

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-250](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

To help ensure that only eligible individuals receive disability benefits, SSA conducts periodic CDRs to assess beneficiaries' medical condition. CDRs have historically saved the government money. However, in recent years, SSA has had difficulty conducting timely CDRs resulting in a backlog of over 900,000 CDRs in fiscal year 2014. With this backdrop, GAO was asked to study SSA's ability to conduct and manage timely, high-quality CDRs.

This report evaluates, among other things, how SSA selects which CDRs to conduct and the extent to which SSA reviews the quality of CDR decisions.

GAO analyzed CDR data for fiscal years 2003 through 2013 (the most recent year for which complete data were available); assessed SSA's models used to prioritize CDRs; reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and SSA documentation about CDR prioritization and accuracy review procedures; and interviewed SSA and state Disability Determination Services officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends SSA, among other things, further consider cost savings as part of its prioritization of CDRs, analyze the root causes of CDRs with errors, and track date errors. SSA agreed with most of GAO's recommendations, but disagreed that there is a need to track date errors and to adjust its approach to sampling CDRs for quality review. GAO maintains actions are warranted and feasible as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-16-250](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or [bertonid@gao.gov](mailto:bertonid@gao.gov)

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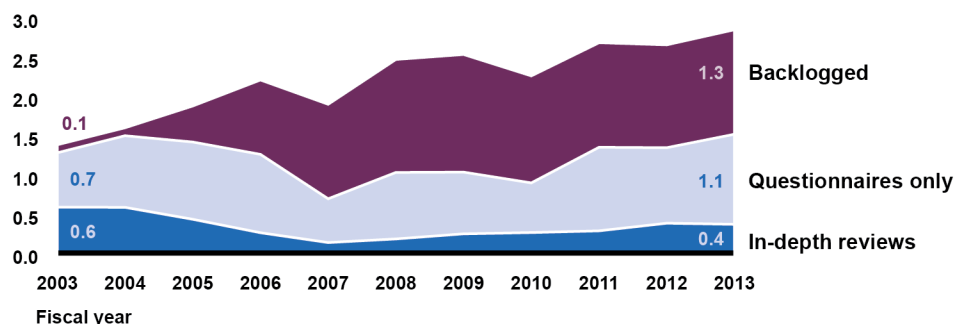
## SOCIAL SECURITY DISABILITY

### SSA Could Increase Savings by Refining Its Selection of Cases for Disability Review

## What GAO Found

The Social Security Administration (SSA) selects cases for continuing disability reviews (CDR) using several inputs, but it does not do so in a manner that maximizes potential savings. SSA first prioritizes CDRs required by law or agency policy such as those for children under 1 year old who are receiving benefits due in part to low birth weight. Then SSA uses statistical models to identify the remaining CDRs to be conducted each year. The models also determine which cases will receive an in-depth review of medical records by the Disability Determination Services—the state agencies that conduct CDRs—versus a lower-cost questionnaire sent directly to the beneficiary. As shown in the figure below, a growing number of cases have been set aside for future review (backlogged) over the last 10 years. Although SSA somewhat considers potential cost savings when selecting cases for in-depth reviews, its approach does not maximize potential savings for the government. For example, estimated average savings from conducting CDRs are higher for some groups of Disability Insurance (DI) beneficiaries than others, but SSA's selection process does not differentiate among these groups. As a result, it may be missing opportunities to efficiently and effectively use federal resources.

**CDRs Completed and Backlogged by SSA, Fiscal Years 2003-2013**  
Number of cases (in millions)



Source: GAO analysis of data from Social Security Administration (SSA) Continuing Disability Review (CDR) Annual Report and data provided by SSA's Office of Public Service and Operations Support. | GAO-16-250

SSA reviews a sample of CDRs for quality, but its analysis and reporting of errors is not comprehensive. Specifically, SSA randomly selects CDR decisions to check for a variety of potential errors. For example, SSA regularly monitors and reports on the frequency of errors that affect whether benefits are continued or ceased. However, contrary to federal internal control standards, SSA does not systematically analyze errors to detect and address root causes. Consequently, SSA lacks information that could help improve the quality of the reviews conducted by the Disability Determination Services. Further, in determining CDR accuracy rates, SSA does not count date errors, including incorrect cessation dates, which can affect disability benefit payments. As a result, decision makers do not have a complete picture of the CDR errors that affect disability payments.