



Highlights of [GAO-09-546](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

For many years, GAO has reported that weaknesses in information security are a widespread problem that can have serious consequences—such as intrusions by malicious users, compromised networks, and the theft of intellectual property and personally identifiable information—and has identified information security as a governmentwide high-risk issue since 1997.

Concerned by reports of significant vulnerabilities in federal computer systems, Congress passed the Federal Information Security Management Act of 2002 (FISMA), which authorized and strengthened information security program, evaluation, and reporting requirements for federal agencies.

In accordance with the FISMA requirement that the Comptroller General report periodically to Congress, GAO’s objectives were to evaluate (1) the adequacy and effectiveness of agencies’ information security policies and practices and (2) federal agencies’ implementation of FISMA requirements. To address these objectives, GAO analyzed agency, inspectors general, Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and GAO reports.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Director of OMB take several actions, including revising guidance. OMB generally agreed with GAO’s overall assessment of information security at agencies, but did not concur with one aspect of GAO’s assessment of OMB’s review activities.

[View GAO-09-546 or key components.](#)
For more information, contact Gregory C. Wilshusen at (202) 512-6244 or wilshusen@gao.gov.

INFORMATION SECURITY

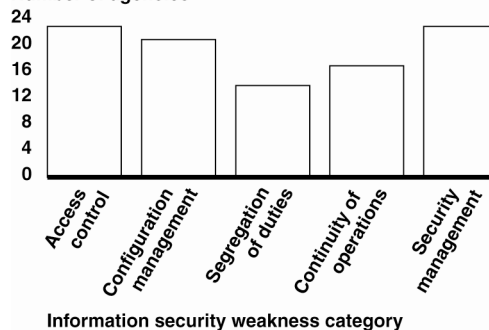
Agencies Continue to Report Progress, but Need to Mitigate Persistent Weaknesses

What GAO Found

Persistent weaknesses in information security policies and practices continue to threaten the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of critical information and information systems used to support the operations, assets, and personnel of most federal agencies. Recently reported incidents at federal agencies have placed sensitive data at risk, including the theft, loss, or improper disclosure of personally identifiable information of Americans, thereby exposing them to loss of privacy and identity theft. For fiscal year 2008, almost all 24 major federal agencies had weaknesses in information security controls (see figure). An underlying reason for these weaknesses is that agencies have not fully implemented their information security programs. As a result, agencies have limited assurance that controls are in place and operating as intended to protect their information resources, thereby leaving them vulnerable to attack or compromise. In prior reports, GAO has made hundreds of recommendations to agencies for actions necessary to resolve prior significant control deficiencies and information security program shortfalls.

Federal agencies reported increased compliance in implementing key information security control activities for fiscal year 2008; however, inspectors general at several agencies noted shortcomings with agencies’ implementation of information security requirements. Agencies reported increased implementation of control activities, such as providing awareness training for employees and testing system contingency plans. However, agencies reported decreased levels of testing security controls and training for employees who have significant security responsibilities. In addition, inspectors general at several agencies disagreed with performance reported by their agencies and identified weaknesses in the processes used to implement these activities. Further, although OMB took steps to clarify its reporting instructions to agencies for preparing fiscal year 2008 reports, the instructions did not request inspectors general to report on agencies’ effectiveness of key activities and did not always provide clear guidance to inspectors general. As a result, the reporting may not adequately reflect agencies’ implementation of the required information security policies and procedures.

Information Security Weaknesses at Major Federal Agencies for Fiscal Year 2008
Number of agencies



Source: GAO analysis of IG, agency, and GAO reports.