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## Policy puts troops at risk for identity theft

By [Andrew Tilghman](#) - Staff writer  
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U.S. troops may be among the most vulnerable Americans to identity theft. That's because the U.S. military is overusing Social Security numbers and putting at risk troops' most basic personal information, according to a recent report from several professors at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.

It's been a problem for years, and the Pentagon has issued a stream of policies and directives to curtail the risk. But the underlying problem is a culture where troops are constantly prompted to provide their Social Security numbers when doing basic daily tasks such as logging onto computers, signing up for medical care and accessing routine military facilities.

### Our view

- [Protect troops' Social Security numbers](#)

"The military culture is one of widespread compulsory Social Security number disclosure," concluded the report, released in early December and published online by the Small Wars Journal.

"We need widespread, systemic changes to the culture and processes surrounding the use of personal information, and these changes need to be embraced and enforced by commanders at every level," the report said.

Identity theft can put troops in debt or ruin personal credit ratings, making it virtually impossible to buy a house or car, or get any kind of loan.



MC2 James R. Evans / Navy Aviation Ordnancemen prepare to move ordnance aboard aircraft carrier Vinson. The military is overusing Social Security numbers and putting troops at risk for identity theft, according to a recent report.

The potential problems are magnified for deployed troops, who can suffer extensive damage to their finances and credit scores before recognizing signs of a problem.

Pentagon officials say efforts to protect troops' information have been underway for years. For example, the new Defense Department identification cards will no longer feature Social Security numbers starting in May.

Defense officials say they are reinforcing a "culture of protection" and continue to take significant steps to reduce the use of Social Security numbers.

The report suggests the military consider replacing the Social Security number with a military ID number, which could uniquely identify troops without jeopardizing their credit.

For now, individual troops are powerless to curtail usage of their Social Security numbers, said Army Lt. Col. Greg Conti, one of the report's authors and a computer science professor.

"You can't fix it individually. I've tried time and time again to correct individually the problems I've encountered. But it's impossible," Conti said. "You are going up against this tide and culture of mandated usage."

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