

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-530](#), a report to congressional addressee

Why GAO Did This Study

Improper payments—including payments that should not have been made or were made in an incorrect amount—are a long-standing, significant challenge in the federal government. Both GAO and the DOD Inspector General have reported on problems related to improper payments in DOD's travel pay program.

This report examines (1) the amount DOD spent on DTS travel payments for fiscal years 2016 through 2018 and how much of those payments DOD estimated to be improper and the extent to which DOD has (2) implemented its Remediation Plan and (3) identified travel payment errors, the root causes of those errors, and the cost-effectiveness of addressing root causes. GAO analyzed fiscal years 2016 through 2018 data on DTS payments, reviewed DOD's Plan and documentation, interviewed officials about implementation efforts, and surveyed 52 DOD components about steps taken to address improper travel payments.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made 5 recommendations, including that DOD consider data on improper payment rates in its remediation approach; define the term "root cause", and consider cost effectiveness in deciding how to address improper payments. DOD generally concurred with 4 recommendations, but did not concur with revising its approach for selecting components to implement its Remediation Plan, stating that it has already taken actions that address this issue. GAO believes the recommendation remains valid.

View [GAO-19-530](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth Field at (202) 512-2775 or fielde1@gao.gov.

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DEFENSE TRAVEL

DOD Should Strengthen Its Ongoing Actions to Reduce Improper Travel Payments

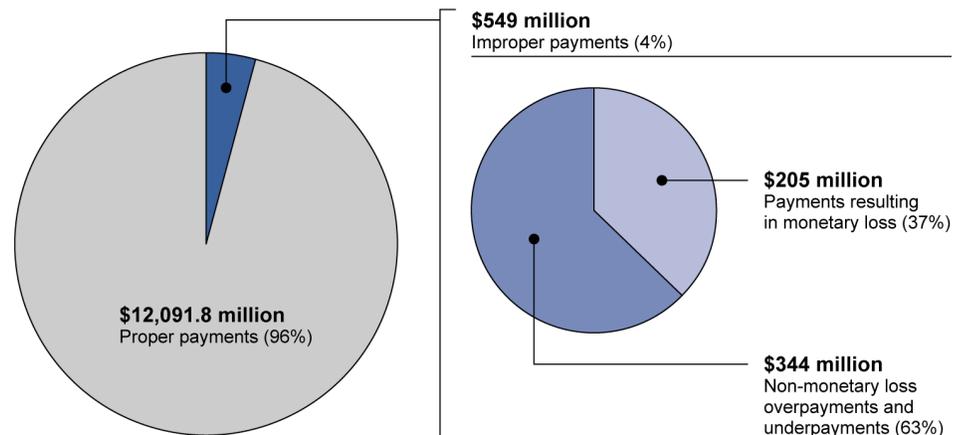
What GAO Found

The Department of Defense's (DOD) Defense Travel System (DTS)—the primary system DOD uses to process travel payments—accounts for most of DOD's travel payments. DOD spent \$18.3 billion on DTS travel payments from fiscal years 2016 through 2018, while incurring a reported \$965.5 million in improper travel payments. In that period, DOD averaged \$6.1 billion in DTS travel payments and \$322 million in improper travel payments annually. Not all improper travel payments—such as legitimate payments that initially lacked supporting documentation—represented a monetary loss to the government. Officials said DOD first estimated a monetary loss from improper travel payments in fiscal year 2017. For fiscal years 2017 and 2018 it estimated a total monetary loss of \$205 million out of \$549 million in improper DTS payments (see fig.).

Defense Travel System Total and Improper Travel Payments (Fiscal Years 2017 and 2018)

\$12,640.8 million

Total Defense Travel System Payments



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense (DOD) data. | GAO-19-530

In October 2016, DOD established a Remediation Plan to reduce improper travel payments and a committee to monitor implementation of the plan at 10 DOD components. DOD selected these 10 components because they accounted for a significant percentage of total travel payments. However, DOD did not take into account the components' own estimates of their improper payment rates. As of March 2019, only 4 of the 9 components that responded to GAO's survey had completed all of the plan's requirements, in part because of a lack of milestones in the plan and ineffective monitoring for required actions. As a result, DOD does not have reasonable assurance that its actions have been sufficient.

DOD has mechanisms to identify errors leading to improper travel payments, and some components have developed specific corrective plans to address the errors. However, GAO found that these efforts did not clearly identify the root causes of the errors, in part because there is no common understanding of what constitutes the root cause of improper travel payments. DOD components also have not incorporated considerations of cost-effectiveness into decisions about whether to take actions that could reduce improper payments. Without addressing these issues, DOD will likely miss opportunities to implement the changes necessary to address the root causes of improper travel payments.