

**GAO**

Health, Education and Human Services  
Division

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**Income Security Issue  
Area**

**Active Assignments**

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# Foreword

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This report was prepared primarily to inform Congressional members and key staff of ongoing assignments in the General Accounting Office's Income Security issue area. This report contains assignments that were ongoing as of July 6, 1995, and presents a brief background statement and a list of key questions to be answered on each assignment. The report will be issued quarterly.

This report was compiled from information available in GAO's internal management information systems. Because the information was downloaded from computerized data bases intended for internal use, some information may appear in abbreviated form.

If you have questions or would like additional information about assignments listed, please contact Jane Ross, Director, on (202) 512-7215; or Leslie Aronovitz, Associate Director, on (202) 512-7104.

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**OTHER ISSUE AREA WORK: INCOME SECURITY**

• FEDERAL BENEFITS PROVIDED TO UNDOCUMENTED ALIENS.

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## ***Income Security***

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### **PROMOTING SELF-SUFFICIENCY**

**TITLE: REVIEW OF TEEN PARENTS AND THE SERVICE THEY RECEIVE IN WELFARE OFFICES (105592)**

**BACKGROUND :** GAO has found that unwed teen mothers are at special risk for long-term welfare dependency, thus least likely to become self-sufficient. Concerns about rising AFDC caseloads, dramatic growth in the number of unwed teen mothers, and long-term dependency among teen mothers receiving AFDC have prompted attention as the nation's welfare system is reformed.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) What services are provided to teen mothers on AFDC in selected cities? (2) What services or programs show promise in helping AFDC teen mothers avoid long-term welfare dependency? (3) What can be done through the AFDC program to help these young mothers avoid long-term welfare dependency?

**TITLE: UTILIZATION OF CHILD CARE GUARANTEE UNDER THE JOBS PROGRAM (105593)**

**BACKGROUND :** The Family Support Act of 1988 guaranteed child care for individuals participating in an education and training activity, like the JOBS program. Current welfare proposals focus on restricting the duration of individuals' stay on welfare and moving more of them into work. The capacity of states to provide child care will be a key factor in the success of these proposals.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** Key Questions: (1) To what extent are the child care needs of JOBS participants identified and how are these needs being met? (2) What barriers exist that hinder participants' use of child care? (3) How do participants' child care needs affect their participation in the JOBS program, as well as their move toward self-sufficiency?

**TITLE: BASELINE DATA ON FAMILY PRESERVATION AND FAMILY SUPPORT (FPFS) PROGRAMS (105820)**

**BACKGROUND :** The federal system for financing child welfare services offers little incentive for states to fund services designed to strengthen and preserve families. In 1993, Congress created a new program to provide funding to states for family preservation and support (FPS) services.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** This is the first in a series of jobs. (1) What were the resulting outcomes of existing state child welfare service-delivery systems? (2) To what extent did states provide and evaluate FPS programs prior to the new law? (3) What implementation issues exist under the new law?

### **PROMOTING SELF-SUFFICIENCY**

**TITLE: OVERVIEW OF FOSTER CARE (105823)**

**BACKGROUND :** The states' foster care systems, caring for 450,000 children, are experiencing severe strains. Welfare reform will pose new challenges to the states and to HHS which is responsible for administering \$2.6 billion in annual foster care grants. Our work will provide useful background information to the Congress as it considers actions to change the foster care systems and federal role.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** 1. What are the factors contributing to the recent growth in the number of foster children?  
2. What kinds of changes have state systems made to respond to increasing foster care pressures and problems?  
3. What has been the federal role in the nation's foster care system?

**TITLE: REVIEW OF STATE EFFORTS TO REFORM WELFARE (105931)**

**BACKGROUND :** HHS allows states to waive specified AFDC program requirements and experiment with initiatives, such as time limits, to assist in promoting program objectives. Waivers have been approved in over 20 states, which are implementing such changes. Many of these initiatives are relevant to the current reforms being considered in Congress.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) What states have received waivers from HHS? (2) What are the common provisions across these waivers? (3) To what extent do these waivers allow states to experiment with reforms that are currently being considered by the Congress?

