

GAO

Report to the Chairman, Committee on
Budget, U.S. Senate

September 1987

SOCIAL SECURITY

Telephone Accessibility



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United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Human Resources Division

B-223771

September 16, 1987

The Honorable Lawton Chiles
Chairman, Committee on Budget
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

As requested by the Committee in July 1987, we tested accessibility to the Social Security Administration (SSA) by telephone. Specifically, we measured the extent to which telephone calls to SSA's local offices and teleservice centers during a single workweek were answered directly, put on hold before being answered, got a busy signal, went unanswered, or were disconnected. As agreed with your office, we did not include miniteleservice centers or statewide answering units in our test.

Nationwide, 34 teleservice centers—SSA's primary telephone service facilities—serve major metropolitan areas or entire states and provide service to about 50 percent of the nation's population. SSA has 32 other central answering units that are dedicated to answering telephone inquiries from the public—12 commonly referred to as statewide answering units and 20 miniteleservice centers—which cover areas as large as entire states or as small as a single district. They provide service to about 11 percent of the nation's population. The remaining 39 percent of the population receives telephone service directly from 627 local offices that are not supported by any of the centralized answering facilities.

In summary, SSA representatives answered, during the test period, about two of every three calls from the public directly or within 2 minutes of being put on hold, by GAO estimates. As a group, local offices were more easily accessible than teleservices centers. Success in reaching SSA fluctuated by day of the week, with Monday being the most difficult day for getting calls answered.

Scope and Methodology

To measure accessibility, we made 1,614 test telephone calls during the week of August 10-14, 1987, to all 34 teleservice centers and 471 randomly selected local offices at randomly selected times. Our test was not designed to determine the performance of individual centers or offices or the causes of any variations in accessibility between centers and offices.

The sampling methodology we used was similar to the one we used in a 4-week sample of accessibility to SSA by telephone in May 1985. The methodology and results of our test were described in our report Social Security: Improved Telephone Accessibility Would Better Serve the Public, (GAO/HRD-86-85, Aug. 29, 1986). The results of our August 1987 sample are not statistically comparable to the 1985 test results because

- the 1985 test covered 4 weeks of calls and allowed for any variations in calling patterns based on the week of the month calls were placed;
- the 1985 overall test results included calls to miniteleservice centers and statewide answering units, whereas the 1987 test did not; and
- the 1985 and 1987 tests were conducted in different months of the year and consequently do not control for any seasonal variations, such as the number of employees on vacation or the number of calls the public is likely to make in May compared to August.

Our test week was unannounced, and SSA officials were not notified in advance when the test would be conducted or while it was in progress. We automatically timed the number of seconds each call was placed on hold and terminated any call on hold for 6 minutes. For each call, using microcomputers, we collected data on

- busy signals,
- calls terminated after 10 rings (about 1 minute) because no one answered,
- calls disconnected before being answered.
- calls answered without being placed on hold,
- calls placed on hold,
- calls disconnected while on hold, and
- wait time on hold.

During the test, when we made contact with an SSA representative, we asked a simple question primarily to bring the call to a close. By design, the questions were not considered difficult to answer because we did not want to be put on hold while the SSA employee researched the answer.

For 254 calls on which we received a busy signal, we placed another call to that phone number within 15 minutes to determine whether we would get through on a second attempt. We recorded the data as we did for the initial calls except that, to facilitate completion of all test calls within the designated sample intervals, we did not measure the time we were placed on hold.

Our sampling plan enabled comparison of teleservice centers and district and branch offices as specific groups. These facilities were sampled as groups rather than by individual facility because determining accessibility to individual facilities during a 1-week test would have required a sample size about four times larger. The sample size we selected ensures a sampling error that would not exceed 5 percent at a 95-percent confidence level.

The percentages illustrated in figures 1-5 appear in appendixes I and II.

