

Social Security Scales Back Worker Inquiries; Agency Contacted Employers When False Data Were Used but Got Little Response

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Body

The U.S. government is scaling back an aggressive program to contact all employers whose workers were using bogus or incorrect Social Security information, concluding that the effort produced few corrections to its records.

The program last year had a major, if unintended, impact: It exposed many unauthorized immigrants who were working "on the books," using stolen or made-up Social Security numbers. Confronted by their employers, tens of thousands of them quietly left their jobs or were fired, according to estimates by immigration advocates and attorneys.

The Social Security Administration had launched the initiative, sending letters last year to about 950,000 employers who had at least one worker whose name and number did not match Social Security files. Government officials said at the time that they were simply trying to get employers and workers to correct the agency's records.

But few responded, said Mark Hinkle, a spokesman for the Social Security Administration. As a result, he said, the agency plans to contact only about 130,000 employers this year in an effort to be "using our resources effectively -- time, money, staff, that kind of thing."

Immigrant advocates and members of business groups, who had protested the earlier Social Security program, said they were pleased with the change. Activists for reduced immigration criticized the move and said it underlined the government's lack of coordination in targeting unauthorized workers.

"It's aggravating beyond belief that the Social Security Administration isn't waking up to its responsibility to be part of the federal government's immigration enforcement arm," said Dan Stein, executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

The Social Security Administration stumbled into the contentious issue of illegal immigration because of a major bookkeeping problem. For years, it has received a growing pile of money from mystery workers whose names or numbers do not match Social Security files. In 2000, the contributions from such workers and their employers totaled about \$ 6 billion -- money that goes into the general fund, since it cannot be linked to individual workers.

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Some of the mystery workers are legally employed but simply have a mistake in their records: a misspelling of their name, or a maiden name listed instead of their married one.

But the government has found that most "no-match" cases are in industries that rely on low-skilled and migrant workers, such as restaurants, farms and hotels.

That leads such people as Steven A. Camarota of the Center for Immigration Studies, a think tank that favors reduced immigration, to question why Social Security is cutting back on the letters and not coordinating with other agencies to target undocumented workers. The number of people in the country illegally has swelled to an estimated 7 million to 8 million.

"This process . . . could have been an important step in controlling or reducing illegal immigration," Camarota said.

Social Security officials respond that that's not their job. In addition, they say that privacy laws bar them from giving their information to immigration authorities. Although the agency sent follow-up letters last year to employers who ignored their first notices, it did not have the power to do much more, said spokesman Mark Hinkle.

"We're not an enforcement agency," he said.

Immigrant advocates argue that unauthorized workers were not the only ones who lost jobs. They said some bosses panicked and fired employees named in the letters -- even though the notices emphasized that they were not grounds for dismissal.

"Many companies used this as an excuse to terminate the employment of various people" without cause, said Saul Solorzano, executive director of CARECEN, an immigrant social-service agency in Columbia Heights.

He said Social Security's plan to send fewer letters is "better, to avoid confusion."

The impact of the letters on the Washington area was "significant but not severe," said Elissa McGovern, head of the local chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association. "It was felt in the service sectors -- hotels, restaurants, landscaping, industries where you have high turnover."

Immigrant and business groups had urged the Social Security Administration to change its program. Did their efforts succeed?

"I'd like to think we had some impact," said Theresa Brown, director of immigration policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. She noted, however, that the Social Security Administration attributed its shift to the lack of results from the letter-sending campaign.

Hinkle said that this year's letters will go only to employers who have at least 10 workers whose information does not match Social Security files. Such people have to make up at least 0.5 percent of the employer's personnel to trigger a letter.

The agency will continue to send individual letters to the homes of all employees whose name or number do not match Social Security records.

Experts who work with or study immigrants said the "no-match" program did not appear to reduce the number of people in the country illegally. Many workers who were confronted with the letters "went somewhere else" to work, said Jeffrey Passel, a researcher at the Urban Institute. "Or they showed up on Monday with a different Social Security number."

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