

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-485](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Human Resources, Committee on Ways and Means House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The number of individuals with disabilities under age 18 receiving SSI benefits increased by about 44 percent from 2000 through 2016. Youth ages 14 to 17 with disabilities face many challenges achieving self-sufficiency as they transition to adulthood. GAO was asked to examine SSA's efforts to encourage employment for these transition-age youth.

This report examines 1) SSA efforts to encourage employment for transition-age youth on SSI as they move toward adulthood and their effectiveness; and 2) the extent to which SSA helps ensure these youth receive vocational rehabilitation services. GAO analyzed SSA data on work incentives for calendar years 2012-2015, the most recent available, and data from five state VR agencies for calendar year 2015; reviewed relevant laws, policies, and research; and interviewed SSA staff and state VR officials in several states chosen for their SSI youth populations and VR outcomes.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends SSA 1) analyze why youth on SSI with earnings did not benefit from SEIE, 2) improve communication about work incentives and rules, 3) work with Education to determine how many youth on SSI are not connected to VR services, and 4) explore options to further connect them. SSA agreed in whole or in part with three recommendations. SSA disagreed that its communication on work incentives and rules needs to be improved, stating field staff provides information to youth, and it has created new written material. GAO maintains SSA's communication could be improved as presented in this report.

View [GAO-17-485](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov

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SUPPLEMENTAL SECURITY INCOME

SSA Could Strengthen Its Efforts to Encourage Employment for Transition-Age Youth

What GAO Found

The Social Security Administration's (SSA) primary approach for encouraging employment for transition-age youth (ages 14 to 17) with disabilities who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) is work incentives that allow them to keep at least some of their SSI benefits and Medicaid coverage while they work. But few transition-age youth benefit from these incentives. SSI is a means-tested program that provides cash benefits to eligible low-income aged, blind, and disabled individuals. SSA administers several work incentives that allow SSI recipients to exclude some income and expenses when calculating SSI benefits. The work incentive targeted specifically to younger SSI recipients is the Student Earned Income Exclusion (SEIE), which allows income to be excluded from benefits calculations if a recipient is a student under age 22. However, less than 1.5 percent of all transition-age youth—and generally less than half of those with earnings—benefited from SEIE in 2012 through 2015. SSA does not analyze these data, and thus cannot determine why the majority of youth with earnings are not benefiting from SEIE, when they may be eligible. SSA data also show that almost no youth benefited from other incentives that allow them to exclude earnings used for specific purposes, such as the Impairment-Related Work Expenses incentive. The effectiveness of SSA-administered work incentives may be further limited because, according to SSA and other officials, youth and their families are often unaware of or do not understand them, and may fear that work will negatively affect their benefits or eligibility. SSA policy requires staff to provide accurate and meaningful information about relevant SSI policies to claimants and recipients. However, GAO found that SSA does not have sufficient procedures in place to ensure that information on work incentives and how work affects benefits and eligibility is consistently communicated to youth and their families. As a result, SSA may miss opportunities to promote work incentives and other supports, allay fears, and potentially reduce dependence of transition-age youth on SSI benefits.

SSA does not have a systematic way to connect transition-age youth on SSI to state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies that provide training and employment services under the VR State Grants program administered by the Department of Education (Education). Although youth receiving SSI are generally presumed to be eligible for VR services, GAO found that less than 1 percent had an open VR service record in 2015 in four of the five states from which GAO collected VR data. Legislation in 1999 created the Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency program, which expanded the number and types of employment service providers for individuals with disabilities. However, SSA limited eligibility to recipients age 18 and older. While transition-age youth receiving special education services can be connected to VR agencies through their schools, the extent to which this happens—and whether they are on SSI—is unknown because data to make such determinations are not systematically collected by SSA or schools. Federal standards for internal control call for agencies to use quality information to achieve their objectives. Without relevant data or additional options for connecting youth to VR services, SSA cannot ensure that transition-age youth on SSI are being connected to these services, which can help to prepare them for adulthood and the workforce.