



POLITICS

# Tens of millions of dead people aren't getting Social Security checks, despite Trump and Musk claims



1 of 2 | A Social Security card is displayed Oct. 12, 2021, in Tigard, Ore. (AP Photo/Jenny Kane, File)

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BY [FATIMA HUSSEIN](#)

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration is falsely claiming that tens of millions of dead people over 100 years old are receiving Social Security payments.

Over the past few days, [President Donald Trump](#) and [billionaire adviser Elon Musk](#) have said on social media and in press briefings that people who are 100, 200 and even 300 years old are improperly getting benefits — a “HUGE problem,” Musk wrote, as his [Department of Government Efficiency](#) digs into federal agencies to root out waste, fraud and abuse.

It is true that improper payments have been made, including some to dead people. But the numbers thrown out by Musk and the White House are overstated and misrepresent Social Security data.

Here are the facts:

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## **What has the Trump administration said about payments to centenarians?**

On Tuesday, Trump said at a press briefing in Florida that “we have millions and millions of people over 100 years old” receiving Social Security benefits. “They’re obviously fraudulent or incompetent,” Trump said.

“If you take all of those millions of people off Social Security, all of a sudden we have a very powerful Social Security with people that are 80 and 70 and 90, but not 200 years old,” he said. He also said that there’s one person in the system listed as 360 years old.

Late Monday, Musk posted a slew of posts on his social media platform X, including: “Maybe Twilight is real and there are a lot of vampires collecting Social Security,” and “Having tens of millions of people marked in Social Security as “ALIVE” when they are definitely dead is a HUGE problem. Obviously. Some of these people would have been alive before America existed as a country. Think about that for a second ...”

On Wednesday, Social Security’s new acting commissioner, Lee Dudek, acknowledged recent reporting about the number of people older than age 100 who may be receiving benefits from Social Security. “The reported data are people in our records with a Social Security number who do not have a date of death associated with their record. These individuals are not necessarily receiving benefits.”

"I am confident that with DOGE's help and the commitment of our executive team and workforce, that Social Security will continue to deliver for the American people," Dudek said.

## **How big of a problem is Social Security fraud?**

A [July 2024 report](#) from Social Security's inspector general states that from fiscal years 2015 through 2022, the agency paid out almost \$8.6 trillion in benefits, including \$71.8 billion — or less than 1% — in improper payments. Most of the erroneous payments were overpayments to living people.

In addition, in early January, the U.S. Treasury clawed back [more than \\$31 million](#) in a variety of federal payments— not just Social Security payments— that improperly went to dead people, a recovery that former Treasury official David Lebryk said was "just the tip of the iceberg."

The money was reclaimed as part of a five-month pilot program after Congress gave the [Department of Treasury](#) temporary access to the [Social Security Administration's](#) "Full Death Master File" for three years as part of the omnibus appropriations bill in 2021. The SSA maintains the most complete federal database of individuals who have died, and the file contains more than 142 million records, which go back to 1899, according to the Treasury.

Treasury estimated in January that it would recover more than \$215 million during its three-year access period, which runs from December 2023 through 2026.

## **So are tens of millions of people over 100 years old receiving benefits?**

No.

Part of the confusion comes from Social Security's software system based on the COBOL programming language, which has a lack of date type. This means that some entries with missing or incomplete birthdates will default to a reference point of more than 150 years ago. The news organization WIRED first reported on the use of COBOL programming language at the Social Security Administration.

Additionally, a series of [reports](#) from the Social Security Administration's inspector general in March 2023 and July 2024 state that the agency has not established a new system to properly annotate death information in its database, which included roughly 18.9 million Social Security numbers of people born in 1920 or earlier but were not marked as deceased. This does not mean, however, that these individuals were receiving benefits.

The agency decided not to update the database because of the cost to do so, which would run upward of \$9 million.

A [July 2023 Social Security OIG report](#) states that "almost none of the numberholders discussed in the report currently receive SSA payments." And, as of September 2015, the agency automatically stops payments to people who are older than 115 years old.

## **What are some of the concerns about misinformation on Social Security payments?**

Chuck Blahous, a senior research strategist at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, said, "Two cheers for Elon Musk if he can root out and put a stop to improper payments."

But to pick the places in the federal government where error rates are high, "Social Security would be near the bottom of the list, not near the top," Blahous said. "Medicaid improper payment rates are quite substantial, and soared after the Medicaid expansion of the ACA."

"By all means — go after any improper payments that are found, but let's not pretend that's where the system's biggest financial problems are," he said.

Sita Nataraj Slavov, a professor of public policy at the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University, said the claims by Musk and Trump will make people think the solutions to the government's financial problems are simpler than they appear.

"The real concern is that this claim may mislead people into thinking there's an easy fix to Social Security's financial problems — that we can somehow restore solvency without making sacrifices through higher taxes or lower benefits," Slavov said. "This is simply not true."

## What does the White House say about the criticism?

Karoline Leavitt, the White House spokesperson, referred back to the Social Security's inspector general report.

"A previous investigation revealed the SSA paid at least \$71.8 billion in improper payments," she said. "The Social Security Administration is now working to find even more waste, fraud, and abuse in the Administration's whole-of-government effort to protect American taxpayers."



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