



Highlights of [GAO-07-62](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Federal statistical information is used to make appropriate decisions about budgets, employment, and investments. GAO was asked to (1) describe selected characteristics of federally funded statistical or research surveys, (2) describe agencies' and OMB's roles in identifying and preventing unnecessary duplication, (3) examine selected surveys to assess whether unnecessary duplication exists in areas with similar subject matter, and (4) describe selected agencies' efforts to improve the efficiency and relevance of surveys. GAO reviewed agency documents and interviewed officials. Using this information and prior GAO work, GAO identified surveys with potential unnecessary duplication.

## What GAO Recommends

Upcoming changes provide an opportunity to go beyond individual agency efforts and examine the portfolio of major federal household surveys. Therefore, GAO recommends that the Director of OMB work with the ICSP to plan for a comprehensive reexamination to redesign or reprioritize the major federal household surveys. OMB and the Department of Housing and Urban Development agreed with GAO's recommendation. The Department of Health and Human Services stated that a reexamination was not warranted without evidence of unnecessary duplication, but GAO's recommendation is based on other factors, including the upcoming changes.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-62](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-62).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Bernice Steinhardt at (202) 512-6543 or [steinhardtb@gao.gov](mailto:steinhardtb@gao.gov).

# FEDERAL INFORMATION COLLECTION

## A Reexamination of the Portfolio of Major Federal Household Surveys Is Needed

### What GAO Found

At the time of GAO's review, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) had approved 584 ongoing federal statistical or research surveys, of which 40 percent were administered to individuals and households. Under the Paperwork Reduction Act, agencies are to certify to OMB that each information collection does not unnecessarily duplicate existing information, and OMB is responsible for reviewing the content of agencies' submissions. OMB provides guidance that agencies can use to comply with the approval process and avoid unnecessary duplication, which OMB defines as information similar to or corresponding to information that could serve the agency's purpose and is already accessible to the agency.

Based on this definition, the seven surveys GAO reviewed could be considered to contain necessary duplication. GAO identified three subject areas, people without health insurance, people with disabilities, and housing, covered in multiple major surveys that could potentially involve unnecessary duplication. Although they have similarities, most of these surveys originated over several decades, and differ in their purposes, methodologies, definitions, and measurement techniques. These differences can produce widely varying estimates on similar subjects. For example, the estimate for people who were uninsured for a full year from one survey is over 50 percent higher than another survey's estimate for the same year. While agencies have undertaken efforts to standardize definitions and explain some of the differences among estimates, these issues continue to present challenges. In some cases, agencies have reexamined their existing surveys to reprioritize, redesign, combine, and eliminate some of them. Agencies have also used administrative data in conjunction with their surveys to enhance the quality of information and limit respondent burden. These actions have been limited in scope, however. In addition, two major changes to the portfolio of major federal household surveys are underway. The American Community Survey is intended to replace the long-form decennial census starting in 2010. This is considered to be the cornerstone of the government's efforts to provide data on population and housing characteristics and will be used to distribute billions of dollars in federal funding. Officials are also redesigning the Survey of Income and Program Participation which is used in estimating future costs of certain government benefit programs.

In light of these upcoming changes, OMB recognizes that the federal government can build upon agencies' practices of reexamining individual surveys. To ensure that surveys initiated under conditions, priorities, and approaches that existed decades ago are able to cost-effectively meet current and emerging information needs, there is a need to undertake a comprehensive reexamination of the long standing portfolio of major federal household surveys. The Interagency Council on Statistical Policy (ICSP), which is chaired by OMB and made up of the heads of the major statistical agencies, is responsible for coordinating statistical work and has the leadership authority to undertake this effort.