
**OFFICE OF
THE INSPECTOR GENERAL**

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

**BROOKLYN SOCIAL SECURITY
CARD CENTER'S COMPLIANCE WITH
POLICIES AND PROCEDURES
WHEN PROCESSING
NONCITIZEN SOCIAL SECURITY
NUMBER APPLICATIONS**

August 2004

A-08-04-14061

AUDIT REPORT



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SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: August 30, 2004

Refer To:

To: The Commissioner

From: Acting Inspector General

Subject: Brooklyn Social Security Card Center's Compliance with Policies and Procedures When Processing Noncitizen Social Security Number Applications (A-08-04-14061)

OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to evaluate the Social Security Administration's (SSA) compliance with policies and procedures when processing noncitizen Social Security number (SSN) applications at the Brooklyn Social Security Card Center (BSSCC).

BACKGROUND

BSSCC Is the First SSA Pilot Office to Specialize in Enumeration

In November 2002, SSA established a pilot center in Brooklyn, New York – the BSSCC – that specializes in enumeration.¹ BSSCC is the only location where residents of Brooklyn, both United States citizens and noncitizens, can apply for an original SSN. When a noncitizen applies for an original SSN,² he or she must complete, sign and submit a Form SS-5, *Application for a Social Security Card*, to SSA and provide acceptable documentary evidence of (1) age, (2) identity, and (3) work

¹ SSA refers to the process of assigning original SSNs and issuing replacement SSN cards as enumeration.

² Noncitizens who apply for SSNs through the Enumeration at Entry (EAE) program are subject to different application policies and procedures. Under EAE, the Department of State (State) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) collect and transmit to SSA application data as part of the immigration process.

authorized lawful alien status and/or a valid nonwork reason.³ Almost 9 out of every 10 applications for original SSNs at the BSSCC are from noncitizens. In Fiscal Year 2003, SSA assigned over 26,000 original SSNs to noncitizens who applied at the BSSCC. Appendix B provides a detailed description of how SSA assigns original SSNs to noncitizens.

Because of SSN integrity concerns, SSA reevaluated its policies and procedures for assigning SSNs to noncitizens. Accordingly, SSA personnel now verify noncitizen evidentiary documents with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and/or the Department of State (State) before SSN assignment.⁴ In addition, personnel record a description of noncitizens' immigration documents and the verification of these documents on the SSN application. This information serves as an audit trail by documenting SSA personnel's actions taken during SSN application processing.

To accomplish our objective, we reviewed SSA policies and procedures for assigning original SSNs to noncitizens.⁵ To evaluate BSSCC compliance with these policies and procedures, we identified a population of 2,502 noncitizens to whom SSA assigned original SSNs in March 2003 based on applications processed at the BSSCC. We then randomly selected and reviewed a sample of 100 SSNs. We also visited the BSSCC to meet with management and staff and observe personnel processing SSN applications. Appendix C includes a detailed description of our scope, methodology and sample appraisal.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

Although SSA has instituted numerous policies and procedures designed to prevent improper SSN assignment, they can only be effective if personnel processing SSN applications comply with the controls. We estimate that BSSCC personnel did not fully comply with policies and procedures in about 15 percent of the noncitizen SSN applications they processed during March 2003. The most common occurrence of noncompliance was BSSCC personnel's failure to document the verification of immigration status with DHS. Although our review did not identify any noncitizens who inappropriately obtained an SSN, we are concerned that failure to comply with policies and procedures may increase the Agency's risk of exposure to improper SSN assignment and misuse, and identity theft. To help ensure BSSCC compliance, we believe SSA should consider enhancing controls within the Modernized

BSSCC Personnel Did Not Fully Comply with Policies and Procedures in About 15 Percent of the Noncitizen SSN Applications Processed

³ See *Program Operations Manual System* (POMS) sections RM 00202.001A and RM 00203.001C.

⁴ SSA fully implemented this policy in September 2002 (Policy Instruction EM-02091).

