

A Guide to Getting a Social Security Number

By JENNIFER DILLEY, Emory University student

What is a social security number?

A social security number is a nine-digit number issued by the United States Social Security Administration (SSA) to citizens, legal long-term residents, and legal temporary residents in the US. In recent years, it has become the primary means of individual identification in the US. Many important personal records, including employee, medical, student, and credit histories, are all indexed by the social security number. You will need one to open a new bank account or apply for a new job. The social security number is crucial for living and working in the United States.

The Social Security Card

There are three types of social security cards. The first shows your name and social security number. It lets you work without any restrictions. It is usually given to US citizens and lawful permanent noncitizens.

The second type of card shows your name and social security number but notes that you are able to work only with a Work Permit issued by the Department of Homeland Security. Legal, temporary residents usually receive this type of card.

The third type of card shows your name and social security number but notes that you are not legally allowed to work in the US. This is usually issued to people who need a social security number in order to receive government benefits and services.

The Process

The process involved in applying for a social security number is surprisingly simple. Applying for a social security number is entirely free, and the government has posted many of the forms you must fill out on the Internet. If you have no internet access at home, you can go to your local library to use a computer. The librarians there will gladly help you to use the Internet and print the forms.

While the steps to apply for a social security number differ slightly for citizens and noncitizens, everyone must include **Form SS-5** in their application. You can find this form online at <http://www.ssa.gov/online/ss-5.pdf>. Be sure to follow the instructions given at the top of the form. Failure to do so will result a delay or rejection of your application.

You must also include several other documents of evidence with Form SS-5 in your application. These forms of evidence, as the government calls them, differ for citizens and noncitizens. If you mail your application, include the **originals** of these documents. The US Social Security Administration cannot accept photocopies or notarized copies. Do not worry—your originals will be returned to you!

Forms of Evidence for US Citizens

For US citizens, you must submit forms of evidence that prove your citizenship, your age, and your identity.

- To prove your citizenship, you may include your US birth certificate, US consular report of birth, US passport, US Certificate of Naturalization, or a US Certificate of Citizenship. You only need to send in one of these certificates.
- To prove your age, you must submit your birth certificate or your passport.
- To prove your identity, you must include a current document that shows your name. Preferably, it will include a recent photograph. Most commonly used are a US driver's license, state-issued nondriver identification card, or a US passport. For a list of other acceptable documents, please refer to the Social Security Administration's website at <http://www.ssa.gov/pubs/10002.html>.

Forms of Evidence for Noncitizens

With these documents, you need to prove your immigration status, your work eligibility, your age, and your identity.

- To prove your immigration status, include in your application **Form I-94**, the Arrival/Departure Record that was issued to you when you arrived in the US.
- To prove your work eligibility, you will be able to use the same form, **Form I-94**. If you have a work permit, include that as well.
- To prove your age, include your birth certificate. If you do not have one or it is not available to you, you may use your passport or another document issued to you by the US government.
- To prove your identity, acceptable documents must be recent and show your name. Preferably, it will have a recent photograph as well. Some examples of acceptable documents are:
 - **Form I-551** (Alien Registration Card), which includes a machine-readable immigrant visa with your unexpired foreign passport,
 - **Form I-94** (Arrival/Departure Record), with your unexpired foreign passport
 - Work Permit Card from the Department of Homeland Security

Your new social security card and number will be mailed to you, along with your documents of evidence. While you wait for your number, you can use a letter from the Social Security Administration stating that you have applied.

I have filled out the application. Now what do I do?

After finishing the application, **Form SS-5**, and compiling your documents of evidence, you can either mail your application packet to your local Social Security Administration office, or you can deliver it yourself. If you are a first-time applicant over the age of 12, you must deliver your application in person. For the address of your local SSA office, please visit the SSA website at www.ssa.gov/locator. Simply enter your zip code and the locator will give you the address of your local office.

A Word to the Wise—IMPORTANT Security Information

When you receive your social security number and card, make sure you keep it safe. It is your identity—anyone who steals it will have access to your credit history, bank accounts, etc. Do not carry your social security card around with you, unless you need it for a specific purpose. Keep it in a safe place at home and do not talk about where it is hidden with neighbors, friends, or anyone else.

If your card is lost or stolen, you may receive a replacement card by contacting the Social Security Administration. You will need to reapply, but the SSA will send you another card free of charge.

Also, if any of your information changes, such as your official name or your address, contact the SSA and inform them of this. Keeping your information correct and current will prevent any problems with your payroll or receiving government benefits.

Does Anyone Have Any Questions?

If you have any questions while you are applying for a social security or after you receive your card, contact the Social Security Administration at 1-800-772-1213. You may also refer to their website, <http://www.ssa.gov/>.