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February 1998

Income Security Issue Area

Active Assignments



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Foreword

This report was prepared primarily to inform Congressional members and key staff of ongoing assignments in the General Accounting Office's Income Security issue area. This report contains assignments that were ongoing as of February 2, 1998, and presents a brief background statement and a list of key questions to be answered on each assignment. The report will be issued quarterly.

This report was compiled from information available in GAO's internal management information systems. Because the information was downloaded from computerized data bases intended for internal use, some information may appear in abbreviated form.

If you have questions or would like additional information about assignments listed, please contact Jane Ross, Director, on (202) 512-7215; Mark Nadel, Associate Director, on (202) 512-7125; Diana Eisenstat, Associate Director, on (202) 512-5562; or Barbara Bovbjerg, Associate Director, on (202) 512-5491.

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REDESIGNING DISABILITY PROGRAMS

TITLE: HRA:29 MANDATED STUDY ON ASSISTANCE TO CHILDREN ON SSI WITH DISABILITIES (207000)

KEY QUESTIONS : The conference report accompanying the welfare reform bill stated that "Congress may revisit...the scope of [Supplemental Security Income (SSI) children's] benefits." To this end, Congress mandated that GAO report on extra expenses incurred by families of SSI children that are not covered by other federal, state, or local programs. Research objectives are to determine: (1) What disability-related expenses do families with SSI children incur? (2) How do federal, state, and local programs affect out-of-pocket expenses that families of SSI children incur?

TITLE: HRA:29 SSA'S PROGRESS ON PLAN TO ELIMINATE BACKLOG OF CDRS (207006)

KEY QUESTIONS : In October 1996, GAO reported on challenges the Social Security Administration (SSA) faces to successfully develop and implement a 7-year plan for eliminating the backlog of continuing disability reviews (CDR) in the Disability Insurance (DI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs. (1) What progress has SSA made in developing a plan that accommodates newly required SSI CDRs, (2) how much has SSA spent on CDRs and does it expect authorized funding will be sufficient to fully implement the plan, and (3) what have been the results of SSA's plans for improving the effectiveness of the CDR selection process?

TITLE: IMPACT OF WELFARE REFORM ON SSI CHILDREN (207026)

KEY QUESTIONS : In August 1996, the Congress enacted welfare reform legislation which raised the severity level for disabled children to be eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments. The stricter standard applies to new applicants as well as children already receiving benefits, who were to be re-evaluated against the stricter standard. SSA was given until February 1998 to reassess children already on the rolls. The law mandates GAO to report on the impact of the eligibility changes on the SSI program for children. (1) What is the impact of SSA's implementation of the new eligibility standard on the number and characteristics of children receiving SSI benefits? (2) Are adjudicators applying the new eligibility standard accurately and consistently?

ENSURING ADEQUATE RETIREMENT BENEFITS

TITLE: REVIEW OF PBGC'S SINGLE- AND MULTI-EMPLOYER INSURANCE PROGRAMS, PROJECTION MODELS, AND SELECTED OPERATIONS (207010)

KEY QUESTIONS : Despite improvements in the financial status of the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC) and private pension plans it insures, Congress remains concerned about the long-term financial viability of the pension insurance program. GAO was asked to review PBGC's single- and multi-employer pension programs, the status of the plans insured by these programs, PBGC's projection models, and other agency responsibilities. For this review, we will (1) present information on the current characteristics and funded status of both the single- and multi-employer insurance programs, (2) give distributional characteristics of insured pension plans, and (3) describe PBGC's current forecasting models and the status of their attempt to improve the models.

TITLE: IN-SIGHTS FROM STATE AND LOCAL PENSION PLANS FOR NON-COVERED EMPLOYEES (207011)

KEY QUESTIONS : Employees of state & local governments were not eligible for Social Security (SS) coverage under the 1935 Social Security Act. Amendments to the Act allowed these government units to elect SS coverage & to terminate this coverage after a specified period. Some state & local units are currently covered by SS, some have never been covered, & others were once covered but subsequently terminated their coverage. (1) What are the characteristics of state & local government pension plans not covered by Social Security? (2) How do benefits provided by these plans compare with those under Social Security? (3) What are the investment portfolios selected by pension plans for non-covered employees? (4) Do any of these plans' experiences offer insights for improving the financing of Social Security?

TITLE: MANDATORY SOCIAL SECURITY COVERAGE FOR STATE AND LOCAL EMPLOYEES (207012)

KEY QUESTIONS : State and local government employees covered by public pension plans are the last remaining group of significant size that is exempt from mandatory Social Security coverage. The Social Security Advisory Council recommended extending mandatory coverage to all newly-hired public employees to reduce Social Security's long term actuarial deficit. (1) What are the implications of mandatory coverage for state and local government employers, employees, and their pension plans? (2) What is the probable impact of mandatory coverage on the Social Security program, including the trust funds and program administration and enforcement? (3) What potential legal and administrative problems, if any, are associated with mandatory coverage?

