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Agriprocessors identity theft puts data of 230-plus at risk

BY GRANT SCHULTE • GSCHULTE@DMREG.COM | © 2008, DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE COMPANY • AUGUST 22, 2008[Read Comments\(36\)](#) [Recommend \(5\)](#) [Print this page](#) [E-mail this article](#)SHARE THIS ARTICLE: [Del.icio.us](#) [Facebook](#) [Digg](#) [Reddit](#) [Newsvine](#) [What's this?](#)

The Social Security numbers used to employ illegal immigrants at Postville's meatpacking plant were stolen from people in at least 25 states, including two people from Iowa, and from 38 people who are dead, an analysis by The Des Moines Register shows.

The identity theft exposed during the federal raid at Agriprocessors Inc. may have imperiled the private information of more than 230 citizens and lawful immigrants whose Social Security or resident alien numbers were used by the illegal workers.

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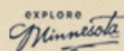
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One federal official declined to say whether victims of the identity theft had been notified. Another said immigration officials generally do not notify victims.

A spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement confirmed that several of the identity-theft victims - it is not clear how many - have filed complaints with the Federal Trade Commission, the national clearinghouse for identity-fraud cases, even though the harm in most cases probably amounts to an inconvenience at most, consumer advocates say.

Most, and possibly all, of the immigrants who were arrested in the May 12 raid at Agriprocessors used unique Social Security numbers. In court

papers, federal authorities disclosed only the last three digits of the victims' Social Security numbers. The numbers whose end digits matched were confirmed as coming from different locations in all but 11 instances.

Agents raided the kosher meat-processing plant May 12 and detained 389 immigrants in what they later described as the largest single-site bust in U.S. history; 305 were charged with immigration-related felonies. One plant supervisor has pleaded guilty to charges that include conspiring to hire illegal immigrants, and another is awaiting trial.

Authorities also found evidence that a human resources department employee helped distribute about 96 false resident alien cards, according to court papers. The cards, commonly known as green cards, were grouped in stacks and appear to have been made by the same forger.

Federal agents have not publicly identified suspects.

Nearly 70 percent escaped prosecution

The Register reviewed more than 1,800 pages of criminal complaints against the immigrants arrested in May for aggravated identity theft, misuse of a Social Security number, unlawful re-entry into the United States and

WHAT IDENTITY THEFT VICTIMS SHOULD DO:

1. Place a fraud alert on your credit reports, and review your credit reports. Fraud alerts can prevent identity thieves from opening financial accounts in your name. The three credit reporting companies are:

- Equifax: (800) 525-6285; www.equifax.com

- Experian: (888) 397-3742; www.experian.com

- TransUnion: (800) 680-7289; www.transunion.com

2. Close the accounts that you know, or believe, have been tampered with or opened fraudulently. Use new passwords and personal identification numbers when opening new accounts.

3. File a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission. You can file a complaint with the FTC online at www.ftc.gov, or call the FTC's Identity Theft Hotline at (877) 438-4338.

4. File a report with local police in the community where the identity theft took place.

Source: *Federal Trade Commission*

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other fraud charges.

The criminal complaints were written by several special agents with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, so the levels of detail vary. Federal court papers also do not account for the immigrants who were detained but not criminally charged.

But the Register's review found:

- Nearly 70 percent of the immigrants who were targeted in federal warrants - the documents that helped justify the raid - remain at large.

The raid snagged 220 of the 697 individuals believed to be illegal immigrants, or about 32 percent, who were identified in pre-raid criminal complaints as John or Jane Doe. The other 85 immigrants arrested during the operation were discovered as a result of the raid.

The remaining 477 immigrants named in the warrants have so far escaped prosecution. Federal authorities said their investigation remains open.

- The immigrants used Social Security numbers that belonged to residents of at least 25 states and Puerto Rico. Michigan was hardest hit, with 22 stolen Social Security numbers discovered by federal agents. A dozen Social Security numbers came from California, and 10 originated in Minnesota. The other states had fewer than 10 stolen. Spokesmen for the U.S. attorney's office and ICE declined to identify any of the victims.

- Two Social Security numbers were stolen from Iowans - one from an unidentified Urbandale resident born in 1942, and one from an Iowan born in 1983 who lives in the north-central town of Carpenter.

- At least 38 of the U.S. residents whose Social Security numbers were stolen are dead, including seven who were born in the late 1800s. Forty-seven of the Social Security numbers used by the immigrant workers were not valid, according to the complaints.

- At least eight immigrants used fraudulent Social Security numbers to register cars, while others used the numbers on driver's licenses.

Among the arrested workers was Miguel Chavez-Figueroa, a Guatemalan, who confessed to using a false Social Security number to buy a car at a Cedar Rapids dealership. Chavez-Figueroa - who worked under the name Miguel Juarez - bought the 1996 Chevy Blazer and first registered the car in Missouri in 2005, according to court records. An Iowa registration for the car expired in March, according to court papers. The Social Security number he used was invalid.

