

DAVID GILBERT    POLITICS FEB 17, 2025 3:02 PM

## **No, 150-Year-Olds Aren't Collecting Social Security Benefits**

Elon Musk claims to have found rampant fraud in the Social Security Administration. There's a much simpler explanation.



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Elon Musk has repeatedly claimed that his so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) project had uncovered massive government fraud when it alleged that 150-year-olds were claiming Social Security benefits.

But Musk has provided no evidence to back up his claims, and experts quickly pointed out that this is very likely just a quirk of the decades-old coding language that underpins the government payment systems.

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Musk first made the claims during his Oval Office press conference last week, when he claimed that a “cursory examination of Social Security, and we got people in there that are 150 years old. Now, do you know anyone that's 150? I don't know. They should be in the Guinness Book of World Records ... So that's a case where I think they're probably dead.”

While no evidence was produced to back up this claim, it was picked up by the right-wing commentators online, primarily on Musk’s own X platform, as well as being reported credibly by pro-Trump media outlets.

Computer programmers quickly claimed that the 150 figure was not evidence of fraud, but rather the result of a weird quirk of the Social Security Administration's benefits system, which was largely written in COBOL, a 60-year-old programming language that undergirds SSA's databases as well as systems from many other US government agencies.

COBOL is rarely used today, and as such, Musk's cadre of young engineers may well be unfamiliar with it.

Because COBOL does not have a date type, some implementations rely instead on a system whereby all dates are coded to a reference point. The most commonly used is May 20, 1875, as this was the date of an international standards-setting conference held in Paris, known as the "Convention du Mètre."

#### Got a Tip?

Are you a current or former employee of the Social Security Administration with insight into what's happening? We'd like to hear from you. Using a nonwork phone or computer, contact David Gilbert at [david.gilbert@wired.com](mailto:david.gilbert@wired.com) or securely on Signal on DavidGilbert.01.

These systems default to the reference point when a birth date is missing or incomplete, meaning all of those entries in 2025 would show an age of 150.

That's just one possible explanation for what DOGE allegedly found. Musk could also have simply looked up the SSA's own website, which explains that since September 2015 the agency has automatically stopped benefit payments when anyone reaches the age of 115.

However, on Monday morning Musk doubled down, posting a screenshot of what he claims were figures from "the Social Security database" to X, writing that "the numbers of people in each age bucket with the death field set to FALSE!"

The figures suggested that over 10 millions people aged over 120 were collecting benefits.

"Maybe Twilight is real and there are a lot of vampires collecting Social Security," Musk wrote.



The database Musk took the screenshot from listed almost 400 million people, which is more than five times the number of people receiving benefits in 2024, according to the [SSA's own website](#). It's also significantly more than the entire US population.

The fact that the Social Security system contains millions of entries from people who are dead is likely distinct from a potential COBOL-caused error, and also not news. [A report written by the SSA's inspector general in 2023](#) found that 98 percent of those aged 100 or older in the Social Security databases are not in receipt of any benefits. The report added that the database would not be updated because it would cost too much money to do so.

“DOGE going into all these agencies with largely unfettered access with a wrecking ball and no understanding of the business logic and structure behind the code, database and configured business logic, related payment systems, and integrated decision trees, poses real risks to the privacy and persona-level data of millions of people across all of those records,” [Thomas Drake](#), a former National Security Agency executive-turned-whistleblower, tells WIRED.

Musk, during the Oval Office press conference which was attended by his son, claimed the payments to 150-year-olds was part of the billions, maybe even tens of billions, in corruption and waste that his DOGE effort had already uncovered.

But just like [condom shipments to Gaza](#) or [payments to Politico](#), Musk's claims of Social Security fraud seems to be a gross misrepresentation of what's actually happening and why.

In the same press conference where he made the remarks about 150-year-olds collecting Social Security benefits, Musk said his DOGE project would be “maximally transparent” with all savings being made posted to its website.

But when the site came online last week, not only was it [just a repurposed Twitter feed](#) with [terrible security](#), it also lacked any details in a section dedicated to savings.

At the time, the site's administrators claimed the savings section would be updated no later than Valentine's Day. When that deadline came and went without any update, the administrator wrote: “Receipts coming over the weekend!” The page was

briefly populated on Saturday before being taken down; at the time of publication on Monday, no receipts were posted.

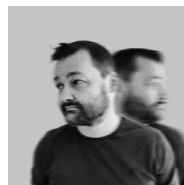
“I do worry about bait-and-switch and further transfers of wealth and even more debt financing into the hands of even fewer, driven and riven by power and abject self-interest, not public interest,” Drake believes. “Democracy is in real danger.”

Neither DOGE nor the White House responded to requests for comment about Musk’s claims.

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[David Gilbert](#) is a reporter at WIRED covering disinformation, online extremism, and how these two online trends impact people’s lives across the globe, with a special focus on the 2024 US presidential election. Prior to joining WIRED, he worked at VICE News. He lives in Ireland. ... [Read more](#)

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