

GAO

Report to the Congress

January 1986

SOCIAL SECURITY

Quality of Services Generally Rated High by Clients Sampled



128999



United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Comptroller General
of the United States

B-220960

January 30, 1986

To the President of the Senate and the
Speaker of the House of Representatives

This report shows that Social Security clients generally perceive many services provided by the Social Security Administration (SSA) to be of high quality and as good or better than service they receive from other agencies. This conclusion is based on our nationwide survey of clients of the two largest programs administered by SSA--the Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance Program and the Supplemental Security Income Program.

We conducted this survey to find out what those who had had recent contact with SSA thought of the service they received. In the report, we recommend that SSA periodically survey clients on the quality of SSA service and advise the Congress of the results. Such surveys would give the Congress insight into the impact of SSA's planned staff reduction.

We are sending copies of this report to the Director, Office of Management and Budget, and the Secretary of Health and Human Services.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Charles A. Bowsher'.

Comptroller General
of the United States

Executive Summary

The Social Security Administration (SSA) touches the lives of millions of Americans. For example, in 1984, SSA paid some \$181 billion to more than 40 million beneficiaries and recipients of its two largest programs—Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

Although there is widespread interest in these programs and how well they serve their clients, little data are available on satisfaction with service. For this reason, GAO surveyed the attitudes of a random sample of OASDI and SSI clients nationwide, asking them to rate certain SSA services, including such specific aspects as employee courtesy, privacy of interviews, clarity of program explanations, and waiting times.

Background

SSA has recognized on several occasions its need for an ongoing mechanism to measure client satisfaction in a uniform, systematic manner. For example, the agency considered such an evaluation tool in 1975, but never implemented it because of higher priorities. A 1978 internal study again recommended that SSA periodically measure the public's perceptions of service but budgetary limitations prevented the recommendation from being carried out.

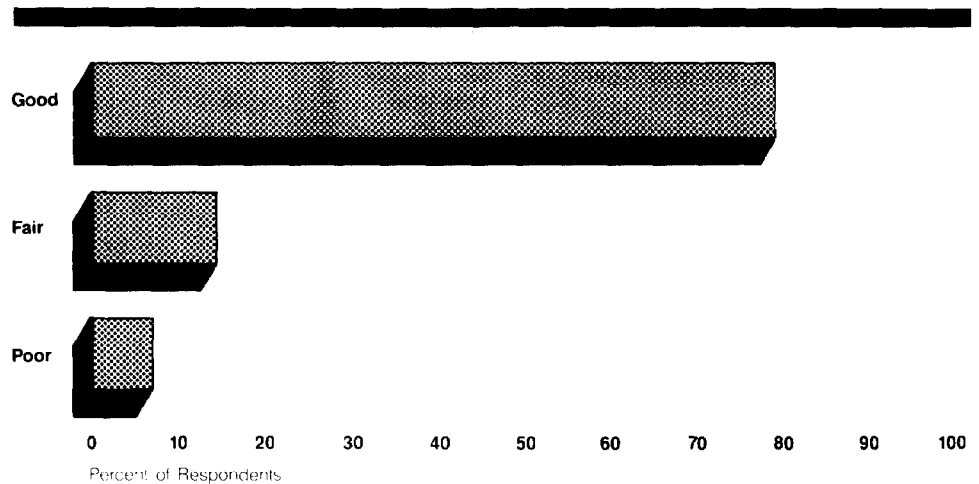
For this survey, GAO sent questionnaires to 1,680 SSA clients, most of whom had recently contacted the agency. In addition to rating certain services they received, they were asked to compare SSA service to that of other government agencies.

GAO's questionnaire did not address client satisfaction with such SSA services as requests for social security numbers and general inquiries. Nor did it gauge the extent to which SSA calculates benefits accurately, processes claims quickly, or manages its operations and programs efficiently and effectively.

Results in Brief

Overall, most respondents gave SSA high marks, rating the service they received as good to very good and better than service from other government agencies. Although most SSI recipients, denied claimants, and the disabled also found SSA service to be good, they rated it lower than did other respondents.

Figure 1: Respondents' Overall Ratings of SSA Service



GAO's Findings

Overall Service Rating High

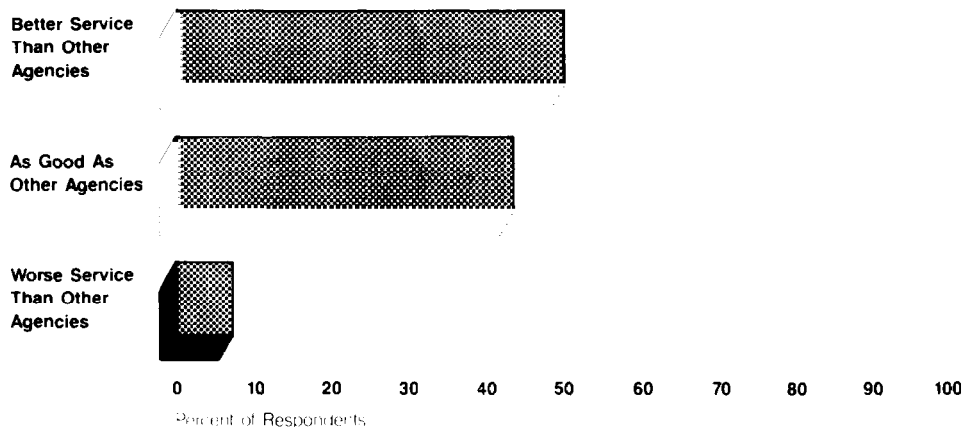
About 78 percent of SSA clients questioned rated the SSA service they received as good to very good. More than 50 percent rated it as somewhat to much better than service received from other government agencies. Also, about 90 percent said that SSA employees were courteous.

