

A report to congressional committees.

For more information, contact M. Hannah Padilla at PadillaH@gao.gov

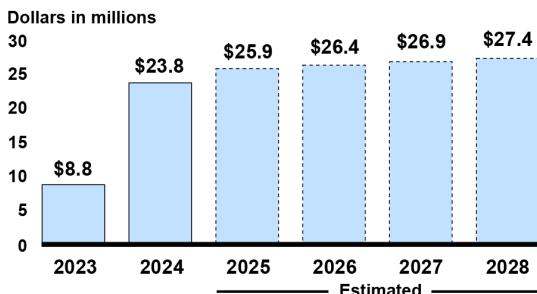
What GAO Found

Under a 3-year pilot program, the Department of the Treasury's Do Not Pay system has temporary access to the Social Security Administration's (SSA) full Death Master File. Prior to the pilot, the system had access to a less-comprehensive version of the file which excluded state death records. In January 2026, Congress passed a bill that, if enacted, would make access permanent.

In April 2025, Treasury reported that the first year of this pilot (calendar year 2024) resulted in identification and prevention or recovery of \$113.5 million in improper payments. This amount, offset by \$4.6 million in costs, represented a return on investment of about 23 times Treasury's pilot costs. Treasury projects that the pilot will result in over \$337 million in net benefits over 3 years.

Death data collected by states are their property, and statute requires SSA to pay states for use of these data. In September 2023, SSA concluded negotiations on new contracts to obtain states' death data. Under these contracts, SSA paid states \$23.8 million in 2024, a significant increase from 2023.

SSA's Actual and Estimated Future Costs for State Death Records, 2023–2028



Source: GAO analysis of Social Security Administration (SSA) information. | GAO-26-107181

The Social Security Act, as amended, specifies that SSA shall reimburse states for specific costs associated with death data, including (1) a fee for use of the data and (2) the full documented cost of transmitting the data to SSA. However, GAO found that SSA did not obtain the required state cost information and therefore did not consider it during negotiations. Instead, SSA and the states agreed on a fee structure based on the timeliness of submission of death records.

Agencies receiving state death data must pay SSA a proportional share of its costs in obtaining the data from states. Of the \$25.9 million in estimated state death record costs for 2025, SSA's proportional share is projected to decline, from 42 percent in 2024 to 23 percent in 2025, due to a methodology change. Specifically, SSA calculated its 2025 share based on the percentage of SSA's total federal outlays rather than on costs of obtaining data. SSA estimated that its outlays were about 23 percent of the federal total, so it decided that would be its cost share for 2025. For the remaining 77 percent, SSA distributed 36 percent to Treasury and 41 percent to other agencies without regard to cost (each of the other agencies is to contribute the same amount, approximately \$1.533 million).

Why GAO Did This Study

Improper payments remain a long-standing and significant problem in the federal government. GAO previously reported that one strategy to help prevent improper payments is up-front verification of eligibility through data sharing and matching. Agencies can verify the eligibility of applicants through Treasury's Do Not Pay system—a centralized data-matching service for agencies to use in preventing and detecting improper payments. This service currently includes the full Death Master File, SSA's compilation of deceased Social Security number holders, to help agencies prevent improper payments.

This report (1) describes the first-year results of the 3-year pilot to include SSA's full Death Master File in Treasury's Do Not Pay system, (2) evaluates the extent to which SSA's payments for state death data are based on states' documented costs, and (3) evaluates the extent to which SSA is charging agencies a proportional share of its costs. GAO analyzed SSA and Treasury documentation and interviewed federal and state agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to SSA to (1) ensure that contracts for state death data reflect statutorily authorized costs and include necessary documentation required by law; (2) conduct an analysis of state cost information, including its availability, and determine whether renegotiating the fee schedule accordingly is necessary; and (3) revise its methodology to incorporate costs for calculating proportional shares of state death data costs. SSA agreed with GAO's recommendations.