TITLE: INVOLVED IN SOCIAL SECURITY FINANCING REFORM PROPOSALS (207447)

KEY QUESTIONS : 1) What has caused Social Security's long-term financing problems? 2) What options could address these problems within the current program structure; what effect would these have on system solvency & beneficiaries? 3) What options are available involving fundamental program restructuring; what would be the effects? 4) What are the key issues in implementing privatized SS?

TITLE: SOCIAL SECURITY RATES OF RETURN (207449)

KEY QUESTIONS : Proponents of privatizing Social Security often note that workers could earn higher returns in the stock market than they do under Social Security. They note that rates of return under Social Security are very low and will get lower given demographic trends. Some say even low earners, who benefit from Social Security's redistributive aspects, would be better off with stock market rates of return. (1) What are Social Security's implicit rates of return and how do these rates vary by demographic characteristics? (2) Do moneysworth analyses yield different conclusions if other measures, such as replacement rates, are used instead of rates of return? (3) What rates of return are available in private investment markets over working careers and how much do such rates of return vary?

PROMOTING EFFICIENT, COST-EFFECTIVE GOVT

TITLE: MANAGEMENT ACTIONS NEEDED TO ADDRESS LONGSTANDING PROBLEMS WITH THE SSI PROGRAM (105153)

KEY QUESTIONS : (1) What are the most significant problems regarding SSI program administration and what impact have these problems had on program integrity & performance? (2) What operational, programmatic or environmental factors caused these problems and what actions has SSA taken to solve them? (3) What management actions and legislative proposals should SSA pursue to address SSI program deficiencies?

TITLE: PREVENTING SSI OVERPAYMENTS THROUGH USING AVAILABLE DATA FROM FEDERAL AGENCIES (105154)

KEY QUESTIONS : (1) What data do SSA get now from federal agencies to identify o/ps? (2) Is on-line access between SSA and these agencies technically and fiscally feasible? (3) Would such access reduce o/ps & improve program administration? (4) What security measures would be required? (5) Do non-technical concerns (e.g., reciprocal access) impede on-line access implementation?

TITLE: EVALUATION OF SSA'S IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WINDFALL ELIMINATION PROVISION AND THE GOVERNMENT PENSION OFFSETS (105156)

KEY QUESTIONS : (1) Are overpayments being made to social security beneficiaries whose benefits should be reduced due to their receipt of noncovered government pensions? (2) How adequate are SSA's internal controls for identifying claims and beneficiaries subject to offsets? (3) What options exist to provide SSA the data necessary to improve its internal control over these payments?

TITLE: REVIEW OF SSA'S EFFORTS TO DEVELOP A COUNTERFEIT-RESISTANT SOCIAL SECURITYCARD (105157)

KEY QUESTIONS : (1) How reasonable are SSA's estimates for costs/workloads related to issuing a counterfeit-resistant social security card? (2) How do SSA's estimates compare to estimates by CBO? (3) What are the effects of charging user fees for replacement cards? (4) What potential problems exist for a counter-feit-resistant card due to current enumeration & employment verification problems?

TITLE: HRA:29 COORDINATION BETWEEN THE SUPPLEMENTAL SECURITY INCOME (SSI) AND CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT (CSE) PROGRAM (116000)

KEY QUESTIONS : Unlike recipients of welfare, Food Stamps and Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients are not required to cooperate with the Child Support Enforcement (CSE) system. Yet, two-thirds of any child support received by recipients of SSI is countable as income toward SSI eligibility and only about 8 percent of all SSI recipients reported income from child support in 1996. (1) How many SSI recipients not currently receiving child support are potential child support recipients? (2) How much reduction in SSI benefits may accrue to the federal government from increased collection and reporting of child support for SSI recipients? (3) Are SSI and CSE agencies exchanging data of use in establishing and verifying SSI benefit eligibility and amounts?

TITLE: HHS' OVERSIGHT OF WELFARE REFORM (116003)

KEY QUESTIONS : The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 devolves significant responsibility to the states but also delineates a number of responsibilities to HHS. The Committees want information on the following about HHS' progress in meeting its requirements: (1) To what extent has HHS reduced staffing in the programs converted to block grants? (2) How clear, timely and useful has HHS guidance and technical assistance been to the states in implementing the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families block grant? (3) What progress has HHS made in evaluating innovative programs for decreasing welfare dependency? (4) What progress has HHS made towards developing the performance measures for the high performance bonus program for states?

