

## Records Checks Displace Workers **Social Security Letters Cost Immigrants Jobs**

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Thousands of immigrants have been forced to leave their jobs in the last few months, the result of a little-publicized operation by the U.S. government to clean up Social Security records, immigration experts say.

Since early this year, the Social Security Administration has sent letters to more than 800,000 businesses -- about one in eight U.S. employers -- asking them to clear up cases in which their workers' names or Social Security numbers do not match the agency's files. The letters cover about 7 million employees.

Agency officials say that they are simply trying to tackle a bookkeeping problem and that the action is not related to the new get-tough approach on immigration stemming from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. But the result could be the most dramatic blow in years to undocumented workers on company payrolls.

"The impact is enormous," said Cecilia Munoz of the National Council of La Raza, which represents Hispanics. "We're hearing about it from all over the country."

Social Security officials note that there may be innocent reasons for some of the discrepancies, such as the misspelling of a worker's name, which can easily be corrected.

But the crackdown has highlighted an open secret: A huge number of illegal immigrants work "on the books," providing stolen or made-up Social Security numbers to employers and having U.S. taxes deducted from their paychecks. Now, with those employers being confronted by Social Security, many in turn are confronting their workers, insisting that they clear up the problem.

Workers who can't do so are often being fired or are quietly leaving. Josh Bernstein of the Washington-based National Immigration Law Center, which is attempting to track the impact of the letters, said as many as 100,000 may have lost their jobs. He worries that legal as well as illegal immigrants have been affected.

"It's devastating," said Laura Reiff, an immigration lawyer in Tysons Corner. One of her clients, a New York bakery, recently lost 200 employees, nearly half its staff, after getting a letter about their Social Security numbers. "You've got people fleeing. You've got people who have to be terminated," Reiff said.

While immigrant advocates and some businesses are concerned, others say it's about time authorities cracked down on abuse of the Social Security system. The issue of identity fraud has taken on new urgency since the attacks carried out by terrorists who acquired U.S. driver's licenses and other identification.

"If someone's not authorized to work in the U.S., they're not authorized. You can't sugarcoat that," said Bill Strassberger, a spokesman for the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

In the Washington area, the Social Security letters have arrived at businesses ranging from restaurants to janitorial companies to manufacturers. At Centex Construction Co. in Fairfax, the notice resulted in five or six of the firm's 230 employees leaving, said Doug Turner, the company's vice president of human relations. Centex now works with the government to verify the Social Security numbers of job applicants before they are hired.

"It was good to know. We work at the airport, large construction sites," Turner said.

Washington has not been as seriously affected by the Social Security letters as have some other areas of the country, according to lawyers, employers and immigrant-service groups. They speculate that may be because some large immigrant groups here, such as Salvadorans, have benefited from special work-permit programs.

Still, workers from many countries have been affected, a reflection of Washington's immigration rainbow. Immigration lawyer Dawn Lurie said she knew of cases involving employees from Latin America, Egypt, Morocco and Mongolia -- and even an Australian maitre d'. Among those who lost jobs was a Venezuelan from the Maryland suburbs. The 30-year-old worker, who asked not to be identified because he lacks legal papers, said his boss at a glass factory approached him in March with the letter.

"He said, 'Look, this came from Social Security,' " the Venezuelan said. The boss told him that "if I didn't have a [proper] Social Security [number], I couldn't continue working there."

The worker, who said he had invented a number, left the company. He now does odd jobs for cash, cutting grass or cleaning buildings, earning half the \$12 an hour he received at the factory.

"It's depressing," said the man, who is married and has two children. He said he and his family left a middle-class life in their homeland because of the economic and political turmoil there and came to the United States on tourist visas, staying on after they expired. "We're not all criminals," he said. "We add to the economy of this country, too. We pay taxes, too."

The Social Security Administration has emphasized that its crackdown is not aimed at immigrants. In fact, the agency refuses to share its information with the Immigration and Naturalization Service because of privacy considerations.

"We were not out targeting anybody, any group. It was strictly to improve wage reporting," said Carolyn Cheezum, a Social Security spokeswoman. In recent years, the agency has received a growing pile of money from taxpayers whose names or Social

Security numbers don't match its files. Such contributions from workers and employers totaled \$4.9 billion in 1999, the most recent year for which data were available.

In response, agency officials said, they decided to ramp up their program of contacting the employers of those workers. In the past, Social Security sent out about 100,000 "no-match" letters a year, focusing on companies with the biggest problems.

This year, it has sent out eight times as many letters, contacting every company with an employee whose name or Social Security number did not correspond to agency records.

Intentionally or not, the crackdown is having a powerful impact on illegal immigrants and some of the companies that rely on them. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has had so many complaints from members receiving the letters that it has formed a task force. "It's a big enough issue that we're throwing significant resources at it, to figure a way out," said Randy Johnson, the chamber's vice president of labor policy.

Lyndsay Lowell, an immigration expert at the Pew Hispanic Center, estimated in a recent report that unauthorized workers account for less than 4 percent of the U.S. labor force but are concentrated in a few industries, including construction, hospitality, textiles, meatpacking and agriculture.

Employers in such industries, as well as immigrant advocates, argue that the government should find ways to give legal status to workers needed by U.S. firms.

But proponents of lower immigration argue that such amnesties would reward people who have broken the law, lead to more illegal immigration and ultimately harm U.S. workers.

David Ray, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which advocates lower levels of immigration, said the U.S. government had to crack down on fake Social Security numbers as part of its anti-terrorism campaign. He said the government couldn't announce measures to tighten the border and increase tracking of visiting foreigners while ignoring the key U.S. identity number.

"Either we want to stop it or we don't want to stop it," he said of illegal immigration.

Unlike the INS, the Social Security Administration has no enforcement powers. Knowing that, some businesses that have received no-match letters have ignored them. Still, they could eventually be penalized by the Internal Revenue Service for providing incorrect information on wage forms. Many immigrant advocates said they are concerned that the no-match letters are harming legal as well as illegal workers.

Some employers are panicking and firing immigrants without determining whether they are eligible to work, such advocates said. They noted that unusual foreign names may frequently be misspelled in companies' records, prompting a no-match letter.

The Social Security letters, written in English and Spanish, state that they are not, in themselves, grounds to fire an employee and do not reflect a worker's immigration status.

Illegal immigrants who are forced out of jobs often move on to other positions, immigrant advocates said. But, like the Venezuelan, they may join the underground economy, where they don't need a Social Security number and may face more difficult conditions.

"They've got to work. They find something else," said Reiff, the immigration lawyer.

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