In contrast, only 7 percent rated the service as poor to very poor. But because the SSA programs serve so many Americans, this relatively small percentage represents a large number of dissatisfied clients and could translate into a large problem.

Needy, Disabled, and Denied Less Satisfied

Although most SSA clients rated SSA service favorably, those receiving SSI, the disabled, and denied claimants were less satisfied. For example, 50 percent of denied claimants rated SSA service as good to very good, although about 80 percent of approved claimants rated SSA service as good to very good. Significant differences also were noted between SSI and OASDI clients and between the disabled and nondisabled.

Figure 2: Respondents' Opinions About Service Received From SSA Compared to That of Other Government Agencies



Field Office Visits, Mail, Phone Service Rated

When GAO asked specific questions concerning particular modes of service, GAO learned that, of clients who visited field offices, about 80 percent waited no longer for service than they expected to and 88 percent had enough privacy to discuss their personal business with SSA staff. Most clients who received mail from SSA said they considered it generally easy to very easy to understand; however, about 50 percent of those who received such mail contacted SSA to determine its meaning. Of clients who reached SSA by phone for service, nearly half (47 percent) got through on the first try.

Factors Affecting Service

In any assessment of client satisfaction with SSA, several external factors that make it difficult for SSA to deliver quality service should be considered. For example, SSA administers new, increasingly complex programs. Between 1977 and 1982, 66 laws containing more than 300 provisions requiring SSA action were enacted. Also, SSA has been asked to administer more than 21 types of payments—originally it was responsible for only the retirement benefit. From enactment of the Social Security program through 1982, monthly benefit calculations have undergone 92 changes, each posing administrative challenges to SSA staff.

To complicate matters, SSA's outdated computer systems resulted in increased manual processing of claims, which is more error-prone and labor-intensive. According to an SSA study, manual processing is three times more likely to result in error than is processing by automation.

SSA's Systems Modernization Plan aims to bring the agency's computer systems to a state-of-the-art level to improve client service.

Need for Evaluations

SSA needs to periodically survey its clients to learn their views of its services. Such information would be particularly useful in view of the Administration's proposed multiyear cut in SSA staff of 17,000 positions. The Congress and others have expressed concerns about the impact of such cuts on the quality of SSA service. SSA could use data on client satisfaction to monitor service quality over the coming years.

Recommendation

GAO recommends that SSA conduct periodic surveys of client satisfaction with the quality of SSA's service and advise the Congress on the results. Such surveys would give the Congress and others insight into the effect of SSA's planned staff reduction.

Agency Comments

SSA agreed with GAO's recommendation and said it was developing a proposal for measuring its performance in providing service.

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Abbreviations

GAO	General Accounting Office
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
OASDI	Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance
SS	Social Security
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSI	Supplemental Security Income

Introduction

On millions of occasions each year, the Social Security Administration (SSA) interacts with the American public— responding to questions about Social Security, processing applications, awarding or denying benefits, and handling changes affecting benefits. For many people, the interaction represents their primary contact with their government and often involves matters crucial to their well-being. Although millions contact SSA by telephone, mail, or in person each year, we found little information on what these clients thought about the service they received.

To learn how SSA clients perceive the quality of services in its two largest programs—Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI)—we conducted a nationwide survey. We also analyzed how various demographic and other characteristics influence client perceptions of the programs. The results are presented in this report, which includes as well an overview of the environment in which SSA operates and discussion of internal and external factors that affect SSA's ability to provide quality service.

The term “service” encompasses a variety of agency activities (see p. 16). To give focus to SSA's service mission, in April 1984, the Acting Commissioner announced four goals for SSA:

- To provide timely and accurate payment of benefits,
- To administer the program(s) efficiently and effectively,
- To provide courteous, sensitive, and dignified service to the public, and
- To strive toward a positive work climate for all employees.

All of these directly or indirectly relate to the quality of service.

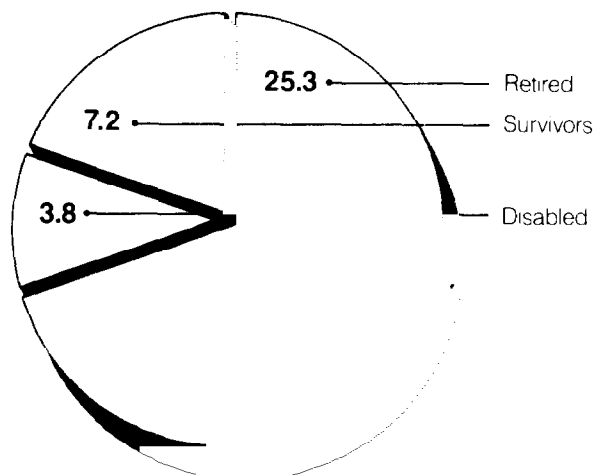
Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance

The OASDI program, authorized under title II of the Social Security Act, provides monthly benefit payments to eligible beneficiaries. Payments are based on a worker's earnings in Social Security-covered employment and are designed to replace part of the income that individuals and families lose when workers retire, die, or become disabled.

