Why GAO Did This Study

Concerns have been raised about the privacy and security of personal information in light of advances in information technology and the increasingly sophisticated ways in which the government obtains and uses information. Federal agencies’ use of personal information is governed by the Privacy Act of 1974 and the E-Government Act of 2002, while the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) provides implementation guidance and oversight. These laws and guidance are based on the Fair Information Practices, a set of widely accepted principles for protecting privacy.

GAO was asked to testify on its report, being released today, concerning the sufficiency of privacy protections afforded by existing laws and guidance. To do this, GAO analyzed privacy laws and guidance, compared them with the Fair Information Practices, and obtained perspectives from federal agencies as well as an expert forum.

What GAO Recommends

In its report GAO identified alternatives that the Congress should consider, including revising the scope of privacy laws to cover all personal information, requiring that the use of such information be limited to a specific purpose, and revising the structure and publication of privacy notices.

OMB commented that the Congress should consider these alternatives in the broader context of existing privacy and related statutes.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on GAO-08-795T. For more information, contact Linda Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.