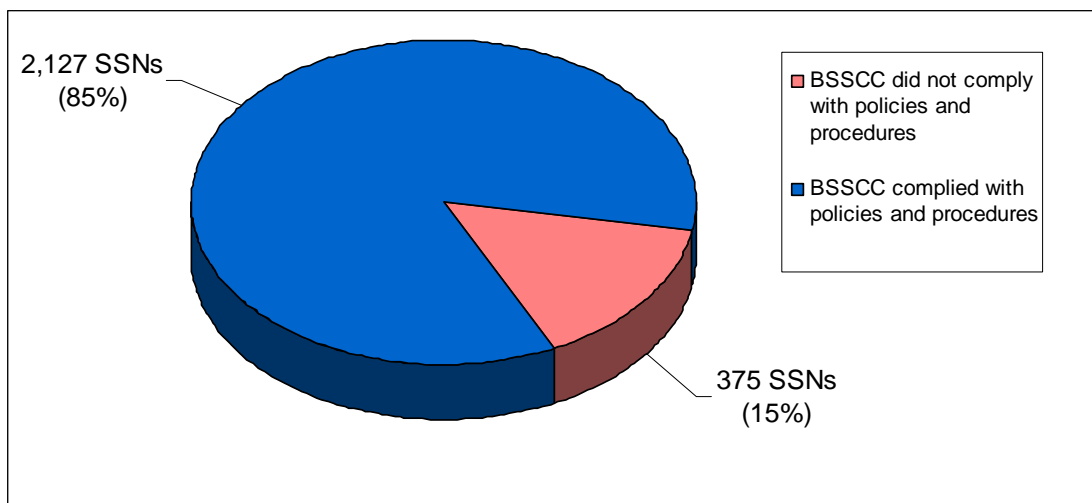
⁵ Policy Instruction EM-02091 contains basic instructions for DHS verification and POMS, section RM 00200 et. seq., contains general policies and procedures for processing SSNs.

Enumeration System (MES) that will prevent SSN assignment when personnel have not adhered to the controls specified in SSA's policies and procedures.

PERSONNEL DID NOT FULLY COMPLY WITH POLICIES AND PROCEDURES WHEN PROCESSING NONCITIZEN SSN APPLICATIONS

We estimate BSSCC personnel did not fully comply with SSA policies and procedures when processing 375 SSN applications for noncitizens in March 2003. This figure represents about 15 percent of the 2,502 original SSNs the Agency assigned to noncitizens who applied at the BSSCC during this period.

Figure 1: Estimated Percentage of BSSCC Compliance with Policies and Procedures When Processing Noncitizen SSN Applications



TYPES OF NONCOMPLIANCE

The most common occurrences of BSSCC personnel's noncompliance with policies and procedures were failure to record on the SSN application: (1) evidence of verification of immigration status with DHS; and (2) the applicant's nonimmigrant class of admission. Table 1 shows the specific occurrences of noncompliance we identified.⁶

⁶ SSA identified similar types of noncompliance during Agency reviews conducted in selected regions.

Table 1: Specific Occurrences of Noncompliance in Sampled Items

Characteristics Identified	Number of Instances
Verification of immigration status with DHS not recorded	7
DHS class of admission not recorded (nonimmigrants)	3
DHS document not recorded	2
Evidence of age not properly documented	2
SSA employee did not sign the SSN application	2
Evidence of lawful noncitizen status was inadequate	1
Identification for individual applying on behalf of another not recorded	1
Number of occurrences identified	18
Multiple occurrences identified (more than one occurrence per case)	3
Number of SSNs in sample not in compliance with policies and procedures	15
Percentage of noncompliance cases to sample (15/100)	15%

We believe the following instance of BSSCC personnel’s noncompliance with policies and procedures illustrates SSA’s risk of exposure to improper SSN assignment and misuse.

- A BSSCC employee recorded, on the SSN application, an Immigration and Naturalization Service Form I-797A, *Notice of Action*, as proof of the applicant’s noncitizen status. However, this form is not acceptable evidence of noncitizen status for SSA purposes.⁷ Because the employee did not comply with policies and procedures, SSA did not have documented assurance of the applicant’s noncitizen status.