In fiscal year 1984, SSA paid \$173.4 billion in OASDI benefits to about 36.3 million people. Of these beneficiaries, more than 69 percent or 25.3 million were retired workers and their spouses and children (see figure 1.1). Survivors of deceased workers and their dependents numbered 7.2 million and accounted for more than 19 percent of beneficiaries. Disabled workers and their spouses and children totaled 3.8 million or 11 percent.

Figure 1.1: OASDI Payments to Beneficiaries by Type of Benefit
(FY 1984)

(Millions of Beneficiaries)



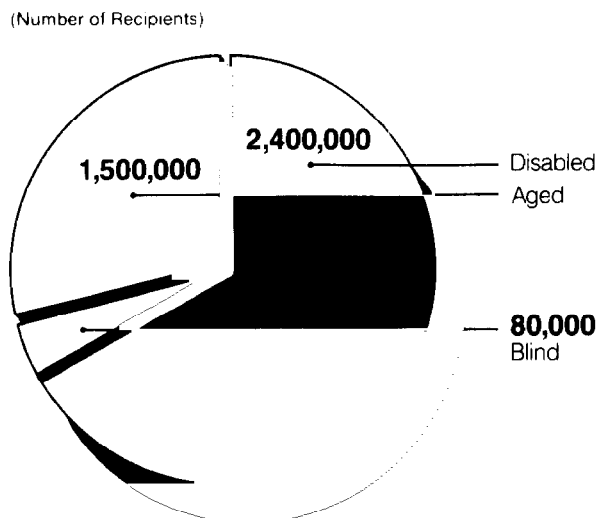
OASDI beneficiaries included 13.6 million adult males, 19.8 million adult females, and 2.9 million students or children under the age of 18. Retired workers received an average of \$443 per month, while the monthly benefit of disabled workers averaged \$455.

Supplemental Security Income

The SSI program, authorized under title XVI of the Social Security Act, provides financial assistance to eligible beneficiaries—needy aged, blind, or disabled persons. SSI, established in 1974, replaced state-administered public assistance programs and made benefit levels and eligibility requirements uniform nationwide. Monthly cash benefits are financed from general revenue funds managed by SSA.

In fiscal year 1984, SSA paid more than \$8 billion in SSI benefits. The roughly 4 million SSI recipients on the rolls at the end of the fiscal year included 2.4 million disabled, 1.5 million aged, and 80,000 blind persons (see figure 1.2). Disabled recipients received an average monthly payment of \$233, aged recipients \$138, and blind recipients \$225.

Figure 1.2: SSI Payments by Type of Recipient (FY 1984)



Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Because its programs touch the lives of so many Americans, there is widespread public and congressional interest in Social Security. To find out what clients think about the quality of SSA service, we asked a nationwide sample of SSA clients in November and December 1984 to comment on their contacts with the agency by telephone, by visit, or by correspondence. The survey questionnaire, composed of 44 questions, covered such issues as employee courtesy, waiting times, privacy, clarity of program explanations, overall satisfaction with SSA performance, and comparison of SSA to other government agencies. Through the questionnaire, we also collected data on the methods, frequency, and reasons for contact between SSA and its clients. A final question invited respondents to add to the form any comments they wished about how Social Security had served them. (See app. I for the survey instrument and app. II for the weighted responses, overall, by program, and by disabled/nondisabled status of respondents.)

In developing our survey strategy, we needed to identify a sampling universe of SSA clients who had recent personal contact with SSA—either by phone, visit, or through the mail. Given the size of the OASDI and SSI programs, the only practical way to approach this seemed to be through SSA's computerized data systems.

On the basis of discussions with SSA officials, we identified and used four major systems: (1) OASDI initial claims, (2) OASDI postentitlement

actions, (3) SSI initial claims, and (4) SSI postentitlement actions. The initial claims files contain records of applications and approvals of client requests for benefits. The postentitlement files record actions following entitlement, including events that affect benefit amounts, such as marriage, death, and earned income above specified amounts.

Numerous subsystems provide input to these four systems, but not all of the subsystems (or individual actions for that matter) represent client contacts with SSA. On the basis of discussions with SSA personnel, we excluded from our survey these subsystems and actions. Typical of these exclusions are actions that track case-folder movements and SSA interactions with other government agencies such as the Internal Revenue Service to assure the proper recording of employees' earnings to their SSA accounts.

From November 7 to December 7, 1984, we mailed questionnaires to 1,680¹ randomly sampled SSI and OASDI applicants, recipients, and beneficiaries who, based on information contained in the four systems, had contacted SSA in September 1984. Our response rate was 85.2 percent.

We wanted to obtain recent SSA/client contacts because recall of events generally becomes less clear as time passes. Using appropriate statistical formulas for a stratified random sampling design, we estimated the number of clients who in September 1984 contacted SSA. That universe exceeded 2.7 million people. All estimates in this report, unless otherwise noted, reflect responses we would have expected to receive had we sent a questionnaire to all 2.7 million people. Throughout this report, estimates expressed as percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. (See apps. III and IV for details of our sampling and estimation methodology and the sampling errors for key questions.)

