



Highlights of [GAO-09-879](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

In all but 3 of the last 30 years, Congress enacted a continuing resolution (CR) allowing federal agencies to continue operating when their regular appropriations had not been passed. CRs appropriate funds generally through rates for operations—funding formulas frequently referenced to the previous years’ appropriations acts or a bill that has passed either the House or Senate—instead of a specific amount. GAO was asked to examine how CRs have changed over time, the effect CRs have had on selected agency operations, and actions that have been taken to mitigate the effects. Accordingly, GAO analyzed CR provisions enacted over the past 10 years and did a case study review of selected agencies that have considerable experience with CRs, represent different ways of providing services, and have different operational capabilities. Case study agencies were the Administration for Children and Families, Bureau of Prisons, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Food and Drug Administration, Veterans Benefits Administration, and Veterans Health Administration.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any recommendations. Departments responsible for case study agencies provided comments that were clarifying or technical in nature and were incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-09-879](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Denise M. Fantone at (202) 512-6806 or fantoned@gao.gov or Susan A. Poling at (202) 512-2667 or polings@gao.gov.

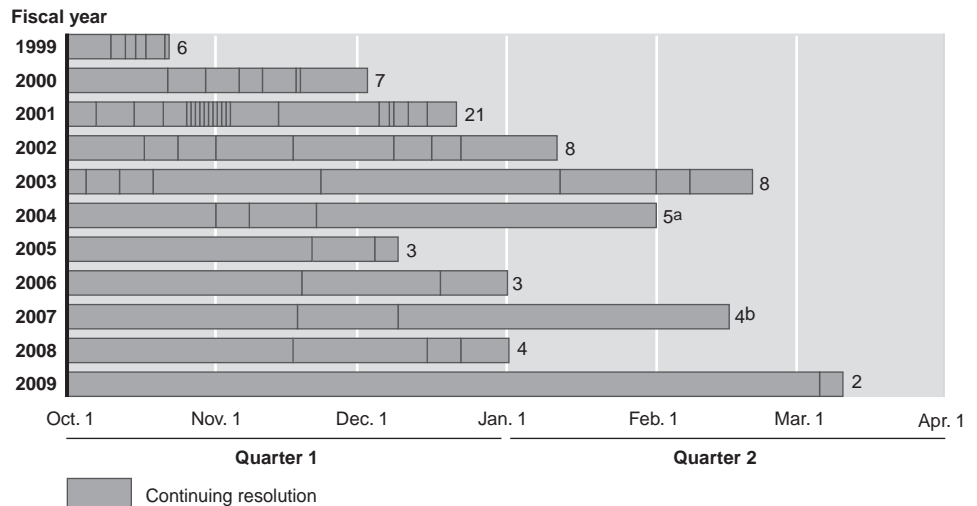
CONTINUING RESOLUTIONS

Uncertainty Limited Management Options and Increased Workload in Selected Agencies

What GAO Found

Since 1999, all agencies operated under a CR for some period of time. The CRs included 11 standard provisions that provided direction on the availability of funding and demonstrated the temporary nature of CRs. During CR periods, these standard provisions required most agencies to operate under a conservative rate of spending and imposed limitations on certain activities. However, CRs provided some agencies or programs funding or direction different from what was provided by the standard provisions, especially under longer-term CRs. These specific provisions—called legislative anomalies—may alleviate some challenges of operating during the CR period. Over the last decade, the duration of individual CRs ranged from 1 to 157 days and the CR period lasted 3 months on average (see figure).

Number and Duration of Continuing Resolutions, Fiscal Years 1999–2009



Source: GAO.

^aThe fifth CR amended the original CR with substantive provisions but did not extend the CR period.

^bThe CR passed in February 2007 provided funding for the remainder of the fiscal year and is not included above.

All six case study agencies reported that operating within the limitations of the CR resulted in inefficiencies. The most common inefficiencies reported were delays to certain activities, such as hiring, and repetitive work, including issuing multiple grants or contracts. Case study agencies also reported that CRs limited management options, making trade-offs more difficult. Both the limitations in planning and amount of additional work varied by agency and activity and depended in large part on the number and duration of CRs. After operating under CRs for a prolonged period, agencies faced additional challenges executing their budget in a compressed time frame. Officials from three agencies said that multiyear budget authority was helpful for managing funds in these circumstances. CRs enabled agencies to continue to carry out their missions until their regular appropriations were enacted.