**TITLE: REVIEW OF THE PRIVATIZATION OF CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT (106600)**

**BACKGROUND :** Faced with rising caseloads, fiscal and staffing constraints, and seeking to improve client services, many states are pursuing privatization of part or all of their child support enforcement programs. Little is known about the status and outcomes of these efforts, advantages and disadvantages to privatization, and consequences for child support programs.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) What is the extent of, rationale for, and perceived advantages and disadvantages of privatizing child support functions? (2) What are the terms of privatized child support contracts? (3) What are the legal issues surrounding the privatization of child support enforcement? (4) What is known about the cost-effectiveness of privatizing child support functions?

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### **PROMOTING SELF-SUFFICIENCY**

**TITLE: TESTIMONY REGARDING CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES TO REDUCE FEDERAL AND STATE COSTS (106602)**

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) What has been the growth in the non-AFDC child support caseloads and related administrative costs? (2) What are the characteristics of non-AFDC clients? (3) What alternatives are available for increasing non-AFDC cost recovery? (4) What alternative fee structure could be devised based on child support collections and what degree of flexibility should be given to the states?

**TITLE: EMERGING ISSUES IN FAMILY AND CHILD WELFARE (106702)**

**BACKGROUND :** The nation faces a rising number of troubled families at risk of or abusing children, especially those with few personal or community resources. Numerous committees have expressed interest in ways to improve the efficiency of federal aid to these families. GAO will identify potential study areas leading to improved efficiency in the administration of child welfare services.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** To position GAO to be responsive to Congress, we will address the following questions: (1) What are the most important study areas in the child welfare system? (2) What are the data sources and methodologies that can be used in studies that are designed to improve the efficiency of child welfare services?

### **REDESIGNING DISABILITY PROGRAMS**

**TITLE: WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL RETURN TO WORK ISSUES CONCERNING SSA'S DISABILITY PROGRAMS? (105580)**

**BACKGROUND :** The Social Security's DI and SSI programs have experienced tremendous growth in size and costs over the past ten years. In 1993, the programs provided \$52 billion in cash benefits and \$50 billion in healthcare coverage. Pointing to poor program outcomes, critics contend that the programs impede participation of the disabled into the workforce.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** In response to Congressional interest, we will identify (1) changes in program growth and composition in recent years and (2) emerging issues that impact program integrity.

**REDESIGNING DISABILITY PROGRAMS**

**TITLE: REVIEW OF PASS WORK-INCENTIVE PROGRAM FOR SSI BENEFICIARIES (105598)**

**BACKGROUND :** A Plan for Achieving Self Support (PASS) is a work incentive provision that helps the disabled achieve an occupational goal. With a PASS, any income used to achieve this goal will not reduce their federal benefits. Because little is known about PASS, the Congress mandated a GAO review of participation, characteristics, and effectiveness in returning people to work.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** GAO was asked to report on: (1) characteristics of PASS holders and applicants and (2) types of approved plans and their duration. (3) We were also asked to examine the success of PASS holders in gaining economic self-sufficiency. We will also examine (4) what improvements can be made to the PASS program and approval process.

**TITLE: DESCRIPTION OF CASELOAD GROWTH AND CHANGING BENEFICIARY CHARACTERISTICS IN THE SUPPLEMENTAL SECURITY INCOME PROGRAM (105681)**

**BACKGROUND :** From 1986 through 1994, the disabled population on SSI grew at an annual average of about 7 percent and benefit payments have more than doubled to \$26 billion in 1994; whereas the aged and blind populations have remained fairly stable. The causes of caseload growth, such as state and federal policy changes, are unclear.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) What legislative, administrative and judicial changes have taken place in the SSI program since the early 1980s? (2) How have caseloads grown and beneficiary characteristics changed? (3) What are the implications for program reform?

**TITLE: MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FROM OTHER PROGRAMS OFFER POTENTIAL FOR REDUCING SSA'S DISABILITY COSTS (106502)**

**BACKGROUND :** Despite rising costs, SSA spends little time and resources managing its disability caseload, and few beneficiaries ever return to work. In contrast, the U.S. private sector and some European countries use techniques to maximize the productive capacity of ill or injured employees. Proponents believe these techniques could reduce SSA disability costs by facilitating early return to work.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** The overarching questions are (1) how do other disability programs remove barriers and create incentives for disabled persons to return to work and (2) can SSA better manage its disability caseload through (a) the eligibility decisionmaking process, (b) early intervention strategies, and (c) different benefit structures?