Between November 27, 1984, and January 4, 1985, we also sent questionnaires to a control group of 994 recipients and beneficiaries² for whom we had no information concerning a contact with SSA. Our response rate was 85.1 percent.

To assure that our September sample groups were representative of the overall OASDI and SSI population and confirm that our sampling strategy

¹1,680 questionnaires were mailed; undeliverables and deceased individuals reduced the sample to 1,633.

²994 questionnaires were mailed; however, undeliverables and deceased individuals reduced the sample to 955.

did not introduce biases into responses, we compared responses from the September and control group samples. Generally, we found that differences between the groups' responses to the questionnaire were not statistically significant, thus indicating that our September sample groups were representative. (See app. V for details.)

Because our approach was necessarily tied to the use of SSA computerized data, we excluded from our survey some important services that SSA provides annually to millions of people. Responses to general inquiries were not included because SSA does not routinely record the name and address of the inquiring person in these cases. Similarly, we eliminated requests for new or replacement Social Security cards because these files lack the mailing addresses we would need for sampling purposes. The addresses are recorded on microfilm and hard copy, but we did not wish to use these sources because of the extensive manual research required.

Other important SSA services not covered by our survey include those where there is no direct interaction between SSA and its clients (e.g., the annual earnings postings, which serve as the basis for computing OASDI benefits). Also, out of consideration for the bereaved, we excluded to the extent practicable individuals who had contacted SSA with regard to a death. Lastly, our survey did not measure the timeliness and accuracy of SSA's benefit computations—an important part of the agency's ongoing tracking system—nor the efficiency of SSA's operations or the effectiveness of its programs.

SSA has a number of well-documented operational problems that our survey instrument was not designed to address. For example, a September 1984 report (GAO/HRD-84-71) disclosed that numerous beneficiary underpayments were not detected by SSA for extended periods of time. On the other hand, a March 1985 report (GAO/HRD-85-12) noted that retired and disabled beneficiaries and their dependents or survivors owed Social Security about \$2 billion because they had been paid more than they were entitled. Finally, our survey instrument did not address what is probably SSA's most serious operational problem—its reliance on antiquated computer systems (see p. 21).

Among the various analyses we performed of the data collected, we compared responses by (1) disabled and nondisabled beneficiaries, (2) OASDI and SSI, (3) approved and denied claimants, (4) SSA region, (5) sex, and (6) urban and rural areas.

To supplement the data we collected through our questionnaire, we held discussions with SSA officials at headquarters and in the field. Also, we analyzed past studies and evaluations of SSA's service.

We did not evaluate the accuracy or completeness of SSA computerized records from which we selected our sample cases. These records, which contain demographic information and payment history data on each OASDI beneficiary and SSI recipient, serve as the basis for SSA benefit payments. For our purposes, the records were appropriate because they generally yielded valid names and addresses of OASDI and SSI clients for mail-out questionnaires.

We conducted our work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

SSA's Operating Environment

For virtually all Americans, SSA touches their lives at some point. They meet the agency as wage earner, retiree, or someone needing financial assistance to make ends meet.

One of the largest agencies in the federal government, SSA employs about 74,000¹ people and has an extensive network of field offices for serving the public. Many services are offered at these field locations; they include informing the elderly, disabled, and poor about their rights to benefits and aiding the dependents of eligible disabled or deceased workers. Because it serves so many people and its programs are complex and constantly changing, SSA must contend on a day-to-day basis with a myriad of problems—many beyond its control.

Types of Services Numerous

Perhaps the first contact most people have with SSA occurs when they receive a Social Security number and card. Since it began operations, SSA has issued more than 270 million Social Security numbers.

Prior to receiving benefits, people may visit or call a local office to check on their earnings record. Also, someone approaching retirement may request a benefit estimate to help decide whether he or she wants to retire, and if so, when. SSA maintains earnings records on 235 million workers, 115 million of them currently in covered employment.

For most, the first significant encounter with SSA is upon application for retirement or disability benefits, for benefits as a survivor of a covered earner, or for SSI payments based on need. Such an encounter starts a process that continues until the applicant receives a notice of award or denial. An applicant whose claim is denied has the right to appeal.

Those whose claims are approved begin receiving monthly checks, entering the postentitlement stage. More than 40.3 million SSA beneficiaries and SSI recipients were receiving checks at the end of fiscal year 1984. During that year, SSA issued to these individuals about 500 million checks. People receiving benefits visit or call SSA if they need assistance, to report a change in beneficiary status, or if they are asked by SSA to contact a field office.

One fairly common contact is to report a change of address. Other calls or visits occur because people lose or do not receive their monthly check on time. Beneficiaries also contact SSA to have benefits recomputed to

¹Full-time permanent staff.

reflect recent earnings or to ask about the amount of their benefits. Other events that may require contact include marriage, divorce, children's birthdays, school attendance, earnings, other entitlement payments, and death.

People getting monthly checks sometimes receive booklets, pamphlets, notices, and letters from SSA. Recipients of SSI and disability payments may receive notices that require them to contact SSA for a periodic re-determination of eligibility.

People also contact SSA for help with Medicare-related matters. Additional contacts result when SSA processes food stamp applications or provides benefit verification information required by public agencies for low-income applicants who seek energy or subsidized housing assistance.

