

Audit Report

Auxiliary Beneficiaries Who Do Not
Have Their Own Social Security
Number

OIG

Office of the Inspector General
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

MEMORANDUM

Date: September 29, 2014 **Refer To:**

To: The Commissioner

From: Inspector General

Subject: Auxiliary Beneficiaries Who Do Not Have Their Own Social Security Number (A-01-14-14036)

The attached final report presents the results of our audit. Our objective was to evaluate Title II auxiliary beneficiaries who did not have their own Social Security number and quantify incorrect payments to those who died.

Please provide within 60 days a corrective action plan that addresses each recommendation. If you wish to discuss the final report, please call me or have your staff contact Steven L. Schaeffer, Assistant Inspector General for Audit, at (410) 965-9700.



Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr.

Attachment

Auxiliary Beneficiaries Who Do Not Have Their Own Social Security Number

A-01-14-14036



September 2014

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To evaluate Title II auxiliary beneficiaries who did not have their own Social Security number (SSN) and quantify incorrect payments to those who died.

Background

Auxiliary beneficiaries are children, widows, spouses, and parents who receive Title II Social Security benefits based on another wage earner's Social Security record. As such, the Social Security Administration (SSA) uses the primary wage earner's—not the auxiliary beneficiary's—SSN to track the auxiliary's benefit payments on the Master Beneficiary Record (MBR).

The *Social Security Act* requires that individuals first entitled to benefits as of June 1, 1989 or later, must have, or have applied for, an SSN to receive Title II benefits.

In 2008, we conducted a review that identified 63,134 Title II auxiliary beneficiaries who did not have their own SSN on the MBR. To conduct our current review, we obtained a file of 12,370 Title II auxiliary beneficiaries who were receiving benefits as of July 2013 and whose SSNs were missing from the MBR.

Our Findings

Our current review identified fewer (80-percent decrease) Title II auxiliary beneficiaries who did not have their own SSN on the MBR than our 2008 review identified. In addition, we determined—with SSA's assistance—that three auxiliary beneficiaries were deceased and improperly paid \$136,153 in benefits after death.

As of June 2014, SSA had updated 597 (5 percent) of the 12,370 auxiliary beneficiary records with an SSN. Of the 11,773 auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN, 594 (5 percent) were first entitled to benefits after May 1989 and, according to the *Social Security Act*, required to have an SSN on the MBR or have applied for an SSN. The remaining 11,179 (95 percent) auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN were entitled to benefits before June 1989 and therefore not required to have an SSN on the MBR or have applied for an SSN. However, having an SSN on the MBR—regardless of the date of entitlement—improves SSA's ability to prevent improper payments since the Agency bases most of its data matching on the SSN.

As of June 2014, more than 5,000 of the 11,773 auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN were age 90 or older. These individuals will most likely continue receiving benefits until their deaths; and if the SSN is not on the MBR, SSA may not be able to timely identify and terminate benefit payments at the time of death.

Our Recommendations

1. Update the MBR with the SSNs for the 594 auxiliary beneficiaries entitled to benefits after May 1989.
2. Take additional steps to ensure aged auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN are alive.

SSA agreed with Recommendation 1, but disagreed with Recommendation 2.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BOAN	Beneficiary's Own Account Number
C.F.R.	Code of Federal Regulations
DACUS	Death Alert, Control and Update System
EVS	Enumeration Verification System
MBR	Master Beneficiary Record
OI	Office of Investigations
OIG	Office of the Inspector General
POMS	Program Operations Manual System
Pub. L. No.	Public Law Number
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSN	Social Security Number
U.S.C.	United States Code

OBJECTIVE

Our objective was to evaluate Title II auxiliary beneficiaries who did not have their own Social Security number (SSN) and quantify incorrect payments to those who died.

