

Controls over the Deletion of Prisoner Records

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) deleted Prisoner Update Processing System (PUPS) records according to Agency policy.

Background

SSA uses PUPS to record information on individuals' convictions and incarcerations. This information assists SSA staff in determining eligibility for benefits. For prisoners previously entitled to benefits, SSA systems create a permanent PUPS record that includes confinement information and alerts the applicable program service center or field office to suspend benefit payments as necessary. PUPS maintains reported inmate information indefinitely for prior and current beneficiaries and recipients.

SSA identified four criteria where deletion of PUPS records is permitted: (1) skeleton record deletion; (2) record correction and deletion request from the public; (3) deletion because the reporting institution provided an insufficient incarceration date; or (4) duplicate record deletion when SSA staff or reporting institutions updated information.

Findings

SSA deleted prisoner records contrary to its policy for 59 (24 percent) of our 250 sampled individuals. SSA should not have deleted these prisoner records because they did not meet SSA's criteria for deletion. Accordingly, we estimate SSA deleted about 195,000 individuals' prisoner records contrary to its policy. SSA staff indicated errors in programs created to identify records eligible for deletion may have caused the improper deletions. During the course of our review, we found several instances where missing release dates in SSA's systems suggested the potential for overpayment of benefits to incarcerated individuals. However, SSA's attainment of release dates from outside sources negated these potential overpayments.

Recommendations

We recommend SSA:

1. Identify the causes of the erroneous prisoner record deletions we identified and make corrections to prevent future occurrences.
2. Determine the cost-effectiveness of taking further actions to detect and correct additional records with improperly deleted prisoner information.

SSA agreed with our recommendations.