

OPINION

Don't leave home without it

Your Social Security card is becoming an ID card

By DIANE ASITIMBAY

The truth of the matter is that I never attached much importance to my Social Security card. It was a rather routine procedure to visit the Social Security Office for the first time when I was 15 years old and finally past the babysitting stage. I needed a Social Security card because I was turning 16 and able finally to look for a "real" job.

When I first received it through the mail, back in 1974, nobody asked to see my card. I simply signed the front, memorized the number and then stashed it away in the back of my underwear drawer and never saw it again.

Dusting off the card

That is, until last year when I had to dig it out and blow the dust off it. All of a sudden, the local bank, the Department of Motor Vehicles and the telephone compa-

ny began asking me to flash it around.

"Social Security card, please," says the customer representative of San Diego Trust and Savings. First thing she requested. Even before my name, which of course I wanted to give her since I was opening a new checking account. She snatched the card out of my hands and rushed to call a Social Security hotline to confirm the number wasn't false.

Wait a minute. When the first Social Security numbers were issued in 1936, the federal government assured the public that the use of the number would be limited to the Social Security program. Then in 1961, the Internal Revenue Service began using this Social Security number to identify taxpayers.

So as far as I know, the only people who have a legal right to see the card are the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and my employer.

Then why has this card become *the* identification tag for 1993 — fashionable

to put on nearly everything: medical forms, school enrollment cards and credit card applications? Filling in the blank immediately labels you part of the "in-crowd."

PacBell says it's optional

I didn't realize how much power the card wielded until last month when I wanted to install telephone service in my new apartment. The Pacific Bell representative first told me about each telephone service. Then she asked for my Social Security number. She said it was optional to give it out and I wouldn't be penalized for not doing so.

"I'd rather not," I said.

"Then you'll have to come into the office during business hours and fill out an application and bring photo identification," she said. "Of course, we cannot connect your telephone service until that's done."

"Would it change things if I gave you my Social Security number?" I asked annoyed. I wanted my telephone connected yesterday.

"Yes it would," she curtly answered.

I gave in to her begrudgingly so as not to have to make an extra trip to her office. Now I'm sorry I did.

Why should I give my Social Security number to a telephone operator? To make her customer files "more complete?" Or is there a hidden issue that no one wants to talk about?

Why not call it an ID card?

Why not raise the question? Is the card being used to separate those legal from the illegal: a new tool to quash illegal immigration? If so, then why not call it a "national identification card?" It would be more accurate. Why pretend it's about the security it is not offering?

Yes, I'm offended. Nobody accepts my name anymore. Too impersonal. Could be just anybody saying anything.

Hold onto that nine-digit number, though. Politicians just might change the name of it.

National ID cards. You can't fool me. We already have them.

ASITIMBAY is a San Diego writer.



JOHN OVERMYER