BACKGROUND

Auxiliary beneficiaries are children, widows, spouses, and parents who receive Title II benefits based on another wage earner's Social Security record.¹ As such, the Social Security Administration (SSA) uses the primary wage earner's—not the auxiliary beneficiary's—SSN to track the auxiliary's benefit payments on the Master Beneficiary Record (MBR). SSA commonly refers to the auxiliary beneficiary's SSN as the Beneficiary's Own Account Number (BOAN). In March 2014, SSA paid benefits to over 58 million Title II beneficiaries; over 11 million of these were auxiliary beneficiaries.²

The *Social Security Act* requires that individuals first entitled to benefits as of June 1, 1989 or later, must have, or have applied for, an SSN to receive Title II benefits.³ To comply with this law, SSA's BOAN Verification System monitors the MBR to ensure all auxiliary beneficiaries receiving benefits have an SSN. The System identifies auxiliary beneficiaries in current pay status without an SSN, verifies—if available—the SSN, and updates the MBR. If an SSN is not verified, the System generates an exception report to the appropriate SSA field offices for correction.

SSA uses SSNs to organize information about individuals and their entitlement to benefits. For example, to terminate payments after death, SSA's Death Alert, Control and Update System (DACUS) obtains death information and matches the deceased individuals' names and SSNs to SSA's benefit records.⁴ A missing SSN can prevent SSA's systems from identifying deceased auxiliary beneficiaries and timely terminating benefit payments.

Since 2002, we have conducted two reviews that identified approximately \$12.7 million incorrectly paid to deceased auxiliary beneficiaries missing an SSN, see Table 1.⁵ For these

¹ *Social Security Act* § 202 (b) – (h), 42 U.S.C. § 402 (b) – (h).

² SSA, *Monthly Statistical Snapshot*, March 2014.

³ Pub. L. No. 100-647, Title VIII, Subtitle A, § 8009, 102 Stat. 3342, 3789; 42 U.S.C. § 405(c)(2)(F).

⁴ DACUS receives death information from various sources including States, Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Systems, and Department of Veterans Affairs. SSA, Program Operations Manual System (POMS), GN 02602.060 (August 4, 2014).

⁵ SSA OIG, *Impact on the Social Security Administration's Programs When Auxiliary Beneficiaries Do Not Have Their Own Social Security Numbers* (A-01-02-22006), September 2002 and *Follow-up on the Impact on the Social Security Administration's Programs When Auxiliary Beneficiaries Do Not Have Their Own Social Security Numbers* (A-01-07-17038), March 2008.

reviews, SSA generally agreed with our recommendations to take all feasible steps to add the SSN of all auxiliary beneficiaries currently receiving benefits to the MBR.

Table 1: Prior Audit Results

Report Date	Title II Auxiliary Beneficiaries Without an SSN	Deceased Title II Auxiliary Beneficiaries Without an SSN	Benefits Paid After Death
September 2002	126,471	181	\$5.2 million
March 2008	63,134	272	\$7.5 million

To conduct our current review, we obtained a file of 12,370 Title II auxiliary beneficiaries who were receiving benefits as of July 2013 and whose SSNs were missing from the MBR. See Appendix A for our scope and methodology.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

We identified significantly fewer (80-percent decrease) Title II auxiliary beneficiaries without their own SSN on the MBR than we identified in our 2008 review.⁶ In addition, we determined—with SSA’s assistance—that three auxiliary beneficiaries were deceased and improperly paid \$136,153 in benefits after death.

As of June 2014, SSA had updated 597 (5 percent) of the 12,370 auxiliary beneficiary records with an SSN. Of the 11,773 auxiliary beneficiaries who still did not have an SSN, 594 (5 percent) were first entitled to benefits after May 1989 and, according to the *Social Security Act*,⁷ required to have an SSN on the MBR or have applied for an SSN. The remaining 11,179 (95 percent) auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN were entitled to benefits before June 1989 and therefore not required to have an SSN on the MBR or have applied for an SSN. See Table 2. However, having an SSN on the MBR—regardless of the date of entitlement—improves SSA’s ability to prevent improper payments since the Agency bases most of its data matching on the SSN.

⁶ SSA OIG, *Follow-up on the Impact on the Social Security Administration’s Programs When Auxiliary Beneficiaries Do Not Have Their Own Social Security Numbers* (A-01-07-17038), March 2008.