OPPORTUNITY TO HELP ENSURE COMPLIANCE WITH POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

When SSA personnel do not fully comply with all policies and procedures for processing noncitizen SSN applications, the Agency increases its risk of improper SSN assignment and misuse. While SSA’s MES allows personnel to record evidence reviewed and accepted, as required by policies and procedures, it does not prevent SSN assignment when personnel do not enter this information into the system. For example, although policies and procedures require SSA personnel to record, on the SSN application, a description of the immigration documents presented and reviewed and DHS verification, MES does not prevent SSN assignment if they fail to record this information.⁸

⁷ POMS section RM 00203.400B.61.

⁸ A recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) study, entitled *Social Security Administration: Actions Taken to Strengthen Procedures for Issuing Social Security Numbers to Noncitizens, but Some Weaknesses Remain* (GAO-04-12, October 2003) pointed out that it is possible for field office staff to process an SSN application without keying information into MES describing the evidence staff reviewed and accepted. Under this situation, there is no consistent means for SSA to confirm and review what verifications field office staff actually performed when they processed an SSN application.

To help ensure compliance with policies and procedures, we believe SSA should consider MES enhancements that would prevent SSN assignment when personnel do not comply with the Agency's policies and procedures. SSA could incorporate separate and distinct data fields into MES that would capture specific evidence reviewed and accepted. That is, SSA could change the MES evidence field from a free-form entry format to one requiring discrete entries (for example, a noncitizen's immigration number and class of admission, and specific immigration documents reviewed and verified with DHS). We believe MES controls should prevent SSN assignment when personnel do not enter such information. Such controls would assist SSA personnel through the SSN application process and help prevent improper SSN assignment.

Management and staff at the BSSCC agreed that MES enhancements, as discussed above, would assist personnel in complying with policies and procedures. SSA has discussed plans to modify MES to capture more discrete information about the evidence submitted during the SSN application process. We understand that such modifications must be considered as part of the Agency's information technology prioritization process. Nevertheless, we encourage the Agency to begin the systems planning process for MES enhancements.

CONCLUSION

Despite SSA's safeguards to prevent improper SSN assignment to noncitizens, the Agency remains at risk to such activity when SSA personnel do not fully comply with policies and procedures. We recognize SSA's efforts can never fully eliminate the potential that noncitizens may inappropriately acquire and misuse SSNs. Nonetheless, we believe SSA has a stewardship responsibility to ensure that personnel comply with all policies and procedures. We believe SSA would benefit by taking additional steps to strengthen SSN integrity and reduce its risk of exposure to improper SSN assignment and misuse, and identity theft.

In a separate report, we recommended that SSA take additional steps to ensure that field office personnel comply with policies and procedures when processing noncitizen SSN applications. Because these recommendations address the noncompliance issues we identified at the BSSCC, we are not making recommendations in this report. Appendix D provides the recommendations from our report on field offices' compliance with policies and procedures when processing noncitizen SSN applications.

AGENCY COMMENTS AND OIG RESPONSE

SSA stated that because a number of the noncompliance issues identified for the BSSCC were the same as those identified in the previously mentioned audit report regarding field office enumeration compliance (Appendix D), the Agency will ensure it includes the BSSCC in any corrective action activities planned in response to the recommendations made in that report. The Agency also provided technical comments

that we considered and incorporated, where appropriate. The full text of SSA's comments is included in Appendix E. We believe the Agency's actions demonstrate its commitment to strengthen the integrity of the SSN.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.

