



Highlights of [GAO-05-778T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs, Committee on Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Americans spend billions of hours each year providing information to federal agencies by filling out information collections (forms, surveys, or questionnaires). A major aim of the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) is to minimize the burden that these collections impose on the public, while maximizing their public benefit. Under the act, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) is to approve all such collections and to report annually on the agencies' estimates of the associated burden. In addition, agency Chief Information Officers (CIO) are to review information collections before they are submitted to OMB for approval and certify that the collections meet certain standards set forth in the act.

For its testimony, GAO was asked to comment on OMB's burden report for 2004 and to discuss its recent study of PRA implementation ([GAO-05-424](#)), concentrating on CIO review and certification processes and describing alternative processes that two agencies have used to minimize burden. For its study, GAO reviewed a governmentwide sample of collections, reviewed processes and collections at four agencies that account for a large proportion of burden, and performed case studies of 12 approved collections.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-778T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Linda Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.

PAPERWORK REDUCTION ACT

Reducing Burden May Require a New Approach

What GAO Found

The total paperwork burden imposed by federal information collections shrank slightly in fiscal year 2004, according to estimates provided in OMB's annual PRA report to Congress. The estimated total burden was 7.971 billion hours—a decrease of 1.6 percent (128 million burden hours) from the previous year's total of about 8.099 billion hours. Different types of changes contributed to the overall change in these estimates, according to OMB. For example, adjustments to the estimates (from such factors as changes in estimation methods and estimated number of respondents) accounted for a decrease of about 156 million hours (1.9 percent), and agency burden reduction efforts led to a decrease of about 97 million hours (1.2 percent). These decreases were partially offset by increases in other categories, primarily an increase of 119 million hours (1.5 percent) arising from new statutes. However, because of limitations in the accuracy of burden estimates, the significance of small changes in these estimates is unclear. Nonetheless, as the best indicators of paperwork burden available, these estimates can be useful as long as the limitations are clearly understood.

Among the PRA provisions aimed at helping to achieve the goals of minimizing burden while maximizing utility is the requirement for CIO review and certification of information collections. GAO's review of 12 case studies showed that CIOs provided these certifications despite often missing or inadequate support from the program offices sponsoring the collections. Further, although the law requires CIOs to provide support for certifications, agency files contained little evidence that CIO reviewers had made efforts to improve the support offered by program offices. Numerous factors have contributed to these problems, including a lack of management support and weaknesses in OMB guidance. Because these reviews were not rigorous, OMB, the agency, and the public had reduced assurance that the standards in the act—such as minimizing burden—were consistently met.

In contrast, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have set up processes outside the CIO review process that are specifically focused on reducing burden. These agencies, whose missions involve numerous information collections, have devoted significant resources to targeted burden reduction efforts that involve extensive outreach to stakeholders. According to the two agencies, these efforts led to significant reductions in burden on the public. In contrast, for the 12 case studies, the CIO review process did not reduce burden.

In its report, GAO recommended that OMB and the agencies take steps to improve review processes and compliance with the act. GAO also suggested that the Congress may wish to consider mandating pilot projects to target some collections for rigorous analysis along the lines of the IRS and EPA approaches. OMB and the agencies agreed with most of the recommendations, but disagreed with aspects of GAO's characterization of agencies' compliance with the act's requirements.