



Highlights of [GAO-08-817](#), a report to congressional addressees

Why GAO Did This Study

Private defined benefit (DB) pension plans are an important source of retirement income for millions of Americans. However, from 1990 to 2006, plan sponsors have voluntarily terminated over 61,000 sufficiently funded single-employer DB plans. An event preceding at least some of these terminations was a so-called plan “freeze”—an amendment to the plan to limit some or all future pension accruals for some or all plan participants. Available information that the government collects about frozen plans is limited in scope and may not be recent. GAO conducted a stratified probability sample survey of 471 single-employer DB plan sponsors out of a population of 7,804 (with 100 or more total plan participants) to gather more timely and detailed information about frozen plans. We have prepared this report under the Comptroller General’s authority as part of our ongoing reassessment of risks associated with the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation’s (PBGC) single-employer pension insurance program, which, in 2003, we placed on our high-risk list of programs that need broad-based transformations and warrant the attention of Congress and the executive branch. Frozen DB plans have possible implications for PBGC’s long-term financial position. This report examines (1) the extent to which DB pension plans are frozen and the characteristics of frozen plans; and (2) the implications of these freezes for plan participants, plan sponsors, and the PBGC.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-817](#). To view the survey results click on [GAO 08-818SP](#). For more information, contact Barbara Bovbjerg, at (202) 512-7215 or bovbjergb@gao.gov.

DEFINED BENEFIT PENSIONS

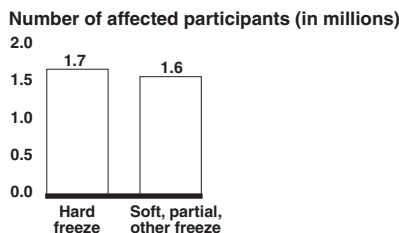
Plan Freezes Affect Millions of Participants and May Pose Retirement Income Challenges

What GAO Found

Frozen plans are fairly common today, with about half of all sponsors in our study population having one or more frozen DB plans. Overall, about 3.3 million active participants in our study population, who represent about 21 percent of all active participants in the single-employer DB system, are affected by a freeze. The most common type of freeze is a hard freeze—a freeze in which all future benefit accruals cease—which accounts for 23 percent of plans in our study population; however, an additional 22 percent of plans are frozen in some other way. Larger sponsors (i.e. those with 10,000 or more total participants) are significantly less likely than smaller sponsors to have implemented a hard freeze, with only 9 percent of plans under a hard freeze among larger sponsors compared with 25 percent of plans under a hard freeze among smaller sponsors. The vast majority of sponsors with frozen plans in our study population, 83 percent, have alternative retirement savings arrangements for these affected participants, but 11 percent of sponsors do not. (An additional 6 percent of sponsors froze plans under circumstances that preclude a replacement plan.) Plan sponsors cited many reasons for freezing their largest plans but most often noted two: the impact of annual contributions on their firm’s cash flows and the unpredictability of plan funding. Sponsors of frozen plans generally expressed a degree of uncertainty about the anticipated outcome for their largest plan, but sponsors whose largest plan was hard frozen were significantly more likely to anticipate plan termination as the likely plan outcome.

The implications of a freeze vary for sponsors, participants, and PBGC. For plan sponsors, while hard freezes appear to indicate an increased likelihood of plan termination, a rise in plan terminations has yet to materialize. For participants, a freeze generally implies a reduction in anticipated future retirement benefits, though this may be somewhat or entirely offset by increases in other benefits or a replacement retirement-savings plan. However, because the replacement plans offered to affected participants most frequently are defined contribution, the investment risk and responsibility for saving are shifted to employees. Finally, plan freezes may potentially improve PBGC’s net financial position, but the degree to which it is accompanied by sponsor efforts to improve plan funding is unclear. In any event, the shrinking of the single-employer pension insurance program plan base seems likely to continue.

Estimated Number of Active Participants Affected by Sponsors’ Largest Plan Freeze, by Freeze Type



Source: GAO analysis of survey of DB pension plan sponsors regarding frozen plans.