Appendices

APPENDIX A – Acronyms

APPENDIX B – How the Social Security Administration Assigns Original Social Security Numbers to Noncitizens

APPENDIX C – Scope, Methodology, and Sample Appraisal

APPENDIX D – Recommendations from our Report Entitled *Field Offices' Compliance with Policies and Procedures When Processing Noncitizen Social Security Number Applications* (A-08-04-14005)

APPENDIX E – Agency Comments

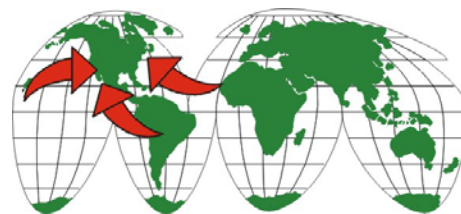
APPENDIX F – OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

Acronyms

ASVI	Alien Status Verification Index
BSSCC	Brooklyn Social Security Card Center
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
State	Department of State
EAE	Enumeration at Entry
GAO	Government Accountability Office
MES	Modernized Enumeration System
POMS	Program Operations Manual System
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSN	Social Security number

How the Social Security Administration Assigns Original Social Security Numbers to Noncitizens

When a noncitizen applies for an original Social Security number (SSN), he or she must complete, sign and submit Form SS-5, *Application for a Social Security Card*, to the Social Security Administration (SSA) and provide acceptable documentary evidence of (1) age, (2) identity, and (3) work authorized lawful alien status and/or a valid nonwork reason.¹



SSA personnel verify documents through (1) visual inspection, including the use of a black light where appropriate and (2) verification with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), either on-line or manually. If documents do not appear valid, then SSA personnel send Form G-845, *Document Verification Request*, along with photocopies of the applicant-provided documents, to DHS. If documents appear valid, personnel query DHS' Alien Status Verification Index (ASVI) database² to verify the immigration and work status of noncitizens.³ If ASVI information is not available, SSA personnel send Form G-845 to DHS. In addition, SSA personnel record noncitizens' immigration documents and the verification of these documents (either the ASVI verification number or annotation of "G-845 verified") on the SSN application.

SSA personnel enter SSN information into SSA's Modernized Enumeration System (MES). SSN applications awaiting verification of DHS immigration status are coded with an "S" for suspect. After determining the validity of supporting evidentiary documents, SSA personnel sign and date the SSN application and clear the application in MES. Once certified and cleared, MES performs numerous automated edits to validate certain applicant information. If the application passes these edits, SSA systems assign an SSN, issue an SSN card, and establish a record in SSA's information systems.⁴

¹ *Program Operations Manual System* (POMS) sections RM 00202.001A and RM 00203.001C.

² The ASVI on-line database is a part of DHS' Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements program, an intergovernmental information-sharing initiative designed to aid various agencies in determining a noncitizen's immigration status.

³ SSA employees have two additional sources to verify refugee and asylee status: the Department of State Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System and the Executive Office for Immigration Review.

⁴ The Numident file houses records of SSN cards issued over an individual's lifetime, as well as identifying information such as age, place of birth, and parent's names.

Description of Evidentiary Documents

Along with an SSN application, noncitizens must present two documents that establish age, identity, and work authorized lawful alien status or a valid nonwork reason for an SSN. If the DHS document is used to establish noncitizen status and age, the noncitizen must provide another document, such as a passport or driver's license, to establish identity. An individual signing the SSN application on behalf of another (for example, a parent for his/her child) must establish his/her own identity.⁵

DHS issues numerous documents that indicate the status and class of noncitizens. Following is a description of the general evidence requirements (not all-inclusive) submitted with original SSN applications.

Lawfully Admitted for Permanent Residence are lawful immigrants who are residing permanently in the United States with the authorization of DHS. Acceptable evidence of this status includes the I-551, *Alien Registration Receipt Card*, commonly known as the "Green Card," and I-688, *Temporary Resident Card*.⁶

Nonimmigrants are temporary lawful residents to whom DHS grants limited stay in the United States for a specific purpose, such as foreign Government officials, visitors, and students. DHS issues an I-94 *Arrival/Departure Record* to all documented noncitizens.⁷ DHS also issues employment authorization documents to certain nonimmigrants as evidence of their authorization to work in the United States.⁸ SSA has additional SSN documentation requirements for certain classes of nonimmigrants. For example, to be eligible for an SSN, an F-1 post-secondary student must provide, in addition to evidence of age and identity, an I-20 ID (Student) Copy, *Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant (F-1) Student Status*, from an accredited school, a current I-94, and evidence of authorization to work on-campus and full-time school attendance.⁹

Asylees, refugees, and parolees come to the United States because of persecution or emergency conditions. Form I-94, with the proper annotations, is acceptable evidence of asylee, refugee or parolee status. In cases when such individuals have no documentation other than his/her DHS document, SSA will accept such documentation (an exception to the two document requirement).¹⁰

⁵ POMS, section RM 00203.200A.

