



# Social Security Administration ISSUES AND ANSWERS

## THE SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER

### Introduction

When it was first introduced in 1936, the Social Security number (SSN) was intended to be used as a device for keeping a record of the taxes paid by individuals into the newly created Social Security system. Since that time, it has been adopted by many other government agencies and private enterprises as a means of identification and record maintenance. Although the driver's license is the most commonly used personal identifier, the SSN is the most widely recognized and most frequently used record-keeping number in America today. But legislators and government officials have always been careful to balance the practicality of a standard record-keeping identifier with the need for privacy and confidentiality.

### History of the Number

One of the most urgent tasks following the passage of the Social Security Act was to enroll the millions of workers covered by the new law. Although many people questioned the need for a numbering system, Social Security officials recognized that there had to be some way of uniquely labeling each worker's earnings. Because many people share the same name, and many more use more than one name in the course of a lifetime, a numerical identifier was selected. The now familiar nine-digit number was adopted because it provided the capacity to register nearly one billion individuals. To date, about 310 million Social Security numbers have been issued.

The Social Security number is divided into three parts. The first three numbers generally indicate the State of residence at the time a person applies for his or her first card. Originally, the lowest numbers were assigned to the New England states, and the numbers grew progressively higher in the South and West. However, in recent years, this geographical relationship has been disrupted somewhat by the need to allocate numbers out of sequence to certain growing and populous states.

The middle two digits of a Social Security number have no special significance, but merely serve to break the numbers into blocks of convenient size. The last four characters represent a straight numerical progression of assigned numbers.

### Expanded Use of the Social Security Number

Although an Executive Order issued in 1943 authorized the use of the SSN by other government agencies, it wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s that its use expanded significantly. Other government agencies (most notably the Internal Revenue Service) and private businesses began to use the SSN as an identifier for their own purposes, sometimes because it was required by law, but more often, because it was simply the most reliable identifier available.

SSNs are used by both public and private organizations in two basic ways. The first is for internal management purposes. For example, most states use the SSN for licensing drivers; many schools and colleges use it for student identification; insurance companies use the SSN for record-keeping purposes; and some hospitals use the number for keeping track of patient data without fear of mixup that could be caused by similarity of names.

Another way public agencies use Social Security numbers is to exchange information with other government units, typically to transfer or match data. For example, States' Aid to Families with Dependent Children rolls are matched against each other, and with Social Security's earnings records; Veteran's benefit rolls are matched against Supplemental Security Income payment records; and Federal payrolls are matched against Social Security beneficiary rolls. Such computer matching operations are intended to help curb fraud and abuse of government programs.

With so many agencies using SSNs, in so many different ways, it is critical that the numbers being used are, in fact, the correct ones. All interested parties — government agencies, private employers, and individual number holders — share responsibility for ensuring the accuracy of their records.

### **Privacy of Records**

The growing use of SSNs has led to increased concerns about privacy. While the Social Security Administration (SSA) does not have the authority to prohibit any private enterprise from asking a person for his or her own Social Security number, the use of the number by those businesses does not in any way give them access to information from Social Security records. SSA has always treated the earnings, benefit, and other personal information it maintains for individuals as privileged and sensitive data. In fact, the agency's very first regulation, implemented in 1937, established the confidential nature of SSA's records.

The laws and regulations concerning disclosure of information and confidentiality of records were clarified in the 1970s when Congress passed the Privacy Act and the Freedom of Information Act. These laws established controls for the type and scope of information that may be released and to whom it may be given. Under the Privacy Act, for example, information about an individual generally cannot be disclosed without the person's consent. However, there are certain instances when disclosure is mandated by law, such as the computer matching operations described above.

### **Misuse of Social Security Numbers**

It is against the law to use someone else's Social Security number, or to give false information when applying for a number. It also is illegal to alter, buy, or sell Social Security cards. Persons convicted of such crimes are subject to stiff fines and/or imprisonment.

In recent years many commercial enterprises have used the Social Security number in various promotional efforts, such as radio or newspaper "lucky number" contests, which promise prizes to individuals whose SSN matches the number broadcast or printed. Although these contests usually are legal, they are neither authorized nor condoned by the Federal Government.

### **How and When to get a Social Security Number**

To get a Social Security number, a person needs to complete an application form available at any Social Security office. Applicants must furnish evidence of age and identity. A parent applying for a minor child also must provide evidence of his or her own identity. In addition, foreign born applicants are required to submit evidence of their United States citizenship or legal alien status. Complete and correct personal information is essential to ensure that numbers are properly assigned and maintained.

The process normally can be handled by phone by simply dialing 1-800-2345-SSA. However, those over the age of 18 (who have never had a Social Security number) and most aliens must apply in person. Once the application is turned over to Social Security, it usually takes about ten days to get a card.

In the past, children usually signed up for a Social Security number just prior to entering the job market. But the Tax Reform Act of 1986 mandated that all children age five and above have a Social Security number in order to be listed as dependents on their parents' tax returns. And a recent law lowered the requirement to the age of two effective in 1990 (for 1989 tax returns).

### **Enumeration at Birth**

A new service is making it easier for parents to obtain numbers for their newborns. A joint venture involving SSA, State vital statistic bureaus, and hospitals offers new parents the option of getting a Social Security number for their child merely by checking a box when they fill out the form that's used to issue their baby's birth certificate. The hospital sends the information to SSA and a Social Security card is mailed to the parents. This new service, called "enumeration at birth," is already offered in most states and will be available nationwide by the end of 1989.

**18.28 NONPROGRAM USE--IDENTIFICATION CARD 1/88**

The use of Social Security cards has been studied by congressional committees and by the Advisory Council on Automated Personal Data. Based on information we currently have, we believe that the Social Security card should not be used for general identification purposes.

To be a good identifier, the Social Security card would have to be revised to include items such as a photograph of the person to whom the card belonged and a personal description of the person. Since the beginning of the Social Security program, over 310 million cards have been issued. Just to add a photograph to cards currently being used would be very expensive to the trust funds. Moreover, because of changes in a person's appearance, there would be a need for a new photograph, as well as changes in the identifying information, at least every 5 years. The increased work would affect our ability to carry out our basic responsibilities under the law.

**18.29 NONPROGRAM USE--PRIVATE USE 1/88 POMS RM 00201.005**

There is no law which prevents a private organization from using people's Social Security numbers in keeping its records if the organization gets the numbers from the people themselves. Because the Social Security number for each person is unique, it has become widely used as an individual code in the recordkeeping systems of schools, libraries, and many businesses.

There is a growing concern about the increased use of the Social Security number. Through the years, the Social Security Administration has not encouraged the use of the number for purposes other than the Social Security program. Moreover, we have made it clear that we will not supply any information about a person which is protected by laws dealing with the confidentiality of Social Security records.