**REDESIGNING DISABILITY PROGRAMS**

**TITLE: BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON SSA'S PROJECT NETWORK (106505)**

**ASSURING ADEQUATE RETIREMENT BENEFITS**

**TITLE: USE OF PENSION FUNDS FOR PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS (105664)**

**BACKGROUND :** Proposals have been made to use pension funds to help address a perceived shortfall in public infrastructure investment. A number of innovative financing mechanisms have been recommended by a congressional commission. We will analyze the various financing mechanisms and provide Congress with our assessment and the implications for pension funds.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) What role might private pension funds play in financing public infrastructure in the context of commission's proposals? (2) Is a federally-chartered corporation the best alternative for attracting pension capital to infrastructure? (3) How would pension fund managers respond to new federal incentives or related proposals?

**TITLE: TREATMENT OF SPOUSES AND WIDOWS UNDER SOCIAL SECURITY (105678)**

**BACKGROUND :** Women's increasing role in the workforce is one of the most significant trends affecting Social Security yet many women have found that increased work does not result in higher Social Security retirement benefits. Studies have analyzed proposals to restructure spouse and survivor benefits. New restructuring proposals have arisen as a part of entitlement reform.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) How does the current Social Security program treat spouses and survivors? (2) How will women's changing labor force participation likely affect future Social Security benefit levels? (3) What have past studies found about the benefits for women and what proposals are currently being advanced to reform spouse and survivor benefit entitlements?

**ASSURING ADEQUATE RETIREMENT BENEFITS**

**TITLE: DOES THE THRIFT SAVINGS PLAN PROVIDE FEDERAL EMPLOYEES WITH ENOUGH INFORMATION FOR A HEALTHY RETIREMENT? (105680)**

**BACKGROUND :** Under FERS, federal employees are responsible for making informed choices regarding their TSP contributions. However, about 25% of FERS employees do not contribute. Those that do may not be contributing sufficiently to provide benefits comparable to CSRS. Further, TSP's three investment options may limit employees' TSP earnings.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) Are FERS-covered employees contributing to TSP at rates sufficient to ensure retirement incomes similar to CSRS? (2) What does TSP do to inform FERS-covered employees of the importance of their TSP accounts in having an adequate retirement income? (3) Would additional TSP investment options provide employees greater earnings on their accounts?

**TITLE: REVIEW OF THE COST-OF-LIVING ADJUSTMENTS UNDER PRIVATE PENSIONS AND PENSION PORTABILITY (105683)**

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) What is the general frequency of COLAs in private pension plans and the rationale for their frequency? (2) Does inflation have a particular effect on women who are receiving private pension benefits? (3) What portability mechanisms are found in private defined benefit and defined contribution plans?

**TITLE: UPDATE OF DATA ON THE UMWA COMBINED BENEFIT FUND (105685)**

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) How many beneficiaries are in the Fund and to which operators are they assigned? (2) What were operators' premium billings for 1995 and have they all paid? (3) What is the Fund's financial status? (4) How has the reduced Medicare reimbursement rate affected the Fund's unreimbursed expenses and its \$114 million surplus at 9/30/94?

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## ***Income Security***

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### **ASSURING ADEQUATE RETIREMENT BENEFITS**

**TITLE: UNDERFUNDED STATE AND LOCAL PENSION PLANS (105686)**

**BACKGROUND :** GAO reported in 1979 and 1992 that most state and local government pension plans were underfunded. GAO recommended that Congress closely monitor these plans to assess improved or worsened plan funding. As such, the Committee asked GAO to update our previous findings with regard to state and local government pension underfunding.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** 1. What percent of state and local pension plans are underfunded? 2. Of underfunded plans, how many (a) are not making contributions necessary to achieve fully funded status and (b) do not participate in Social Security? 3. How many of those not under Social Security provide disability coverage to their workers?