⁶ POMS, section RM 00203.410.

⁷ POMS, section RM 00203.450.

⁸ POMS, section RM 00203.500.

⁹ SSA Policy Instruction EM-02093.

¹⁰ POMS, section RM 00203.460 and RM 00203.020.

Scope, Methodology, and Sample Appraisal

We obtained a data extract from the Social Security Administration's (SSA) Modernized Enumeration System (MES) Transaction History File for March 2003. From this extract, we identified a population of 2,502 noncitizens to whom SSA assigned original Social Security numbers (SSN) for SSN applications processed by the Brooklyn Social Security Card Center (BSSCC). From this population, we randomly selected and reviewed a sample of 100 SSNs. For each of the sampled SSNs, we

- requested from SSA a microfiche copy of Form SS-5, *Application for a Social Security Card*, including all information recorded at the bottom of the form;
- determined whether SSA personnel followed applicable policies and procedures when processing the SSN application; and
- independently verified the applicant's immigration status with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). We verified the Alien registration number or Admission number via DHS' Alien Status Verification Index (ASVI) database. Additionally, we manually verified with DHS those records where ASVI displayed exceptions or SSA personnel failed to record an evidence description on the SSN application. We did not conduct an independent assessment of the quality of DHS' records.

As part of this audit, we also visited the BSSCC. We met with management and staff to obtain their views on the Agency's policies, procedures, and practices for processing noncitizen SSN applications. We observed personnel processing 10 original noncitizen SSN applications.

The SSA entity reviewed was the Office of the Deputy Commissioner for Operations. We relied primarily on MES to complete our review, and determined that the MES data used in the report is sufficiently reliable given the audit objective and use of the data. We conducted our work from May 2003 through February 2004 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Table 1 shows our sample size, results, and appraisal.

Table 1: Results and Projection

SAMPLE ATTRIBUTE APPRAISAL	
Total population of original SSNs assigned to noncitizens from SSN applications processed at the BSSCC	2,502
Sample size	100
SAMPLE ATTRIBUTE APPRAISAL	
Number of instances in sample where BSSCC personnel did not comply with policy and procedures	15
Estimate of instances in population where BSSCC personnel did not comply with policy and procedures	375
Projection lower limit	239
Projection upper limit	551

Projection made at the 90-percent confidence level.

Recommendations from our Report Entitled *Field Offices' Compliance with Policies and Procedures When Processing Noncitizen Social Security Number Applications (A-08-04-14005)*

1. Reemphasize to field office (FO) personnel the importance of following all policies and procedures, including the use of black lights to detect counterfeit documents, when processing Social Security number (SSN) applications from noncitizens.
2. Conduct periodic studies to assess FO compliance with policies and procedures for processing noncitizen SSN applications and take corrective action as needed.
3. Consider Modernized Enumeration System enhancements that would prevent SSN assignment to noncitizens when FO personnel do not comply with policies and procedures.

Agency Comments



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

33325-24-1175

Date: July 30, 2004

Refer To: S1J-3

To: Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.
Acting Inspector General

From: Larry W. Dye /s/
Chief of Staff

Subject: Office of the Inspector General (OIG) Draft Report "Brooklyn Social Security Card Center's (BSSCC) Compliance with Policies and Procedures When Processing Noncitizen Social Security Number (SSN) Applications" (A-08-04-14061)--INFORMATION

We appreciate OIG's efforts in conducting this review. Our comments on the draft report content and recommendations are attached.

Please let me know if you have any questions. Staff inquiries may be directed to Candace Skurnik, Director, Audit Management and Liaison Staff, at extension 54636.

