

The Social Security Administration's Challenges and Successes in Obtaining Data to Determine Eligibility and Payment Amounts

A-01-21-51029



September 2022

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To review the Social Security Administration's (SSA) efforts to implement new incoming data exchanges to reduce its reliance on beneficiaries' self-reporting information that could affect their eligibility and payment amounts.

Background

SSA must obtain beneficiaries' data on such factors as income, resources, and living arrangements, to determine eligibility and payment amounts. As beneficiaries do not always fully comply with the requirement to report to SSA any change in circumstances, obtaining data from external sources, such as other Federal and State agencies and financial institutions, is critical to preventing and detecting improper payments.

SSA has more than 3,000 data-exchange agreements. Its Office of Data Exchange and International Agreements provides coordination, oversight, strategic decision-making, policy, and procedures on data-exchange activities.

We reviewed SSA's policies, procedures, and processes for entering into incoming data exchanges. We also reviewed information the Agency provided concerning data exchanges it attempted to enter into from 2019 through August 2021, including approved, pending, abandoned, and denied requests.

Results

While SSA has made progress implementing data exchanges to reduce its reliance on beneficiaries self-reporting information, it still has work to do. SSA encountered various challenges when entering into data exchanges, such as:

- legal authority to obtain data or require that others provide data to SSA,
- not having a centralized system for administering data exchanges,
- the need for an SSA component sponsor,
- budget limitations, and
- technical issues.

The Agency successfully:

- developed policies and procedures for entering into data exchanges, and the Agency regularly reviews and updates the policies and procedures to improve the process and
- participated in activities to learn about best practices in obtaining data from other agencies.

Recommendations

We recommend SSA:

1. Implement a centralized, interactive, and user-friendly system for administering data exchanges.
2. Submit legislative proposals in Fiscal Year 2024 for data the Agency does not have the authority to obtain.

SSA agreed with Recommendation 1 but disagreed with Recommendation 2. SSA disagreed because, in most cases, the decision to pursue data-exchange-related legislation is driven by factors other than a need for legal authority. However, SSA should continue seeking legislative changes to obtain data it cannot obtain through other means. For example, the Agency should seek legislative changes to obtain information it requested from the Federal Bureau of Investigation.