

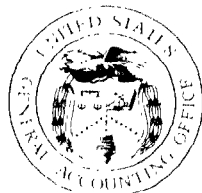
GAO

Briefing Report to the Chairman,  
Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and  
the Humanities, Committee on Labor  
and Human Resources, U.S. Senate

April 1991

# STUDENT LOANS

## Characteristics of Defaulted Borrowers in the Stafford Student Loan Program



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Human Resources Division

B-243528

April 26, 1991

The Honorable Claiborne Pell  
Chairman, Subcommittee on Education,  
Arts, and the Humanities  
Committee on Labor and Human Resources  
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This report responds to your request for information on the characteristics of students who default on loans obtained under the Stafford Student Loan Program. On October 31, 1990, we discussed the results of our work with your office. This letter summarizes the information discussed at that meeting. (See appendix I.)

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## Background

The Stafford Student Loan Program (formerly called the Guaranteed Student Loan Program) was established in 1965 to provide students with a source of funds to help finance their education.<sup>1</sup> These loans are made by commercial lenders who are insured against default by guaranty agencies, who are in turn reinsured by the Department of Education.

Stafford loan volume increased during the 1980s, from \$4.3 billion in fiscal year 1980 to \$12.3 billion in fiscal year 1990, an increase of more than 185 percent. As loan volume rose, federal default payments to guaranty agencies also increased dramatically, from about \$144 million in fiscal year 1980 to \$2.48 billion in fiscal year 1990, an increase of over 1,600 percent.

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## Scope and Methodology

As agreed with your office, we reviewed available studies that examined various characteristics of student loan defaulters. We identified the studies through literature searches and contacts with state education agencies, student aid researchers, and Department of Education officials. We obtained 12 studies that were the products of original research and addressed the characteristics of student loan defaulters. These studies were published from 1984 to 1990 and are listed in appendix II.

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<sup>1</sup>This program includes Stafford loans, Supplemental Loans for Students, and Parent Loans for Undergraduate Students.

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There have been more studies published on defaulters and, therefore, our analysis is not meant to be a complete review of all research done on this topic. In addition, we did not validate the studies' results.

Each study we reviewed is based on analyses performed in different states, and with different groups of students and types of educational institutions. In addition, each study used different sampling methods and data analysis techniques and was based on a different time period. For example, one study sampled students who attended only vocational schools and community colleges. Consequently, the percentage of defaulters who attended vocational schools is greater in this study than in studies that sampled students who attended a wider range of schools, such as 4-year schools.

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## Results in Brief

We identified nine defaulter characteristics most frequently cited in the studies. Generally, the studies concluded that students likely to default on their loans were those who (1) attended vocational/trade schools, (2) had low incomes, (3) had little financial support, (4) had minority backgrounds, (5) lacked high-school diplomas, (6) failed to complete their education programs, (7) attended school for 1 year or less, (8) borrowed small amounts, and (9) were unemployed when defaulting. Appendix III shows the defaulter characteristics each study identified.

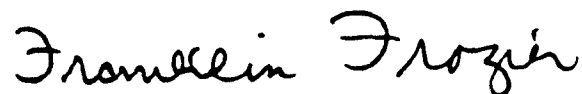
Only one of the studies sought to use defaulter characteristics to predict the type of students who would default. This study concluded that a combination of six defaulter characteristics, identified from a sample of students attending vocational schools and community colleges in California, could be used to identify about two-thirds of student loan recipients who would default.

However, two studies cautioned that defaulter characteristics cannot be used to predict default. They emphasized that an often misunderstood fact about default is that while most defaulters have certain characteristics, the majority of borrowers with these characteristics do not default on their loans. For example, one of the studies found that 65.5 percent of all defaulters had family incomes of \$10,000 or less at the time they took out their loans, but only 16.9 percent of all borrowers at that family income level defaulted.

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As agreed with your office, we did not obtain written comments on this report from the Department of Education or other interested parties. We are sending copies of this report to other congressional committees, the Department of Education, and other interested parties. Should you wish to discuss the contents of this report further, please call me on (202) 275-1793. Major contributors to this briefing report are listed in appendix IV.