Two-Thirds of Calls Termed "Easy Access"

Figure 1 depicts the overall results of our test of SSA telephone accessibility and contrasts the differences between accessibility to the 34 teleservice centers and to the 471 local offices as groups. Overall, 67 percent of the calls experienced "easy access," and 33 percent "difficult access." Calls that were answered directly or within 2 minutes of being placed on hold were characterized as "easy access." Calls on hold longer than 2 minutes, disconnected, terminated by us after 10 rings, or getting busy signals were categorized as "difficult access." Easy access and difficult access both are expressed as a percentage of total calls made. As the figure shows, local offices were more easily accessible than teleservice centers.

**Figure 1: Phone Accessibility to SSA
During Week of August 10, 1987**

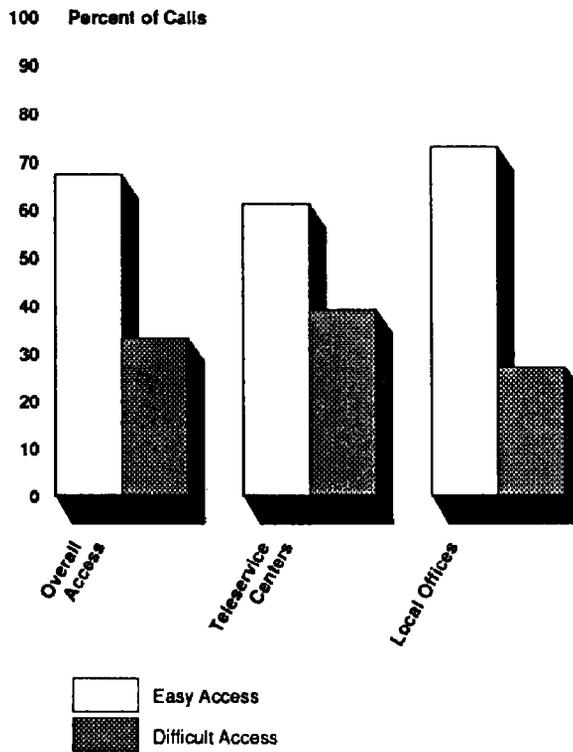


Figure 2 shows that the reasons for difficult access were primarily busy signals (16 percent) and calls on hold for longer than 2 minutes (14 percent).

Figure 2: Reasons Why SSA Was Difficult to Access by Phone

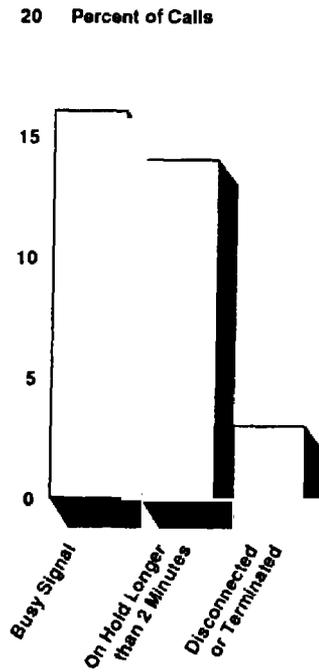
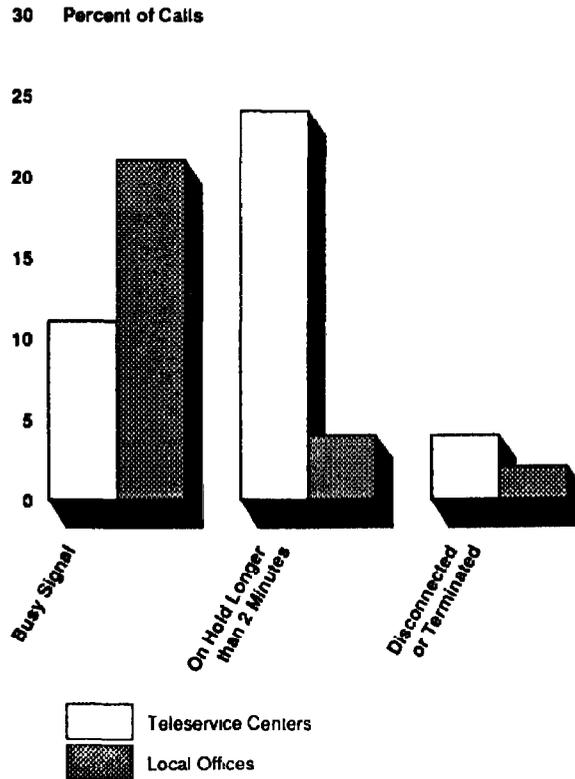


