

Timeliness and Accuracy of Death Reporting for Individuals Killed During the September 11, 2001 Terrorist Attacks

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Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration (SSA) promptly and accurately input September 11, 2001 terrorist attack victims' death information on its records.

Background

SSA maintains a master record of relevant identifying information about every Social Security numberholder in its Numident file. SSA also maintains a record of reported deaths, known as the Death Master File (DMF). SSA creates the DMF based on death information recorded on the Numident.

SSA provides a version of the DMF to the Department of Commerce, which, in turn, sells DMF data to public and private customers.

In June 2011, the Scripps Howard News Service published an article alleging that SSA had "not registered as dead" thousands of September 11 victims. The article also alleged that SSA may have incorrectly used either September 1 or 15 "as a default day of death" for those victims when recording death entries.

We identified the names of 2,974 individuals killed during the September 11 terrorist attacks and determined that 2,930 had Social Security numbers.

Our Findings

With limited exceptions, SSA promptly and accurately input September 11 victims' death information on its records. Within 1 year of the attacks, SSA had recorded death information on the Numident for 96 percent of the victims. We also verified that these individuals' death information appeared on the full version of the DMF.

However, SSA did not record 102 victims' death information on the Numident. In most instances, SSA payment records indicated the numberholder died in September 2001. System controls designed to identify and correct discrepancies between death information on payment and Numident records were not effective in these cases. As a result, these individuals' death information did not appear on the DMF.

Our Recommendation

We recommended that SSA input the 102 numberholders' death entries on the Numident. SSA agreed with the recommendation.