Contacts—both visits and phone calls—were most often to inquire about an SSA notice or mailing, SSA clients indicated when surveyed. The reasons given for the most recent contact are ranked in order of frequency mentioned by respondents in table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Why People Visit or Call SSA

Ranking	Reason	
	Visit	Call
1	Inquire about notice/ mail	Inquire about notice/ mail
2	Asked to visit by SSA	Asked to call by SSA
3	Submit retirement claim	Change of name/address
4	Submit disability claim	Inquire about disability claim
5	Change of name/address	Inquire about SSI Claim
6	Submit SSI claim	Inquire about retirement claim
7	Submit survivors' claim	Medicare help

Contacting SSA: Visit, Phone, or Write

Visiting and telephoning SSA were the primary methods of contact; mail was used less frequently (see figure 2.1). Data from clients surveyed on the frequency of the visits, phone calls, and mail contacts appear in table 2.2.

Figure 2.1: Ways in Which Respondents Interacted With SSA

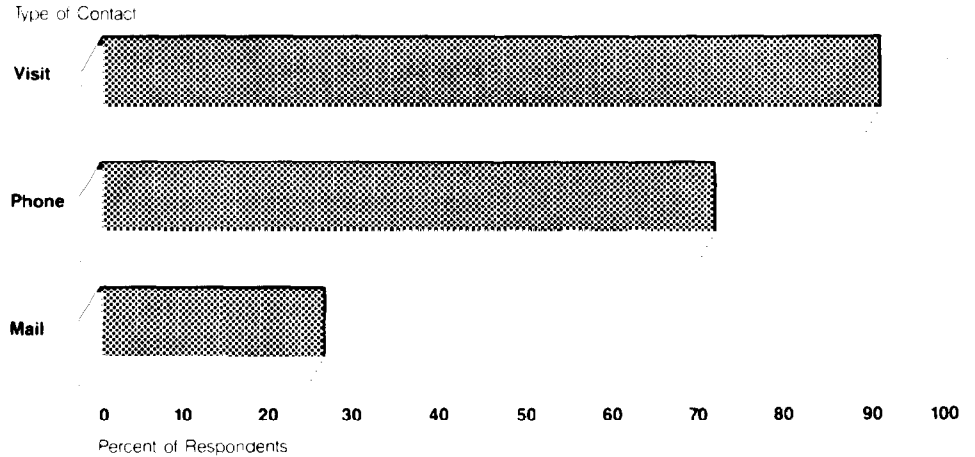


Table 2.2: Frequency of Contacts With SSA

Frequency of respondent contacts	Type of contact (percent)		
	Visit	Phone	Mail
1 time	15	15	33
2 times	22	21	25
3 times	21	20	16
More than 3 times	43	44	26

Our survey results also showed that:

- Of visits to SSA offices, 60 percent occurred before 11 a.m., including 13 percent who arrived before the offices open at 9 a.m.
- For 71 percent of the visits, the total time at the office was less than one hour.
- Fourteen percent of the clients had someone visit an SSA office on their behalf.
- Eighteen percent had someone call SSA on their behalf.
- Eighty percent were on the phone 10 minutes or less during their last call to SSA.
- Of clients in a benefit status, 96 percent usually got their check on time, but one of every four had contacted SSA about at least one late check.
- About 3 of every 10 clients in a benefit status had contacted SSA to ask whether the benefit amount was correct.
- SSI clients contacted SSA more frequently than QASDI clients. For example, 58 percent of SSI clients visited SSA more than 3 times compared to

38 percent for OASDI clients. Also, 50 percent of SSI clients phoned SSA more than 3 times compared to 42 percent for OASDI clients.

- Thirty-seven percent of the most recent visits of SSI clients lasted over an hour compared to 27 percent for OASDI clients.

To provide face-to-face service to its clients, SSA as of September 1985 had about 1,300 district and branch offices, 75 resident stations, and 2,600 contact stations. Essentially all client needs can be met at district and branch offices, which are the heart of SSA service delivery.

Both resident and contact stations are extensions of the district and branch offices and provide many of the same services. Resident stations often lack systems capability; they cannot provide direct input to nor receive direct output from SSA's computerized files. Contact stations, staffed part-time, likewise have no systems capability; typically, they utilize a post office or city hall in a small rural town, which an SSA district or branch office employee visits one day a month. Lastly, when necessary, SSA field representatives visit clients who cannot reach an SSA office or station.

Field offices usually have a reception area for arriving clients set apart from the area for adjudicating claims and processing postentitlement actions. In many offices, signs direct the public on how to get service and a numbering system is used to call clients. Some offices use service representatives as receptionists on a rotating basis to process clients. After leaving the reception area, SSA clients are assisted or interviewed by a claim or service representative. Interviews are conducted in open or partitioned areas. Busy times at field offices generally occur early in the day, early in the week, and early in the month.

To handle telephone traffic, SSA has established 34 independent teleservice centers, primarily in major urban areas. These centers—physically similar to field offices but not open to the public for face-to-face contact—serve about 50 percent of the nation's population. For the population not served by teleservice centers, district and branch offices and 32 miniteleservice centers handle the telephone traffic. Minicenters serve clients in one or more districts, and 12 of the 32 provide service to an entire state. In comparison with teleservice centers, the minicenters generally handle smaller traffic volumes and organizationally are considered part of a district office.