TITLE: REVOLVING DOOR PRACTICES IN SOCIAL SERVICE PRIVATIZATION (116011)

KEY QUESTIONS : Our requester has expressed concern about whether the hiring of senior state and local government officials by social services contractors raises conflict of interest issues or limits fair competition. The requester has asked us to focus on the following four issues: (1) What federal, state, and local government laws and policies address competition and "revolving door" practices? (2) Within the area of social services, to what extent have government employees been hired by contractors that have contracted with the government in the same program areas from which the former government employees originated? (3) To what extent have revolving door practices affected competitive contracting? (4) What impacts have revolving door practices had on public sector service capacity?

TITLE: SSA'S PROGRESS IN REENGINEERING ITS DISABILITY CLAIMS PROCESS (207007)

KEY QUESTIONS : In Dec. 1996, GAO reported on SSA's two-year effort to reengineer its disability claims process and cited a number of implementation difficulties. Responding to GAO's and stakeholders' concerns, SSA revised its reengineering plan in Feb. 1997. The Subcommittee subsequently asked GAO to evaluate: (1) To what extent do SSA's testing and evaluation methods assure that decisions to proceed with further testing or implementation of specific initiatives are adequately supported? (2) What has SSA done to maintain stakeholder support? (3) To what extent is SSA continuing to experience delays in testing and implementation, and why? (4) What are the results of the Adjudication Officer pilot to date, and to what degree is this initiative supported by stakeholders?

TITLE: HRA:29 REVIEW OF ALLEGATIONS OF MIDDLEMEN FRAUD IN SSI (207024)

KEY QUESTIONS : In 1995 GAO issued a report entitled, SSI: Disability Program Vulnerable to Applicant Fraud when Middlemen Are Used. It focused on middlemen who coached non-English speaking applicants on how to appear disabled so that they could fraudulently obtain Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits. The report recommended that SSA develop an aggressive, program-wide strategy (including specific actions as developing an agency-wide data base on middlemen) to reduce SSI's vulnerability to this type of fraud. In September 1997, GAO was asked to look into allegations that the program continues to be vulnerable to middlemen fraud and, to determine: 1) the extent of the problem, 2) SSA's response to our previous report, and 3) any additional actions SSA should take to address this problem.

TITLE: DOL CONTRACT FOR ECONOMICALLY TARGETED INVESTMENTS CLEARINGHOUSE (207025)

KEY QUESTIONS : Economically-targeted investments (ETIs) are made by private pension plans to provide social or collateral benefits to the community. ETIs must have a projected rate of return comparable to alternate investments with similar levels of risk. GAO was asked to obtain information on a Labor contractor which implemented and administered an ETI Clearinghouse to disseminate information on ETIs to the pension plan community. GAO will determine: (1) What process did Labor use to select the contractor? (2) How much was budgeted for and paid to the contractor? (3) What Labor staff resources were involved in setting up the ETI Clearinghouse? (4) What is the ETI Clearinghouse's current status?

PROMOTING RESPONSIBILITY & WORK

TITLE: MONITORING STATES' WELFARE REFORM (106614)

KEY QUESTIONS : (1) How have states restructured their programs to provide assistance to needy families? (2) What approaches are states using to promote work and what are their early results? (3) What approaches have states developed to reduce out-of-wedlock births and promote two-parent households? (4) What types of program performance data will states track?

TITLE: RESTRICTING WELFARE ELIGIBILITY FOR LEGAL IMMIGRANTS (116002)

KEY QUESTIONS : The 1996 welfare reform law restricts the access of most legal immigrants to Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Food Stamps, and Medicaid. Benefits for many current legal immigrant recipients will be terminated and new immigrants will not be eligible until they become citizens, or, in some cases, have been in the country for 5 years. (1) For which programs and for how many legal immigrants, including children, are federal welfare benefits being terminated? (2) How are states implementing the new limits on legal immigrants' eligibility for federal welfare benefits? (3) What plans do states have to provide state-funded assistance? (4) What major implementation issues and challenges do federal agencies and states face?

TITLE: REVIEW OF STATES' RESPONSES TO CHILD SUPPORT CASES FACING TIME LIMITS (116004)

KEY QUESTIONS : Welfare reform set a 5-year time limit on benefits; child support is a major part of the safety net for families when welfare is cut off. Under waivers, 14 states adopted time-limited programs. Little is known about whether they were able to provide child support under time limits nor whether non-waiver states can secure child support for families within 5 years. (1) In states that experimented with time-limited benefits, how successful have they been in obtaining child support for families reaching their time limits? (2) How successful have other states been in obtaining child support for families within a 5-year period? (3) What, if any, further policy or programmatic changes could be made to enhance states collection of child support for families with time-limited benefits?

