Overpayments resulting from residency violations totaled about $118 million between 1997 and 2001. However, this figure, which represents only violations detected by SSA, likely understates the true level of the problem. Additionally, the extent of violations appears to vary by geographic region, with overpayments being more prevalent in several large metropolitan areas. GAO found that 54 percent of all overpayments detected by SSA during this period occurred in just 15 counties. In addition, we found that recipients born outside the United States accounted for at least 87 percent of all residency overpayments.

SSA’s ability to detect and deter residency violations is impeded by three kinds of weaknesses. First, the agency relies heavily on self-reported information from recipients to determine domestic residency, often without independently verifying such information. Second, SSA makes insufficient use of existing tools to detect violations, such as its “risk analysis” system, redeterminations, and home visits. Finally, the agency has not adequately pursued independent sources of information from other federal agencies or private organizations to detect nonresidency of SSI recipients. GAO recognizes that the SSI program is complex to administer, and residency requirements are particularly difficult to enforce because they can necessitate time-consuming, labor-intensive verification checks, such as home visits. However, SSA has not employed a systematic, comprehensive approach to this problem that would allow the agency to use its available systems and procedures more efficiently and reduce the program’s exposure to additional violations.

Top 15 Counties for SSI Residency Overpayments (1997-2001)

- California
  - San Francisco
  - Alameda
  - San Mateo
  - Santa Clara
  - Los Angeles
  - Riverside
  - Orange
  - San Diego

- Illinois
  - Cook

- New York
  - Queens
  - New York
  - Kings
  - Bronx

- New Jersey
  - Passaic

- Florida
  - Dade

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-789T. To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robert E. Robertson (202) 512-7215 or RobertsonR@gao.gov.