Sincerely yours,



Franklin Frazier  
Director, Education and  
Employment Issues

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**Abbreviations**

GAO      General Accounting Office  
FY        fiscal year

# What Are the Characteristics of Defaulted Borrowers in the Stafford Student Loan Program?

Figure I.1:

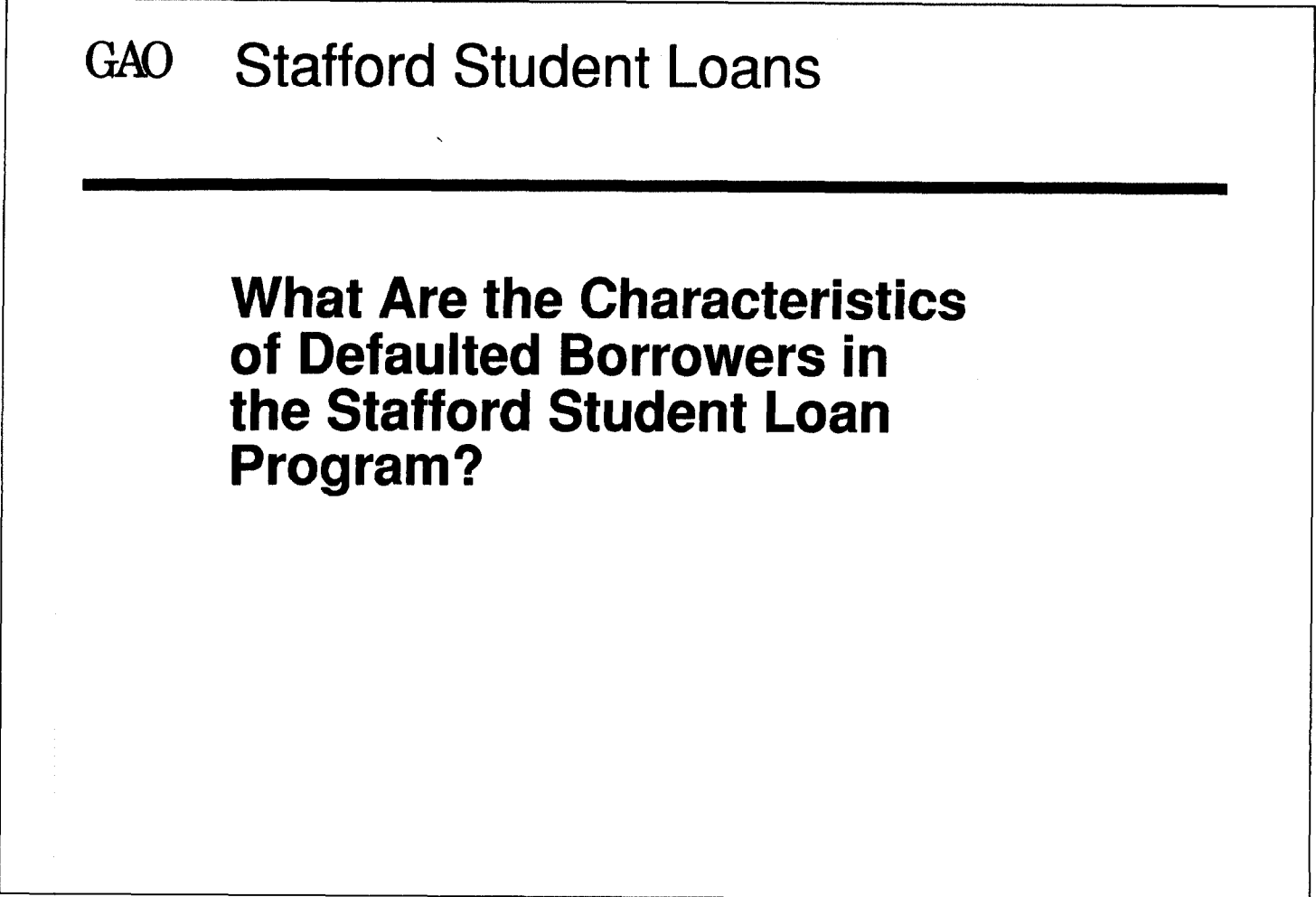




Figure I.2:

## GAO Background

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Stafford Student Loan  
Program helps students  
finance their education

Loan volume increased over  
185 percent from FY80 to  
FY90 (\$4.3 to \$12.3 billion)

Default payments increased  
over 1,600 percent from  
FY80 to FY90 (\$144 million  
to \$2.48 billion)

Figure I.3:

**GAO Objective**

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**GAO was asked to determine**

What are the characteristics  
of defaulted student borrowers  
in the Stafford program?