**TITLE: SUPPLEMENTAL DEFERRED COMPENSATION PLANS OF STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (207442)**

**BACKGROUND :** State & local government employees frequently have deferred compensation pension plans that supplement defined benefit plans. Some plans are at risk because of imprudent investments. For example, Orange County, CA, public employee pension funds experienced a 10% loss because deferred compensation funds were invested in the county's investment pool, which went bankrupt.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) What is the total funding of state and local supplemental pension plans? (2) How are the plans administered and funded? (3) How are the plan funds invested? (4) Have any other plans sustained losses similar to those of Orange County, CA? (5) How many pension plans does the federal government have, who do they cover, and what are their benefits and funding levels?

### **IMPROVING SERVICE TO THE PUBLIC**

**TITLE: OHA BACKLOGS (105141)**

**BACKGROUND :** Increasing workloads at SSA's Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA) are delaying the issuance of appeal decisions. For FY94, the backlog of 485,000 cases was over twice the FY92 level, and average processing time was 305 days. Delays can cause severe hardship for those claimants who are unable to work because of a disability.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) What steps has SSA's management undertaken to reduce the hearings backlog and what results have been achieved? (2) What additional actions might be taken to improve SSA's and OHA's performance and what results can be expected from these actions?

**IMPROVING SERVICE TO THE PUBLIC**

**TITLE: REVIEW OF HOW SSA TELEPHONE DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS AFFECT BUSY SIGNAL RATES AT 30 TEST OFFICES (105144)**

**BACKGROUND :** In 1995, SSA plans to test if voice mail & automated menu equipment can improve phone service at local offices. P.L. 103-296 requires GAO to assess the public's telephone access to those local offices. The primary issues are whether the equipment reduces busy signal rates & improves service in general. GAO has also been asked to monitor SSA efforts to evaluate its pilot projects.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) What is the level of public telephone access after the new equipment is added in comparison to what it had been before? (2) How will SSA evaluate the results of the demonstration projects? (3) What are the public service implications of the new equipment?

**PREVENTING INEFFICIENCY AND WASTE**

**TITLE: SHARING OF INFORMATION (105139)**

**BACKGROUND :** Billions of dollars in overpayments have been made due to the lack of data needed to make accurate and timely determinations of eligibility and payment amounts. Overpayments for the Social Security retirement, AFDC, SSI, and unemployment insurance programs amount to about \$10 billion annually and only about 30 percent of this amount is recovered.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) What data are needed to determine eligibility and payments? (2) What are the barriers to getting more timely and accurate information (e.g., poor data sharing due to system incompatibilities or privacy concerns)? (3) What specific or quantifiable problems result from not having timely and accurate data? (4) Will changes enhance payment accuracy and agency productivity?

**TITLE: HOW CAN THE RECOVERY OF BENEFIT OVERPAYMENTS IN MAJOR WELFARE PROGRAMS BE IMPROVED? (105497)**

**BACKGROUND :** Major needs-based welfare programs provided over \$100 billion in public assistance benefits in fiscal year 1992. For various reasons, hundreds of millions of dollars of benefit overpayments to clients occur each year.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) To what extent are state agencies recovering benefit overpayments in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Food Stamp, and Medicaid programs? (2) What are the inhibitors to more effective recovery practices? (3) How could these inhibitors be overcome?

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## ***Income Security***

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### **PREVENTING INEFFICIENCY AND WASTE**

**TITLE: SURVEY OF SSA CONTROLS TO PRECLUDE SSI FRAUD BY IMMIGRANTS (105672)**

**BACKGROUND :** The media has reported on immigrants who, with the help of interpreters and physicians, file fraudulent claims for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability benefits. Interpreters coach immigrants on how to appear mentally disabled and take them to physicians who will provide false medical reports. The Social Security Administration (SSA) and states administer the SSI program.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) To what extent has the number of immigrants on SSI disability grown? (2) Which states have suspected immigrant fraud cases? (3) How many immigrants have defrauded the SSI program with help from interpreters and physicians? (4) What controls do SSA and states have to prevent immigrant fraud? (5) What initiatives do SSA and states have for improving controls?