Attachment:
SSA Response

COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL (OIG) DRAFT REPORT "BROOKLYN SOCIAL SECURITY CARD CENTER'S (BSSCC) COMPLIANCE WITH POLICIES AND PROCEDURES WHEN PROCESSING NONCITIZEN SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER APPLICATIONS" (A-08-04-14061)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft report. We appreciate OIG's continuing efforts to evaluate the integrity of our enumeration process. We are pleased that the report acknowledges our efforts to improve the accuracy of SSN applications and that the review found no instances where noncitizens inappropriately obtained an SSN.

Since a number of the noncompliance issues identified for the BSSCC were the same as those identified in the Field Office (Audit No. A-08-04-14005) enumeration compliance reports, we will ensure that the BSSCC is included in any corrective action activities planned in response to the recommendations made in those reports.

Some of the steps the Agency has already taken or has in progress to strengthen the integrity of the enumeration process in the BSSCC and other field offices include:

- Training— In April 2004, we conducted an Interactive Video Training session focusing on the identification of fraudulent documents, including the use of black lights to verify the various check points on the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) and other documents. We have made these procedures available online so they can be accessed easily by interviewing employees. We are currently revising Program Operations Manual System (POMS) instructions to clearly stress these procedures and policies in reviewing immigration documents, and we will release a reminder to FO personnel in July 2004 emphasizing the need to utilize all tools available for verifying documents.
- Monitoring— as of October 2002, all SSA regional offices had plans in place to monitor FO compliance with the collateral verification requirements, such as reviewing samples of completed SS-5 applications. We have also included an assessment of FO staff compliance with verification requirements as part of our ongoing enumeration quality reviews. The published findings from these reviews are currently limited to addressing those enumeration failures classified as "critical errors" (a misassigned SSN that is either assignment of an SSN that belongs to someone else or a multiple SSN that is not cross-referred on the existing records) or "major errors" (errors that can result in an additional or incorrect action in subsequent enumeration transactions or claims actions because information on the applicant's record is incorrect or incomplete). Based on the results of this review, we will provide an analysis and assessment of documentation failures in future reports. Finally, we continue to monitor compliance through our Comprehensive Integrity Review Process program and develop process improvements to address any identified weaknesses or errors.

In addition to these ongoing reviews, the recently developed New York Region's Modernized Enumeration System (MES) Workload Management Information application provides information on SS-5 applications from foreign-born individuals who were

assigned SSNs in one day, but whose immigration documents were subject to verification; US-born individuals over the age of one who were assigned SSNs in one day, but whose birth records were subject to verification; and individuals who reside outside the State or service area of the processing field office. The MES application serves as a valuable resource for managers to identify: 1) employees who may not be following current collateral verification procedures; 2) local weaknesses in the enumeration process; and 3) any SS-5 workloads that appear to be unusual for particular offices.

- Enhancements to the Modernized Enumeration System-- We are considering certain changes as suggested to the MES as part of our Long Term MES Enhancements Initiative. We will consider revising the evidence collection fields in MES to collect evidentiary data in specific fields, however, any identified modifications will have to be considered as part of our Information Technology prioritization process.

In the interim, the New York Region has developed a front-end software program to improve FO compliance with the policies and procedures for processing SS-5 applications. The SS-5 Assistant application assists FOs to comply with the collateral verification procedures by providing greater control over, and improving the accuracy of, SSN applications filed by noncitizens. We expect to release Version 2.0 of the SS-5 Assistant in early fiscal year 2005. The new features of this version will: 1) serve as the front-end input system that will collect all necessary data in mandatory fields and propagate it to the current MES screens; 2) collect data in an intelligent manner as a data-driven system that will understand the policy requirements and facilitate capturing the mandated information from the user, include drop-down selections, and ensure the character lengths for certain fields are appropriate; and 3) automatically query the Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements system of DHS for the user at the time the application is being entered (as the interface will require that verification is received) before permitting processing of the SS-5 application.

We anticipate that the implementation of Release 2 of the SS-5 Assistant application will eliminate the noncompliance situations identified in the report.

OIG Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

OIG Contacts

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Acknowledgments

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