PROTECTING CHILDREN'S WELFARE

TITLE: IMPLICATIONS OF DRUG ABUSE & FOSTER CARE (105827)

KEY QUESTIONS : Although foster care laws currently emphasize family reunification, this emphasis may not be appropriate for foster care cases involving parental substance abuse. 1) What are the characteristics of substance abuse, how are they relevant to foster care outcomes and the safety of children while in foster care, and what is the prevalence of parental substance abuse among foster care cases? 2) How, if at all, do foster care laws on family reunification, other permanency decisions, and safety address the issue of parental substance abuse? 3) Given the characteristics of substance abuse and existing foster care laws, regulations and policies, what are the implications of parental substance abuse for foster care outcomes and the safety of children while in foster care?

TITLE: IMPLICATIONS OF THE EXPANDED ROLE OF KINSHIP CARE (105828)

KEY QUESTIONS : Recent welfare law requires states to give priority to children's relatives when making foster care placements. While this may help children maintain family ties, these placements often receive less attention from foster care agencies, raising concerns about children's experiences. (1) How do foster children in kinship care fare relative to foster children in other placement settings in the dimensions of continuity, permanency, and quality? (2) In what areas, if any, are safeguards needed to improve outcomes for kinship care?

TITLE: MANAGED CARE PLANS FOR CHILD WELFARE AND HEALTH SERVICES FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE (116005)

KEY QUESTIONS : Child welfare agencies are looking at managed care--including capitating payments and using performance goals in contracts--as a new model for managing foster care services. But experts caution that similar arrangements in health care are not directly transferable to child welfare. The absence of outcome & cost data & a client population that is difficult to serve will challenge public officials in establishing managed care arrangements. (1) What are the financial & service delivery arrangements under managed care that are being applied to the child welfare system? (2) To what extent are child welfare agencies using these arrangements for services to foster care children & their families? (3) What issues do child welfare agencies face as they develop & implement managed care?

TITLE: FEDERAL SPENDING ON CHILD CARE (116009)

KEY QUESTIONS : Background: To aid in Senate deliberations on child care legislation in the upcoming Congressional session, the requester has asked GAO for information on federal child care spending. 1) What is the current amount of federal money spent on child care by way of direct spending such as through programs or grants, and indirect spending through tax credits and deductions? 2) How many children are served by this amount of federal support? 3) What are the eligibility criteria for key federal programs or funding sources?

Income Security

TITLE: REVIEW OF STATES' EFFORTS TO REFORM JUVENILE DEPENDENCY COURTS TO ACHIEVE TIMELY PERMANENCY (116010)

KEY QUESTIONS : State court systems are critical in ensuring children in foster care achieve a permanent placement within established time frames. Historically, however, courts have faced numerous problems, such as overcrowded dockets and judges not trained in child welfare issues. Examining key reform efforts will provide information on the results attainable and barriers to implementing improved processes and operations. (1) What key problems have been identified in the court system, including those found in state court assessments? (2) How have reform efforts addressed these problems and what results have been achieved? (3) What role have child welfare agencies played in reforming courts? (4) What federal policy implications arise as states reform courts to achieve timely permanent placements?

OTHER ISSUE AREA WORK: INCOME SECURITY

TITLE: HOW PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS USE SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBERS (207023)

KEY QUESTIONS : Social Security numbers (SSNs) are used to conveniently manage automated record systems and data exchanges. For example, the federal government uses them to identify personnel and tax payer records and requires them for receiving benefits for some programs. Outside the federal sector, SSNs are used for professional and driver's licensing, requesting financial services, and school enrollment, among other uses. Some of the uses are not specifically authorized or restricted by law. To assist in its consideration of legislation proposed to restrict SSN use, the Subcommittee asked GAO to provide information on (1) how organizations use SSNs, (2) what SSN use the law delineates, (3) the extent of SSN usage, and (4) what users believe would be the impact of restricting their use of SSNs.

TITLE: AGING ISSUES: RELATED GAO REPORTS AND ACTIVITIES IN CALENDAR YEARS 1995 AND 1996 (207027)

KEY QUESTIONS : For the past several fiscal years, the Committee has asked GAO to submit an annual report describing GAO products related to older Americans. This information was then used in Volume II of the Committee's annual report, "Developments in Aging". This year, the Committee's report will discuss the activities of the 104th Congress. Therefore, GAO has been asked to provide information about GAO's work during calendar years 1995 and 1996. We will identify the reports and testimonies relating to older Americans issued during that time period.