**TITLE: NONPROFIT STATUS OF OUT OF STATE FOSTER CARE PROGRAMS (105821)**

**BACKGROUND :** Under Title IV-E, states may claim federal funds for youths placed in facilities where federal criteria are met. The criteria provides that private institutions must be "nonprofit" and not be detention facilities. It is alleged California directed out-of-state facilities to convert to "nonprofit status," and that these facilities may be detention facilities.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) Did programs convert to nonprofit status and, if so, why? (2) Do these programs meet the federal definition of a "detention facility"? (3) Is Title IV-E reimbursement claimed for any program placements and, if so, are the claim amounts appropriate?

**TITLE: AN ANALYSIS OF PROGRAMS FUNDED UNDER THE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES SERVICES BUDGET ACCOUNT (105929)**

**BACKGROUND :** This request focuses on the potential for consolidation of programs within one specific budget account of HHS--Children and Families Services Programs--administered by HHS' Administration for Children and Families (ACF). There are about 30 programs totalling about \$1.4 billion in annual expenditures.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) Is there overlap among program objectives, target populations, and services? (2) Are there opportunities to reduce administrative expenses, overhead or complexity through program consolidation?

**PREVENTING INEFFICIENCY AND WASTE**

**TITLE: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE AND RESULTS ACT IN THE OFFICE OF CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT (106601)**

**BACKGROUND :** In early 1995, GAO recommended several improvements in the child support enforcement program, such as strengthening federal-state partnerships. The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) responded that it would address needed improvements through its participation as a pilot project under the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) What is the status of OCSE's implementation of GPRA? (2) What progress has OCSE made in using GPRA to address recommended program improvements?

**TITLE: REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SUPPLEMENTAL SECURITY INCOME MATCHING PROGRAMS (106800)**

**BACKGROUND :** In FY 1994, SSA paid \$25 billion in SSI benefits. SSA determined, however, that \$852 million was overpaid and believes total overpayments may be much more. Many overpayments were identified through computer matching. Additional overpayments may be identified and future overpayments avoided by enhancing and expanding SSA's matching program.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) Can the current SSI matches be improved so they will identify more ineligible or overpaid individuals? (2) What additional matches could and should SSA be performing and what results can be expected from these matches? (3) Are current match results being followed-up on in a timely manner?

**TITLE: REVIEW OF TRANSFERS OF RESOURCES IN THE SSI PROGRAM (106801)**

**BACKGROUND :** In 1988 Congress eliminated the penalty that made some people ineligible for SSI and certain Medicaid benefits for two years because of resource transfers. SSA must notify states of resource transfers so SSI recipients do not receive certain Medicaid benefits for which they are ineligible. SSA may not be making all the notifications.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) To what extent have SSI recipients reported transfers of resources? (2) Does SSA routinely notify state Medicaid agencies of resource transfers? (3) How many recipients benefitted from eliminating the SSI transfer of resource penalty?

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## ***Income Security***

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### **OTHER ISSUE AREA WORK: INCOME SECURITY**

**TITLE: WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF BUSINESSES INVOLVED IN DIRECT-MAIL MARKETING STRATEGIES THAT OFFER SOCIAL SECURITY SERVICES? (105258)**

**BACKGROUND :** Some business advertising is crafted to look as though it is "Social Security" mail, giving the impression of an SSA endorsement. Such mail may prompt the public to (1) pay for services which could have been obtained directly from SSA free of charge or (2) contribute dollars to lobbyists. These mail practices can be highly profitable and in some cases illegal.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** What are the characteristics of businesses that engage in deceptive mailings to senior citizens? Specifically, (1) Who are they? (2) What are their affiliations, activities, and income from activities related to mail solicitations?

**TITLE: FEDERAL BENEFITS PROVIDED TO UNDOCUMENTED ALIENS (105906)**

**BACKGROUND :** Three sets of requestors asked for information on the costs of providing public benefits to undocumented aliens. To meet the third request, we are expanding our initial job scope to include costs for any programs for which estimates have been made (including state and local costs) and costs for amnestied aliens.

**KEY QUESTIONS :** (1) What are the costs of providing public benefits and services to undocumented (illegal) aliens and aliens who received amnesty under the Immigration and Reform Control Act of 1986? (2) In cases where the agencies that administer programs do not collect data on these costs, what are the reasons why?

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