

The Social Security Administration's Reporting Under the Federal Information Security Modernization Act

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June 2021

Office of Audit Report Summary

Objective

To determine whether the Social Security Administration's (SSA) responses to the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 Chief Information Officer (CIO) *Federal Information Security Modernization Act of 2014* (FISMA) metrics were reliable.

Background

FISMA requires that the head of each Federal agency provide “. . . information security protections commensurate with the risk and magnitude of the harm resulting from the unauthorized access, use, disclosure, disruption, modification, or destruction of agency information and information systems.”

Under FISMA, *Chief Financial Officers Act* agencies—including SSA—are required to respond quarterly to security posture questions, referred to as CIO metrics. The metrics assess agencies' implementation of information security capabilities in various risk areas and measure their effectiveness. Risk areas include management of assets, configurations, vulnerabilities, access, and incidents. Agencies are required to submit metrics data using CyberScope. The Office of Management and Budget compiles agencies' metrics into the Annual FISMA Report to Congress.

In 2019, agencies needed to respond to 87 metrics.

Findings

SSA provided sufficient documentation to support its responses to 14 of the 45 CIO metrics we sampled but was unable to support its responses to 12 metrics because it did not have a process in place to retain evidence to corroborate these responses. In addition, the Agency provided incorrect responses for 19 metrics. We were unable to determine whether the 12 unsupported CIO metric responses were reliable and determined that the 19 incorrect metric responses were not reliable. Without reliable data, OMB and Congress may not be able to properly assess the state of SSA's cybersecurity. The Agency stated it plans to enhance its processes to capture the point-in-time evidence of its CIO metric reporting.

Agency Actions Resulting from the Audit

As of February 2021, the Agency had enhanced its process to collect artifacts, including the date of data collection, the description of how the reported values were obtained (including the tool used), and screen shots of the original information when available. The Agency also created a site to retain the evidence to support its responses to the metrics.

Because SSA has taken steps to improve its processes, we are not making any recommendations.