⁷ *Social Security Act* § 205(c)(2)(F), 42 U.S.C. § 405(c)(2)(F).

Table 2: Population of Auxiliary Beneficiaries' SSN Status as of June 2014

	First Entitled Before June 1989		First Entitled After May 1989		Total Auxiliary Beneficiaries
Population of Auxiliary Beneficiaries as July 2013	11,307 ⁸	91%	1,063 ⁹	9%	12,370
Auxiliary Beneficiaries updated with an SSN as of June 2014	128	21%	469	79%	597
Auxiliary Beneficiaries Without an SSN as of June 2014	11,179	95%	594	5%	11,773

Why Auxiliary Beneficiaries May Not Have an SSN

According to SSA, the 12,370 auxiliary beneficiaries identified as not having an SSN were entitled to receive benefits; however, the timing between receiving benefits and obtaining an SSN is a known issue for auxiliary beneficiaries outside the United States. For instance, SSA reported this situation may occur when auxiliary beneficiaries reside in foreign countries and travel a great distance to apply for benefits (usually at an SSA foreign service post located in a U.S. Embassy), yet may be missing some necessary documentation for SSN purposes.¹⁰ In this situation, SSA might place auxiliary beneficiaries in current pay with instructions to return to the office with the missing paperwork. Of the 12,370 auxiliary beneficiaries identified without an SSN, 10,242 (83 percent) resided outside the United States, see Table 3.

⁸ Of the 11,307 auxiliary beneficiaries first entitled to benefits before June 1989 and not required to have an SSN on the MBR, 1,246 (11 percent) resided in the United States and 10,061 (89 percent) resided outside the United States.

⁹ Of the 1,063 auxiliary beneficiaries first entitled to benefits after May 1989 and required to have an SSN on the MBR, 882 (83 percent) resided in the United States and 181 (17 percent) resided outside the United States.

¹⁰ Documents to determine the identity of an SSN applicant include valid U.S. driver's license, U.S. Passport, Certificate of Citizenship, etc. SSA, POMS, RM 10210.420 (June 20, 2014).

Table 3: Countries Where Auxiliary Beneficiaries Missing an SSN Reside

Country	Title II Auxiliary Beneficiaries Without an SSN	Percentage of Title II Auxiliary Beneficiaries Without an SSN
Italy	1,100	8.9%
Philippines	1,272	10.3%
Mexico	2,096	16.9%
Canada	2,407	19.5%
Other	3,367	27.2%
Sub-Total	10,242	82.8%
United States	2,128	17.2%
TOTAL	12,370	100.0%

SSA also described an uncommon situation occurring in the United States. For example, a parent may withhold his/her children's paperwork from another parent. In this situation, SSA might also place auxiliary beneficiaries in current pay with instructions to return with the missing paperwork.

SSA's automated process identifies auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN. Specifically, the BOAN Verification System monitors the MBR and (a) selects auxiliary beneficiaries in current pay status whose SSNs are unverified or missing; (b) verifies the SSN, if available; (c) updates the MBR; and (d) sends exceptions to SSA field offices for corrective action.¹¹ In addition, SSA is exploring methods to enhance its international process, including enumerating individuals at the time of benefit application.

Auxiliary Beneficiaries Who Appeared Deceased

We initially identified 33 auxiliary beneficiaries who appeared to be deceased and were paid benefits after death.¹² With SSA's assistance, we determined the following.

- Twenty-nine were alive and matched to another—comparably named—individual's death record.
- Three were deceased and improperly paid \$136,153 after death for an average of 51 months.

¹¹ SSA, POMS, SM 03003.005 A (March 22, 2013).

¹² Initially, we ran the 12,370 names and dates of birth (without an SSN on the MBR) through SSA's Enumeration Verification System and identified possible SSNs for 1,632 beneficiaries. We then matched the 1,632 possible SSNs to SSA's Death Master File and conducted additional analysis to identify 33 possible deceased auxiliary beneficiaries. All 33 auxiliary beneficiaries who appeared to be deceased were entitled to benefits before June 1989, and therefore, not required to have an SSN on record at the time of entitlement.