**Figure I.4:**

## **GAO Scope**

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**We identified 12 studies that examined defaulter characteristics by**

- conducting literature searches**
- contacting guaranty agencies, student aid researchers, and Department of Education officials**

Figure I.5:

## GAO Methodology

---

Reviewed 12 studies

Each study used different

- data bases,
- sampling methods, and
- time periods

Studies selected are not  
inclusive of all such research

GAO did not validate each  
study's results

Figure I.6:

## GAO What Did These Studies Find?

---

Results vary, but nine characteristics were generally attributed to defaulters

Caution should be exercised in using the characteristics as defaulter predictors

Figure I.7:

## GAO What Were the Nine Defaulter Characteristics?

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- Attended vocational/trade school
- Had low income
- Had little or no financial support from others
- Had minority background
- Lacked high-school diploma
- Failed to complete program
- Attended 1 year or less
- Borrowed small amounts
- Unemployed at time of default

Figure I.8:

**GAO Defaulter: Attended  
Vocational/Trade School**

---

**All 12 studies identified this  
factor**

Default rate by students  
attending these schools ranged  
from 29 to 62 percent

Two studies also found high  
default rates at community  
colleges

Figure I.9:

**GAO Defaulter: Had Low Income**

---

**11 studies identified this factor**

3 studies found that almost 75 percent of defaulters had incomes of \$15,000 or less

5 studies found that the majority of defaulters had incomes of \$10,000 or less



Figure I.10:

**GAO Defaulter: Had Little or No  
Financial Support from Others**

---

**8 studies identified this factor**

5 studies found that between  
52 and 71 percent of  
defaulters had little support

3 other studies showed a  
lower percentage (8, 17, and  
29 percent) of defaulters had  
little support

Figure I.11:

**GAO Defaulter: Had Minority  
Background**

---

**3 studies identified this factor**

These studies found that 35,  
72, and 79 percent of  
defaulters had minority  
backgrounds

Figure I.12:

GAO Defaulter: Lacked  
High-School Diploma

---

**1 study identified this factor**

The study found that  
34 percent of defaulters had  
no diploma

Figure I.13:

GAO Defaulter: Failed to Complete  
Education Program

---

**6 studies identified this factor**

5 studies said that 26 to 70  
percent of defaulters did not  
complete their programs

- 1 of these 5 stated this  
factor was the most significant  
characteristic evaluated

1 study had no statistics  
but said nongraduation was a  
default predictor

Figure I.14:

**GAO Defaulter: Attended School  
1 Year or Less**

---

**6 studies identified this factor**

5 studies found that 54 to  
75 percent of defaulters  
attended school for 1 year  
or less

1 study found that 33  
percent of defaulters attended  
school for 1 year or less

Figure I.15:

**GAO Defaulter: Borrowed Small  
Amounts**

---

**7 studies identified this factor**

3 studies found that 68 to 76  
percent of defaulters had loan  
balances of less than \$3,000

4 other studies did not cite  
percentages, but reported that  
defaulters' loan balances  
averaged less than \$3,600

Figure I.16:

**GAO Defaulter: Unemployed at Time  
of Default**

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**2 studies identified this factor**

The studies found that 37 and  
51 percent of defaulters were  
unemployed at time of default

Figure I.17:

## GAO Usefulness of Characteristics As Defaulter Predictors

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1 study used six characteristics to predict almost two-thirds of defaulters at schools sampled

2 other studies found that individual characteristics had little predictive value

- Although most defaulters have certain characteristics, most borrowers with the same characteristics do not default



