



Highlights of [GAO-08-617](#), a report to Congressional Committees

## TAX COMPLIANCE

### Businesses Owe Billions in Federal Payroll Taxes

#### Why GAO Did This Study

GAO previously reported that federal contractors abuse the tax system with little consequence. While performing those audits, GAO noted that much of the tax abuse involved contractors not remitting to the government payroll taxes that were withheld from salaries.

As a result, GAO was asked to review the Internal Revenue Service's (IRS) processes and procedures to prevent and collect unpaid payroll taxes. Specifically, GAO was asked to determine (1) the magnitude of unpaid federal payroll tax debt, (2) the factors affecting IRS's ability to enforce compliance or pursue collections, and (3) whether some businesses with unpaid payroll taxes are engaged in abusive or potentially criminal activities with regard to the federal tax system. To address these objectives GAO analyzed IRS's tax database, performed case study analyses of payroll tax offenders, and interviewed collection officials from IRS and several states.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO makes six recommendations to IRS to address issues identified in this report, including development of (1) processes and performance measures to monitor collection actions against egregious payroll tax offenders and (2) procedures to timely file tax liens and assess penalties to hold responsible parties personally liable for not remitting withheld payroll taxes. IRS agreed to our recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-617](#). For more information, contact Steven J. Sebastian at (202) 512-3406 or [sebastians@gao.gov](mailto:sebastians@gao.gov).

#### What GAO Found

IRS records show that, as of September 30, 2007, over 1.6 million businesses owed over \$58 billion in unpaid federal payroll taxes, including interest and penalties. Some of these businesses took advantage of the existing tax enforcement and administration system to avoid fulfilling or paying federal tax obligations—thus abusing the federal tax system. Over a quarter of payroll taxes are owed by businesses with more than 3 years (12 tax quarters) of unpaid payroll taxes. Some of these business owners repeatedly accumulated tax debt from multiple businesses. For example, IRS found over 1,500 individuals to be responsible for nonpayment of payroll taxes at three or more businesses, and 18 were responsible for not remitting payroll taxes for a dozen different businesses.

Although IRS has powerful tools at its disposal to prevent the further accumulation of unpaid payroll taxes and to collect the taxes that are owed, IRS's current approach does not provide for their full, effective use. IRS's overall approach to collection focuses primarily on gaining voluntary compliance—even for egregious payroll tax offenders—a practice that can result in minimal or no actual collections for these offenders. Additionally, IRS has not always promptly filed liens against businesses to protect the government's interests and has not always taken timely action to hold responsible parties personally liable for unpaid payroll taxes.

GAO selected 50 businesses with payroll tax debt as case studies and found extensive evidence of abuse and potential criminal activity in relation to the federal tax system. The business owners or officers in our case studies diverted payroll tax funds for their own benefit or to help fund business operations.

#### Examples of Tax-Related Abusive and Potentially Criminal Activity

Business	Unpaid payroll taxes	Activity
Construction	Almost \$2.5 million over 12 years	Potential illegal check kiting and money laundering
Health care	Almost \$2.5 million over 7 years	Officers took large cash withdrawals prior to filing bankruptcy multiple times
Dentist	Over \$500,000 over 10 years	Owner owed over \$500,000 in personal taxes, put property in spouse's name, and sold property to children for less than market value

Sources: GAO analysis of IRS, public, and other records.