Another immigrant who faced charges, Brenda Hernandez-Poron, allegedly had a driver's license with a Social Security number that belonged to the Iowan from Carpenter.

- The resident alien numbers stolen belonged to lawful U.S. immigrants from countries including Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and Azerbaijan. Most of the complaints, however, did not identify the whereabouts of the legal immigrant victims or their native countries.

- More than one-third of the immigrants charged had worked at Agriprocessors for less than a year, according to employment records reviewed by federal agents. Two-thirds had worked for less than two years, and the longest-serving employee who was charged began working at the plant in June 2000. Federal authorities have said their investigation spanned two years.

Valid numbers led to tougher sentences

Defense lawyers from the raid stress that although the immigrants generally knew their work papers were fraudulent, they did not realize that some of the identification numbers belonged to real people.

"I don't think anybody intended any harm. ... They were merely trying to find a way to make a living," said Chris Clausen, a Marshalltown lawyer who represented 23 of the workers.

The difference between a valid and an invalid number played a huge role for individual workers during court hearings in Waterloo.

The immigrants whose numbers belonged to real people received five-month prison sentences as part of a plea deal, followed by removal from the country. Immigrants whose numbers happened to be invalid were allowed to return to their home countries right away with unsupervised probation.

Clausen, who also represented immigrants from the 2006 Swift & Co. immigration raid in Marshalltown, said victims of immigration-related identity theft usually learn about the breach in one of two ways.

Sometimes, he said, the Internal Revenue Service will contact victims about unclaimed revenue from a job

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they never had. Others learn that the Social Security Administration has issued cards with their number multiple times. The information breach can take four to six months to surface, Clausen said.

One undocumented Agriprocessors employee told a federal grand jury in June that five illegal workers traveled to Des Moines to buy false identification papers weeks before the raid, according to a complaint against one of the plant's managers. Another manager, Juan Carlos Guerrero-Espinoza, allegedly asked workers for photographs and \$200 to \$220 in exchange for new documents.

Executives at Agriprocessors have since hired a former federal prosecutor to oversee the company's compliance with the law.

The plant also has voluntarily enrolled in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's E-Verify program to check for false or mismatched Social Security numbers, said Agriprocessors spokesman Menachem Lubinsky.

Bob Teig, a spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office, refused to say whether federal authorities have notified the residents whose personal information was stolen. Any such information, he said, is part of the still-open investigation.

ICE spokesman Tim Counts said his office does not generally notify identity-theft victims about stolen personal information, unless it advances an investigation. Those who contact the agency, he said, are often referred to the Federal Trade Commission or the Social Security Administration.

Theft of identity for employment is rare

Using personal data to create false work papers stands among the rarer forms of identity theft, consumer advocates say.

In most cases, thieves use Social Security numbers and other documents to open fake bank or credit card accounts in their victims' names, which experts say is far more damaging and difficult to repair.

Twenty percent of the reported U.S. identity-theft cases in 2006 came from victims whose private information was used for purposes other than opening false financial accounts, according to the most recent study by the Federal Trade Commission.

Within that group, less than 5 percent of the identity-theft victims reported that thieves used their personal information to find jobs. But 65 percent also experienced problems with existing financial accounts, the FTC study found.

The FTC does not track identity theft cases related to immigration, said spokeswoman Claudia Bourne Farrell.

False Social Security numbers are often used on loans and financial accounts - which in turn could land on the rightful owner's record, said Bill Brauch, director of the Iowa attorney general's Consumer Protection Division. Using bogus Social Security numbers on work records causes relatively little harm, he said.


Iowans filed 1,063 identity-theft complaints in 2007, the Federal Trade Commission said. Nationally, the state ranked 48th in the number of per-capita identity-theft claims.

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DamagedRooster wrote:

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8/22/2008 12:04:48 PM

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missdorothy wrote:

Replying to terminator:
You PAID for this "paper"? LOL



Replying to missdorothy:



Am I reading the Des Moines Register? It's a beautiful story - none of this "the criminals are the victims" who "sing in church choirs" type of reporting. This is the real story - they were criminals - as were the people leading the company.

Excellent. May we see a Pulitzer in Mr. Schulte's future?

They caught wind that I'm letting my subscription expire. They want me back.

8/22/2008 12:04:08 PM

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newsinaction wrote:

Send all of the illegal aliens back to their country of origin and make Agriprocessors pay the bill.

Let's start doing something for Americans for a change.

8/22/2008 11:04:36 AM

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commentator wrote:

Thanks for the well-written article, Grant. It's about time that people hear the truth behind the illegal aliens and what they do to legal citizens, to our hospitals, schools, welfare ssystem, and our law enforcement systems. Put them in jail and then ship them back!

8/22/2008 10:26:46 AM

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DonRupert wrote:

How is this news? I mean didn't eveyone know this weeks ago when the raid happened?

8/22/2008 9:58:37 AM

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