SSA Computers Confront Program Complexity

Over the years, the Congress has added new program responsibilities and frequently legislated program changes that make existing programs more complex to administer. Also, SSA depends on antiquated computer systems to process the millions of SSA/client transactions that occur annually. Currently, SSA is in the midst of a major program to computerize field office operations.

Other factors that impede SSA's ability to provide quality service include management of larger caseloads as older Americans represent a larger segment of the population, diversion of resources to carry out judicial mandates, and legislation with short implementation lead times.

Social Security: Growing, Changing

In addition to administering social insurance and welfare programs, SSA operates systems that support other agencies' programs. SSA has had to respond to frequent legislative changes that have substantially broadened the original Social Security Act and enlarged the agency's mission.

The addition of new programs and benefit categories with different eligibility requirements, the increased complexities of benefit computations, and the extension of coverage to additional occupational groups have made it more difficult for SSA to serve the public. Initially, Social Security paid only retirement benefits. Today, there are more than 21 types of benefits. As eligibility has been liberalized, benefit rules have become more complex. For example, there have been 92 changes in the monthly benefit calculation from enactment of the Social Security program through 1982. Also, between 1977 and 1982, 66 laws were enacted containing about 300 provisions requiring SSA action.

These changes have had to be incorporated in SSA's Program Operations Manual System, which contains procedures and instructions for SSA employees. Keeping instructions current is a major task. Field office personnel are inundated by revisions; during a 2-month period, one field office received on average 28 pages of instructions daily, a study estimated.

Training qualified employees to deal with program complexities takes significant time. Before dealing with the public, claims representatives must undergo about 3 months of training in SSA programs, rules, and regulations. Ongoing training is routine for an SSA employee.

Besides administering the OASDI and SSI programs, SSA

- Maintains the federal role in the Aid to Families With Dependent Children program by providing matching grants from general federal revenues to defray a portion of the states' costs. Total payments to about 3.7 million families in fiscal year 1984 were \$14 billion, of which \$7.7 billion was the federal share.
- Determines Medicare eligibility, issues Medicare cards, maintains the master health insurance record, and handles public inquiries about Medicare, even though administration of the Medicare program was transferred to the Health Care Financing Administration in 1977.
- Administers payments to about 340,000 Black Lung Program beneficiaries and receives about 10,000 claims a year for transfer to the Department of Labor.
- Assists the Department of Agriculture by accepting food stamp applications from SSI recipients and applicants who live in households where everyone receives SSI or is applying for it.
- Administers the program for Low-Income Energy Assistance, which in fiscal year 1984 provided \$2 billion to help low-income households offset home energy costs.
- Administers federal funds appropriated to reimburse state and local public assistance programs for refugee assistance.

Also, using its computer telecommunications, SSA performs such supplementary tasks as providing the Internal Revenue Service with annual earnings reports and the Selective Service System with information on draft eligibles.

Systems Modernization Needed

As its computer systems fell behind its program responsibilities, SSA increasingly relied on manual processing. Computer problems that SSA experienced included

- inefficiencies resulting from old software,
- frequent breakdown of equipment and lack of capacity,
- overreliance on magnetic tape, instead of the more modern disks for basic data storage, and
- inadequate telecommunications systems, which created information gaps in SSA files.

Compared with computers, manual processing is more error-prone and labor-intensive. Monthly benefit claims processed manually are more than three times as likely to have an error as claims processed through the automated system, a study by SSA's Office of Assessment shows.

In February 1982, SSA began its Systems Modernization Plan, a multi-year effort to upgrade its computer systems to a state-of-the-art level. Progress has been made, including replacement of many tape files with disk storage and establishment of additional computer support to reduce telecommunications backlogs. But a critical part of the plan—software development—is behind schedule. Completion of the plan will give SSA the systems support needed to ensure better public service. At present, SSA is preparing to go nationwide with the largest segment of the plan—installing the latest computer technology in its field office operations.

What Clients Think About SSA Service

In the eyes of most Americans who have had a recent contact with SSA, the agency provides quality service to its clients. Clients we questioned said that overall, SSA does a good to very good job, somewhat better than other federal, state, or local agencies they have contacted.

Most OASDI and SSI clients who visited SSA field offices waited no longer than they had expected for service and had enough privacy to conduct their business. Those who visited or reached SSA by phone found SSA employees very courteous and clear in explaining the programs and rules, generally were satisfied to very satisfied with the amount of time it took to complete their business, and believed that SSA did a good to very good job in handling the purpose of the contact.

SSI clients, disabled beneficiaries, and denied claimants, although also generally satisfied, when asked for additional comments, expressed concern about eligibility decisions, erroneous payments, processing of disability claims, and adequacy of benefits for the elderly. Also, while clients found SSA mail generally easy to understand, about half contacted SSA and more than one-third contacted family members or friends to ask what the mail meant. Also, only about half of the clients reached SSA by phone on the first try.