- One individual died in August 2009, and SSA continued paying benefits through January 2014. As a result, this individual was improperly paid \$71,854 for over 4 years. Our Office of Investigations (OI) determined possible fraud occurred in this case; it was accepted for prosecution by the County Prosecutor's Office.
- One individual died in January 2009, and SSA continued paying benefits through March 2014. As a result, this individual was improperly paid \$14,384 for over 4 years. While the SSA overpayment amount is below prosecutorial guidelines, a second Federal agency also lost funds and our investigators are coordinating with them.
- One individual died in July 2010, and SSA continued paying benefits through May 2014. As a result, this individual was improperly paid \$49,915 for over 3 years. OI investigated and the individual's daughter confessed to receiving her mother's benefits after death and agreed to repay SSA.
- One whose \$80 in monthly benefit payments were suspended as of April 2014 because the beneficiary's residence was unknown. As of September 2014, this individual's benefit payments remained suspended.

As of June 2014, 9,865 (84 percent) of the 11,773 auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN were age 65 or older, see Table 4. These individuals will most likely continue receiving benefits until their deaths. Furthermore, 5,072 of these auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN were aged 90 or older.¹³

The life expectancy for an individual who is aged 90 is 4.5 years, and the life expectancy for an individual who is 100 years or older is 2.2 years.¹⁴ Since the SSNs are not on the MBR, SSA's death matching processes may not timely identify and stop these benefits when the person dies.

Table 4: Auxiliary Beneficiaries Without an SSN by Age as of June 2014

Age	Entitled Before June 1989	Entitled After May 1989	Total	
Under 65 years old	1,439	469	1,908	16.2%
65 to 79 years old	1,243	94	1,337	11.4%
80 to 89 years old	3,430	26	3,456	29.3%
90 to 99 years old	4,821	5	4,826	41.0%
100 years or over	246	0	246	2.1%
TOTAL	11,179	594	11,773	100.0%

¹³ Of these 5,072 auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN, 349 (7 percent) resided in the United States and 4,723 (93 percent) resided outside the United States.

¹⁴ Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, *National Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 61, No. 3, Table 1, September 24, 2012, p. 11.

SSA's centenarian project has been conducted the past few years to ensure the Agency pays benefits to eligible, living beneficiaries who are at or near 100 years of age.¹⁵ For example, SSA may schedule telephone interviews with these beneficiaries to confirm whether they are alive. During SSA's study of centenarians in 2012, the Agency identified several deceased widows still receiving benefits many years after their date of death because the widows' SSNs were missing from the MBR. As a result, SSA conducted a special project that found 222 widows and aged spouses were improperly paid \$12 million in benefits after their dates of deaths.¹⁶

SSA should consider whether telephone interviews, contact letters, or other steps should be taken for aged auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN.

Additional Effects of Missing SSNs

For 7 of the 597 auxiliary beneficiary records updated with an SSN, SSA assessed over \$30,000 in overpayments for reasons other than death. Auxiliary beneficiaries not being present in the United States for extended periods¹⁷ and unrecognized income caused these overpayments. For example, SSA assessed one overpayment of over \$10,000 because the Agency had not recorded all of the auxiliary beneficiary's Title II income on his Title XVI record.¹⁸

Typically, when an auxiliary beneficiary's record has an SSN, SSA's data matches are effective; however, without an SSN, SSA's data matches are less effective, and therefore, may not detect improper payments. If SSA adds SSNs to the remaining 11,773 auxiliary beneficiary records, the Agency may identify and/or prevent additional improper payments.

CONCLUSIONS

In comparison to our 2008 review, we identified an 80-percent decrease in Title II auxiliary beneficiaries without their own SSN on the MBR.¹⁹ In addition, we determined—with SSA's assistance—that three auxiliary beneficiaries were deceased and improperly paid \$136,153 in benefits after death. Having an SSN on the MBR—regardless of the date of entitlement—

¹⁵ SSA, POMS GN 02602.500 (April 2, 2013).

