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FBI: Thousands of PR children victims of ID theft

By DANICA COTO

An identity-theft ring that catered to illegal immigrants seeking to establish themselves in the U.S. stole the personal data of 7,000 public school children in Puerto Rico, officials said Tuesday.

Members of the ring broke into about 50 schools across the U.S. island territory over the past two years to steal birth certificates and Social Security numbers to sell to the illegal immigrants, the FBI and other agencies announced at a news conference.

The victims were largely unaware their information had been stolen - and likely would not have learned of the thefts until they became adults and tried to buy something on credit, said assistant U.S. Attorney Julia Diaz Rex.

"A kid is going to have a perfect credit history," Diaz said. "They reach 18, 20 years of age. They go buy a car and their credit is damaged."

The authorities did not disclose how they uncovered the ring but said seven people have been arrested and one more is being sought. At least some of them were illegal immigrants from the Dominican Republic.

Investigators determined the birth certificates and Social Security numbers were sold as a package in a number of states including Texas, Alaska and California, for up to \$250, authorities said.

Two suspects are accused of possessing nearly 6,000 birth certificates and Social Security cards. One was accused of intending to sell 40 Social Security cards for nearly \$3,000, while another was seeking the same amount for 12 cards.

The suspects in custody were being held on charges that include aggravated identity theft and social security fraud and face up to 15 years in prison, said U.S. Attorney Rosa Emilia Rodriguez.

One suspect had been previously arrested for the kidnapping of a Dominican man last year that led to the shooting of a police officer during an FBI raid, said Luis Fraticelli, special FBI agent in charge of Puerto Rico.

It is unclear if other members of the ring are at large, and whether they received help from school officials, Rodriguez said.

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