

## Why GAO Did This Study

According to VA, in 2016, racial and ethnic minority veterans represented about 22 percent of the total veteran population of 18.6 million. VA projects racial and ethnic minority veterans will make up 36 percent of its total veteran population by 2040. VA has identified racial and ethnic disparities in its health care outcomes, mirroring trends seen across the United States.

House Report 115-188 included a provision for GAO to review whether VHA provides quality, equitable care for minority veterans. GAO's report examines, among other issues, (1) the extent to which VA has taken steps to advance health equity for racial and ethnic minority veterans, and (2) VA's efforts to use race and ethnicity data to identify and address disparities in health care outcomes involving minority veterans. GAO reviewed relevant documents, such as strategic and operational plans and peer-reviewed research studies; assessed VA's health equity action plan against criteria identified in GAO's body of work on effectively managing performance; and interviewed VA officials familiar with VA's health equity efforts, as well as race and ethnicity data.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations to VA to (1) ensure that any health equity action plan includes performance measures to assess progress, and clear lines of accountability designating responsibility to specific offices, and (2) conduct an assessment to determine how to address weaknesses identified with the completeness and accuracy of race and ethnicity data in the electronic health record, and implement corrective actions as necessary. VA agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-20-83](#). For more information, contact Debra A. Draper at (202) 512-7114 or [draperd@gao.gov](mailto:draperd@gao.gov).

## VA HEALTH CARE

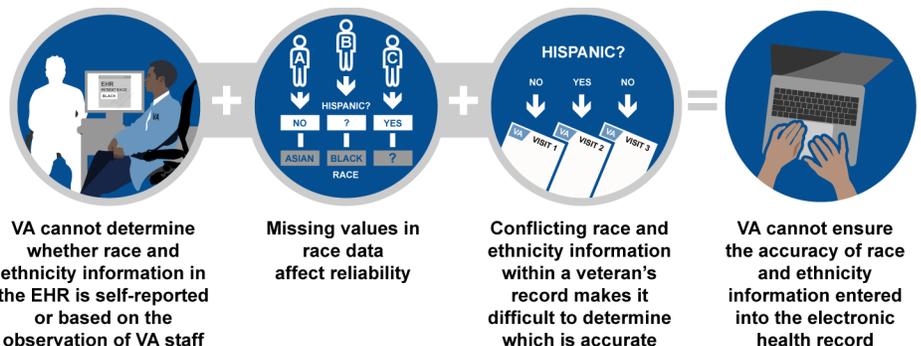
# Opportunities Exist for VA to Better Identify and Address Racial and Ethnic Disparities

## What GAO Found

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has taken steps to reduce disparities in health care outcomes linked to race and ethnicity, but lacks mechanisms to measure progress and ensure accountability for results. In 2012, VA established the Office of Health Equity to identify and address health care outcome disparities and to develop an action plan to achieve health equity. This office issued an action plan in 2014 that identified activities to make improvements in five focus areas, such as increasing awareness of the significance of disparities and strengthening leadership for addressing them. However, GAO found that the extent of VA's progress in implementing the action plan and advancing health equity is unknown because the action plan lacked performance measures and clear lines of accountability for specific offices. For example, although VA's action plan included a list of "success criteria" for each of the five focus areas, these criteria were not measurable, and were not linked to specific activities or to offices responsible for implementation.

VA funds research efforts that have identified disparities in health care outcomes involving minority veterans, but rely on data that VA officials and researchers noted have weaknesses in completeness and accuracy. One concern is that race and ethnicity information can be labeled incorrectly in VA patients' electronic health records as "self-reported", a highly reliable method of collection, when data were actually collected based on the less reliable method of VA staff observation. Other reported concerns include missing values on patients' race and conflicting race and ethnicity information. VA researchers told GAO they account for some of these concerns by using data from other sources, such as Medicare, but such work-arounds are time intensive. Further, VA officials reported that data weaknesses limit their ability to identify and address disparities in health care outcomes in their medical centers. Despite recognizing weaknesses related to the quality of race and ethnicity data, VA has not implemented corrective actions to address them. Without doing so, VA medical center officials cannot readily identify and address disparities in health care outcomes by race and ethnicity.

### Concerns Raised by Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Officials about the Completeness and Accuracy of VA Race and Ethnicity Data



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs' information. | GAO-20-83

Note: Concerns about the completeness and accuracy of race and ethnicity information were raised by officials from VA's Office of Health Equity, Veterans Experience Office, and Health Services Research & Development.