¹⁶ SSA Office of Budget, Finance, Quality, and Management, *Entitled Aged Spouses or Widows Without Their Own Social Security Numbers on the Master Beneficiary Record*, June 2014. This report also noted that nearly \$4.5 million of the \$12 million had been recovered by SSA. This study excluded beneficiaries living outside the United States.

¹⁷ SSA suspends payments to beneficiaries who are not U.S. citizens and no longer lawfully present in the United States. SSA, POMS, RS 00204.010 (May 9, 2011).

¹⁸ Title XVI is a needs-based program where eligibility, in part, is dependent on the individual's income—including Title II benefits. *Social Security Act* § 1602, 42 U.S.C. 1381a; *see also* 20 C.F.R. § 416.110.

¹⁹ SSA OIG, *Follow-up on the Impact on the Social Security Administration's Programs When Auxiliary Beneficiaries Do Not Have Their Own Social Security Numbers* (A-01-07-17038), March 2008.

improves SSA's ability to prevent improper payments since the Agency bases most of its data matching on the SSN.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that SSA:

1. Update the MBR with the SSNs for the 594 auxiliary beneficiaries entitled to benefits after May 1989.
2. Take additional steps to ensure aged auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN are alive.

AGENCY COMMENTS

SSA agreed with Recommendation 1, but disagreed with Recommendation 2. SSA disagreed because aged auxiliary beneficiaries are subject to the same policies and full processing procedures as non-aged beneficiaries, such as benefit suspension for not responding or refusal to apply for a SSN. SSA agreed it was important to ensure aged auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN were alive; however, the Agency also believed current policies and safeguards were appropriate to meet program needs. See Appendix B.

OIG RESPONSE

Our report demonstrates a need for SSA to take additional steps to ensure that aged auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN are alive. Specifically, we identified—with SSA's current policies and safeguards in place—three individuals (more than 80 years old each) improperly paid \$136,153 after death for an average of 51 months.

In addition, as of July 2013, we identified 12,370 auxiliary beneficiary records without an SSN on the MBR. Approximately a year later, SSA's systems updated 597 (5 percent) of these records with an SSN and 11,773 (95 percent) remained without an SSN. Furthermore, of the 11,773 auxiliary beneficiaries' without an SSN, 8,528 (72 percent) were aged 80 or older.²⁰

As the Agency bases most of its data matching—including death matches—on the SSN, having an SSN on the MBR—regardless of the date of entitlement or presence in the United States—improves SSA's ability to prevent improper payments.

²⁰ Of these 8,528 auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN, 576 (7 percent) resided in the United States and 7,952 (93 percent) resided outside the United States.

APPENDICES

Appendix A – SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

To conduct our review, we

- Reviewed applicable sections of the *Social Security Act* and the Social Security Administration's (SSA) regulations, policies, and procedures.
- Reviewed prior Office of the Inspector General reports.
- Obtained a file of 12,370 Title II auxiliary beneficiaries who were receiving benefits as of July 2013 and whose own Social Security number (SSN) was missing from the Master Beneficiary Record.
- From the file of 12,370 auxiliary beneficiaries, we
 - identified possible SSNs for 1,632 auxiliary beneficiaries using SSA's Enumeration Verification System (EVS) with output code "A."¹
 - matched the 1,632 possible SSNs to SSA's Death Master File and identified 50 auxiliary beneficiaries who appeared to be deceased.
 - analyzed the 50 auxiliary beneficiaries who appeared to be deceased and determined that 33 appeared to be receiving benefits after death as of November 2013.
 - provided these 33 cases to our Office of Investigations (OI) to determine whether any fraud activity took place.
 - provided 31 of the 33 cases (outside the United States) to SSA's Office of Operations for review and appropriate administrative action.
 - documented SSA's and OI's actions including quantifying improper payments after death and fraud investigations.
 - identified records where SSA added an SSN as of June 2014 and overpayments assessed for reasons other than death.
 - identified records where auxiliary beneficiaries were first entitled to benefits in June 1989 or later.