# List of Studies Reviewed

- 
- A. California Student Aid Commission, Student Borrowing in California: A Report on Student Participation in California's Educational Loan Programs, 1988.**
- B. Colorado Student Loan Program, Report on the 1989 Default Study of the Colorado Student Loan Program, 1990.**
- C. Defaulted Student Loans: Preliminary Analysis of Student Loan Borrowers and Defaulters (GAO/HRD-88-112BR, 1988).**
- D. GAO's Views on the Default Task Force's Recommendations for Reducing Default Costs in the Guaranteed Student Loan Program (GAO/HRD-88-7, 1988).**
- E. Maryland State Board for Higher Education, Report of the Task Force on Guaranteed Student Loan Defaulters in Maryland, 1988.**
- F. Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board, Analysis of Guaranteed Student Loan Program Borrowers, 1988.**
- G. New Jersey Department of Higher Education, Toward the Reduction of Student Loan Defaults in New Jersey: Report of the New Jersey Default Task Force, 1988.**
- H. New York State Higher Education Services Corporation. Student Loan Payers and Defaulters, 1984.**
- I. U.S. Department of Education, 1987 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: Characteristics of Stafford Loan Recipients, 1988, 1990.**
- J. U.S. Department of Education, Characteristics of Stafford Loan Program Defaulters: A National Sample, 1989.**
- K. Virginia Education Loan Authority, Study of Guaranteed Student Loan Defaults, 1984.**
- L. Wilms, Wellford W., and others, "Whose Fault Is Default? A Study of the Impact of Student Characteristics and Institutional Practices on Guaranteed Student Loan Default Rates in California," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 1987.**

# Summary of Defaulter Characteristics Identified in the Studies

Defaulter characteristics	Studies reviewed <sup>b</sup>											
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
Attended vocational/trade school	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Had low income	X	X	X	X	X	•	X	X	X	X	X	X
Had little or no financial support	•	X	X	X	X	•	X	•	•	X	X	X
Had minority background	•	X	•	•	X	•	•	•	•	•	•	X
Lacked high-school diploma	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	X
Failed to complete education program	•	•	•	X	X	•	•	•	X	X	X	X
Attended school 1 year or less	•	X	X	X	•	•	X	•	•	X	X	•
Borrowed small amounts	X	•	•	X	•	•	X	X	X	•	X	X
Unemployed at time of default	•	X	•	•	•	•	•	X	•	•	•	•

<sup>a</sup>The studies listed as A thru L correspond to the letter assigned to the study contained in appendix II.

<sup>b</sup>The designation "X" means that the characteristic was included in the study while the designation "•" means the characteristic was excluded.

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# Major Contributors to This Report

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Christopher C. Crissman, Assignment Manager

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**Seattle Regional Office**

Charles M. Novak, Regional Assignment Manager  
Thomas C. Perry, Evaluator-in-Charge





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# Related GAO Reports

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Defaulted Student Loans: Analysis of Defaulted Borrowers at Schools Accredited by Seven Agencies (GAO/HRD-90-178FS, Sept. 12, 1990).

Supplemental Student Loans: Legislative Changes Have Sharply Reduced Loan Volume (GAO/HRD-90-149FS, Aug. 3, 1990)

Financial Problems in the Stafford Student Loan Program (GAO/T-HRD-90-52, July 27, 1990)

GAO Views on the Stafford Student Loan Program (GAO/T-HRD-90-13, Feb. 20, 1990).

Supplemental Student Loans: Who Borrows and Who Defaults (GAO/HRD-90-33FS, Oct. 17, 1989).

Guaranteed Student Loans: Analysis of Student Default Rates at 7,800 Postsecondary Schools (GAO/HRD-89-63BR, July 5, 1989).

Defaulted Student Loans: Preliminary Analysis of Student Loan Borrowers and Defaulters (GAO/HRD-88-112BR, June 14, 1988).

GAO's Views on the Default Task Force's Recommendations for Reducing Default Costs in the Guaranteed Student Loan Program (GAO/T-HRD-88-7, Feb. 2, 1988).

Guaranteed Student Loans: Legislative and Regulatory Changes Needed to Reduce Default Costs (GAO/HRD-87-76, Sept. 30, 1987).

Defaulted Student Loans: Private Lender Collection Efforts Often Inadequate (GAO/HRD-87-48, Aug. 20, 1987).

Defaulted Student Loans: Guaranty Agencies' Collection Practices and Procedures (GAO/HRD-86-114BR, July 17, 1986).

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