

Frequently Asked Questions:

Social Security Numbers For Non-Citizens

A social security number is a unique nine-digit number assigned to individuals in the United States by the federal government as proof that they are eligible to work in this country. Social security numbers are used to report an individual's wages to the government and to determine a person's eligibility to collect Social Security benefits. The government agency in charge of issuing Social Security numbers is called the Social Security Administration (SSA).

How do I know whether I am eligible for a Social Security Number?

Generally, only those noncitizens who are authorized to work in the U.S. by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) can get a Social Security number. These includes lawful permanent residents (LPRs), asylees and refugees, recipients of deferred action (including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)), and individuals with certain temporary non-immigrant status that provides for work authorization. As a general rule, any non-citizen with a valid Form I-766 Employment Authorization Document (EAD) is eligible for a Social Security number (SSN).

Why do I need a Social Security Number?

Noncitizens need an SSN to work legally in the U.S. An SSN also helps the government keep track of your earnings and the benefits you can get upon retirement. An SSN may also be required to receive some government services. For example, students must have a valid SSN in order to be eligible for federal financial aid. However, there are other public benefits that noncitizens may access without an SSN. For example, the government cannot require an SSN from noncitizens who wish to register for public elementary or secondary education or apply for school lunch programs.

Many companies, such as banks, credit card companies, and hospitals, will ask for an SSN in order to identify you. You may also be asked for your SSN when you rent an apartment or buy a home. However, in most cases, you are not required to provide your SSN if you do not have one so you should always ask whether you can be identified by some other means. Most times when an SSN is required, you may simply provide the number. You do not usually need to show the card itself so do not carry it with you but keep it in a safe place with other important documents.

How do I apply for a Social Security Number?

You may apply for an SSN at a local Social Security office. To find the closest office, call 1-800-772-1213 between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. or search by zip code on the SSA website at: www.socialsecurity.gov/locator. You will need to complete and submit an application Form SS05. You will also need to provide at least two original documents that prove your identity, age, and U.S. immigration status and authorization to work. A foreign passport or birth certificate may be evidence of your age. Acceptable immigration paperwork from DHS includes a Form I-551 permanent resident card (or green card), a Form I-766 Employment Authorization Document (EAD), or a Form I-94 Arrival/Departure Record. There is no fee to apply for an SSN.

Once the SSA has verified your documents, they will mail you your SSN and card. Your card may contain the statement: “Valid for work only with DHS authorization.” Individuals who are applying for an immigrant visa at the U.S. Department of State may also apply for a Social Security card as part of the applying for an immigration visa in their home country before coming to the U.S.

What if I am not eligible for a Social Security Number?

You may have heard that some individuals use a false SSN or the number of another person without their permission in order to obtain employment in the U.S. This can have serious criminal and immigration consequences. If you are not authorized by DHS to work in the U.S. and you need a number in order to file taxes, you may apply for an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Visit the local IRS office or call 1-800-829-3676 and request Form W-7, Application for An Individual Taxpayer Identification Number.

Remember that immigration law is complicated and applies differently to people in different situations. When you have an immigration law question, check with an immigration lawyer or BIA accredited representative.

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