We conducted our audit between December 2013 and June 2014 in Boston, Massachusetts. The principal entities audited were SSA's field offices under the Offices of the Deputy Commissioner of Operations and Systems. We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally

¹ EVS verifies SSNs, names, and dates of birth to SSA's records.

accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We tested the data obtained for our audit and determined them to be sufficiently reliable to meet our objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix B – AGENCY COMMENTS



SOCIAL SECURITY

MEMORANDUM

Date: September 9, 2014

Refer To: S1J-3

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

From: Katherine Thornton /s/
Deputy Chief of Staff

Subject: Office of the Inspector General Draft Report, “Auxiliary Beneficiaries Who Do Not Have Their Own Social Security Number” (A-01-14-14036) - INFORMATION

Thank you for the opportunity to review the draft report. Please see our attached comments.

Please let me know if we can be of further assistance. You may direct staff inquiries to Gary S. Hatcher at (410) 965-0680.

Attachment

COMMENTS ON THE OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL (OIG) DRAFT REPORT, “AUXILIARY BENEFICIARIES WHO DO NOT HAVE THEIR OWN SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER” (A-01-14-14036)

Recommendation 1

Update the MBR with the SSNs for the 594 auxiliary beneficiaries entitled to benefits after May 1989.

Response

We agree. We plan to update the Master Beneficiary Record (MBR) as appropriate for those auxiliary beneficiaries identified who are in current pay status and were entitled to benefits after May 1989, by the end of fiscal year 2015.

We will not investigate cases in which payments were already in terminated status, which were 10 percent of the 594 auxiliary beneficiaries cited in the report, as it would not be a prudent use of our resources. In addition, we will not take action on auxiliary beneficiaries whose payments were placed in miscellaneous suspense status because they were first entitled to benefits after May 1989 and refused enumeration.

Recommendation 2

Take additional steps to ensure aged auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN are alive.

Response

We disagree. Aged auxiliary beneficiaries are subject to the same policies and full processing procedures as non-aged beneficiaries, such as benefit suspension for not responding or refusal to apply for a Social Security number (SSN). We agree it is important to ensure aged auxiliaries without an SSN are alive, which is why we have well-established policies and programs in place to verify that these individuals are still living. We believe our current safeguards are appropriate to meet our program needs.

Our Beneficiary’s Own Account Number (BOAN) Verification System cited in the report on page 1, “Background” section, describes how we monitor auxiliaries residing in the United States.

We understand that OIG is particularly concerned with the population of aged auxiliary beneficiaries living outside of the United States. As the report indicates, 93 percent of the auxiliary beneficiaries without an SSN, who were age 90 or older, lived outside of the United States. However, we have the following processes in place to ensure that aged and non-aged beneficiaries who live outside of the United States are alive—including aged auxiliaries without an SSN.

- Foreign Enforcement Program - This process verifies the existence and identity of beneficiaries of all ages living abroad either annually or biennially. We contact beneficiaries age 90 and over annually.
- Nonagenarian and Centenarian Program - This process includes in-person contacts with each foreign beneficiary in the year he or she attains age 97 or 100.
- Totalization Data Exchange - Countries with which we have totalization agreements provide us death information for auxiliaries and beneficiaries, and we initiate contact with each identified individual to confirm the accuracy of the death report.

Furthermore, the absence of a BOAN is not relevant to these processes. Rather, these programs identify auxiliaries based on a combination of the numberholders' SSNs and the claimants' own beneficiary identification codes, not by BOANs. We may select individual cases for review based on the auxiliary's recorded date of birth. In addition, we require all foreign beneficiaries to respond to our contacts in person, by telephone, or by mail. Non-responders are subject to suspension of monthly benefits.

Appendix C – MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS

Judith Oliveira, Director, Boston Audit Division

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Kevin Joyce, IT Specialist

MISSION

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