Figure 3 shows callers received busy signals almost twice as frequently when calling local offices. Callers were more likely to be placed on hold longer than 2 minutes when calling teleservice centers.

Figure 3: Reasons Why Phone Access to SSA Was Difficult by Type of Facility



Accessibility Varies by When Call Is Made

Figure 4 shows that our telephone access to SSA was more difficult on Monday than on any other day of the week. Also shown is the extent to which busy signals contributed to the difficult access.

Figure 4: Percent of Daily Calls to SSA That Were Busy and Difficult Access

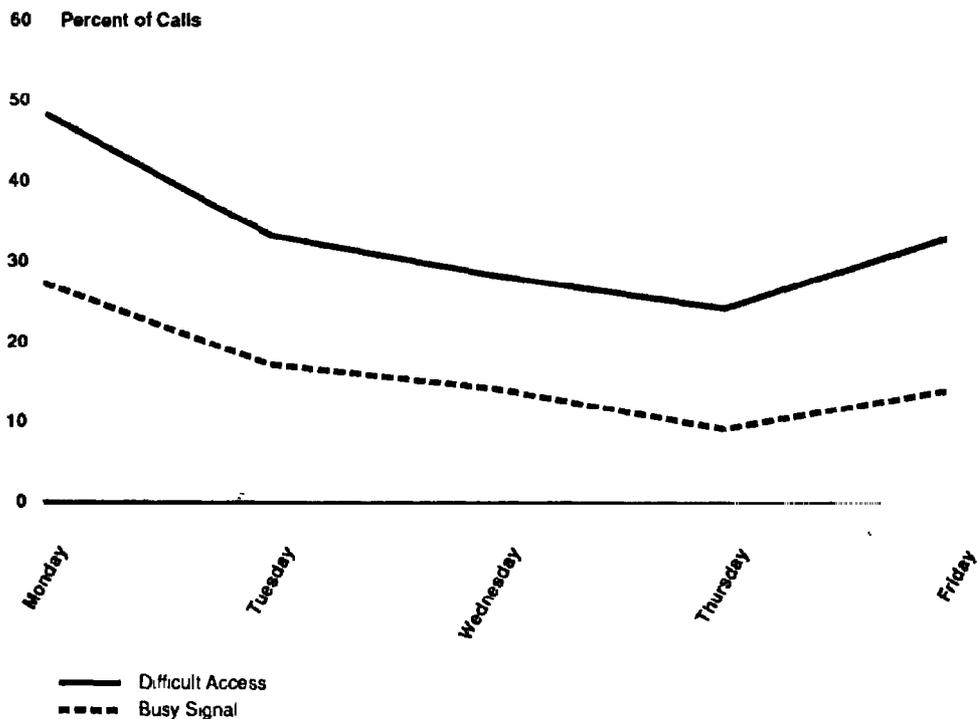
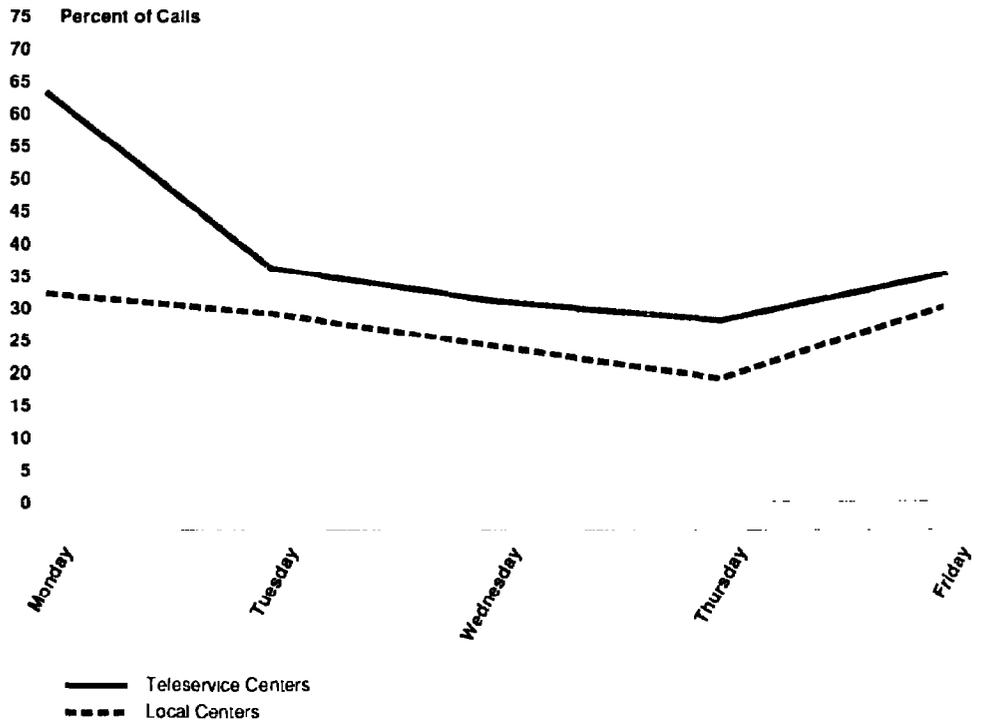


Figure 5 contrasts difficult access by type of facility by day of the week. Teleservice centers were much more difficult to reach on Monday.

Figure 5: Percent of Daily Calls to SSA That Were Difficult Access by Type of Facility



To further test accessibility, we placed a repeat call within 15 minutes of our initial call to numbers for which we received a busy signal. About 62 percent of our repeat calls were either answered directly (35.4 percent) or were answered and placed on hold (26.4 percent); 32.7 percent received a busy signal again. Repeat calls to teleservice centers received busy signals more frequently (36.7 percent) than repeat calls to local offices (29.7 percent).

As requested, we have not obtained written comments from SSA on the results of our test. We plan no further distribution of this report for 10 days from the date of issuance unless you publicly disclose its contents

earlier. At that time, we will send copies to interested congressional committees and subcommittees, the Commissioner of SSA, and others on request.

Sincerely yours,



Richard L. Fogel
Assistant Comptroller General

Accessibility to SSA During the Week of August 10, 1987

Percent of calls placed

	To teleservice centers	To local offices	Overall access
"Easy" access	61	73	67
Calls straight through	37	64	50
Calls on hold less than 2 minutes	24	9	17
"Difficult" access	39	27	33
Busy signal	11	21	16
Calls on hold longer than 2 minutes	25	4	14
Disconnected/ terminated calls	3	2	3

Daily Accessibility to SSA During Week of August 10, 1987

Percent of calls placed

	To teleservice centers			To local offices			Overall		
	Easy access	Difficult access	Busy	Easy access	Difficult access	Busy	Easy access	Difficult access	Busy
Monday	37	63	(26)	68	32	(28)	52	48	(27)
Tuesday	64	36	(12)	71	29	(22)	67	33	(17)
Wednesday	69	31	(7)	76	24	(20)	72	28	(14)
Thursday	72	28	(6)	81	19	(13)	76	24	(9)
Friday	65	35	(5)	70	30	(23)	67	33	(14)

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