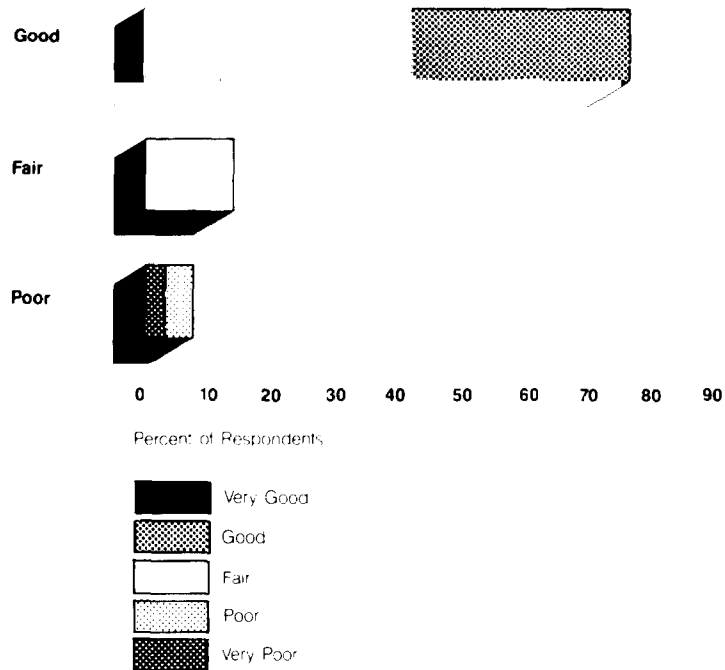
Of our 1,391 respondents, 542 added written comments about SSA services, and of these narratives, 320 were negative. The complaints cited eligibility decisions, insufficient benefits to live on, collection of overpayments, and how long SSA took to make claims decisions—especially disability claims.

In this chapter, we discuss in detail the respondents' overall rankings of SSA services; variations in response by client characteristic, sex, urban/rural location, and SSA region; specific responses concerning visits to field offices, correspondence, and phone contacts; and the nature of the narrative responses.

SSA Scores High in Clients' View

About 78 percent of SSA clients rated SSA's service as good to very good. About 7 percent said SSA did a poor or very poor job. Because the SSA programs serve more than 40 million individuals, however, a relatively small percentage of unsatisfied clients can translate into a large problem. For example, the 7 percent who rated SSA service as poor represent a large number of dissatisfied clients. Figure 3.1 shows specific ratings.

Figure 3.1: Respondents' Overall Ratings of SSA Service



Clients who had visited or phoned SSA found SSA employees courteous, said programs and rules were explained clearly and that SSA did a good to very good job of handling their business, and generally were satisfied to very satisfied with how long SSA took to resolve their business. Figures 3.2 through 3.5 give specifics on these responses.

Figure 3.2: Respondents' Opinions About the Courtesy Displayed by SSA Employees

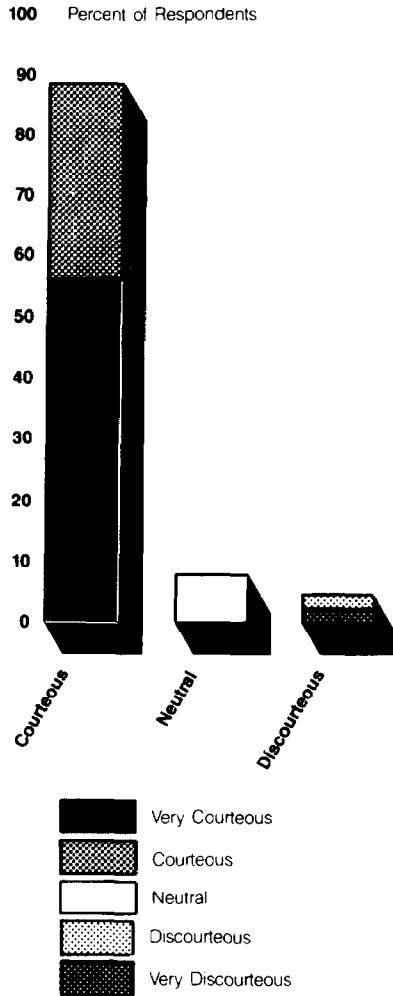
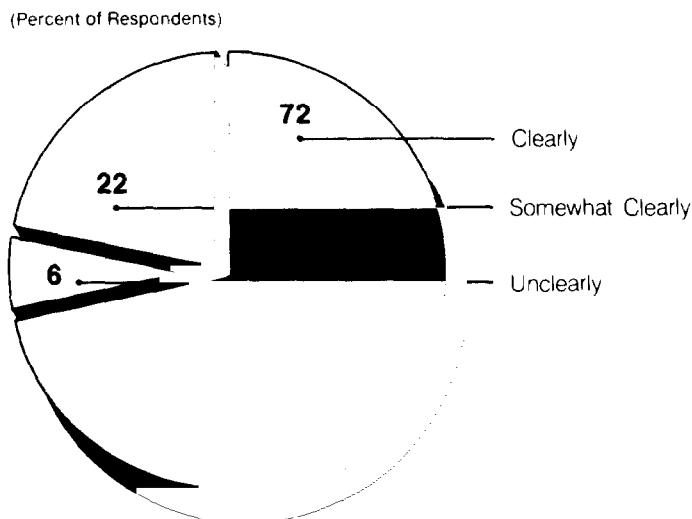


Figure 3.3: Respondents' Opinions About the Way in Which Programs and Rules Were Explained



Among the voluntary narrative comments were 222 positive remarks on SSA service, among them:

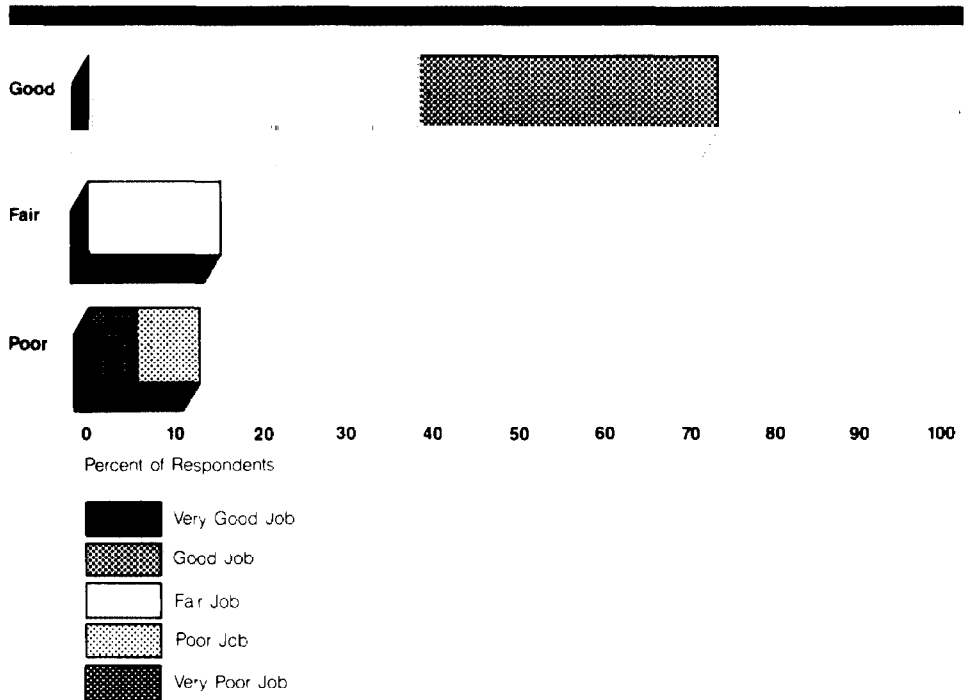
“They treated me very nice. I felt like a first-class citizen when I left”—a 58-year-old disabled male beneficiary from California.

“My contact with local SS office has been worthwhile for information purposes, all times having been received courteously and competently . . . I consider that the SSA handles their workload in a very proficient manner for the number of accounts they service”—a 70-year-old male OASDI beneficiary from North Carolina.

“I applied for SS and SSI in August this year. By the end of October I knew I was qualified. By the middle of November, I had a check. They were very kind, courteous, and understanding.”—a 31-year-old disabled female beneficiary from Indiana.

“Social Security has always been fair and courteous to me. Dealing with the elderly can be trying at times but they never seem to lose patience . . .”—an 81-year-old female SSI recipient from Oregon.

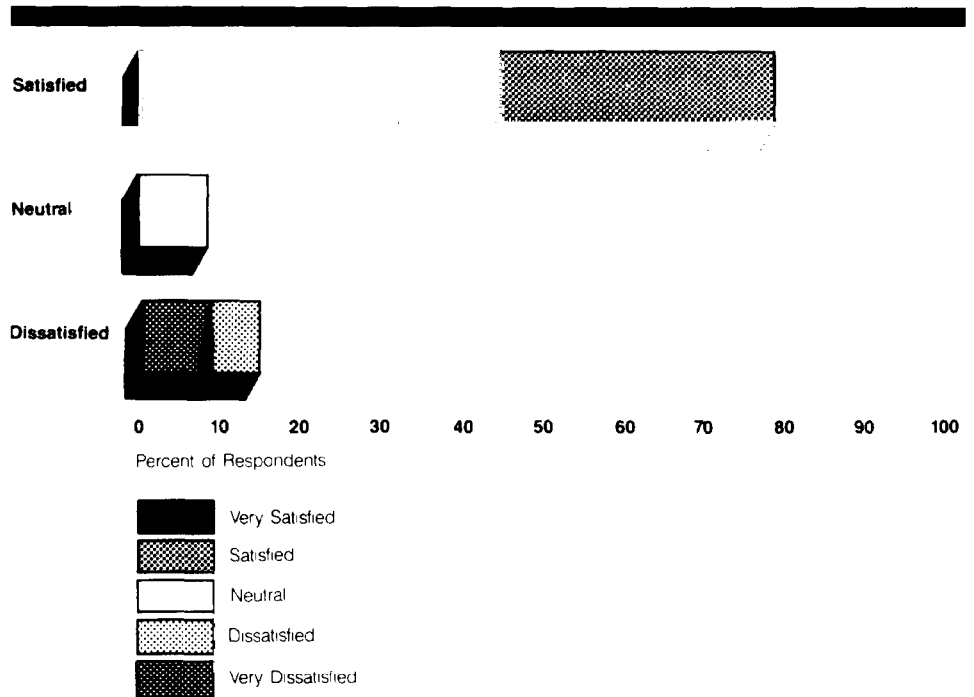
Figure 3.4: Respondents' Opinions About the Type of Job SSA Did in Handling Their Business



“All of Social Security employees here at the . . . branch are very courteous people. You are not kept waiting unnecessarily long. We know that it takes some time for we are not the only participants of the Social Security program.”—a 47-year-old female SSI recipient from Alabama.

We also asked respondents how SSA compared with other federal, state, or local agencies that had provided them service. Fifty-one percent rated SSA service somewhat to much better than that of other agencies, while an additional 43 percent rated SSA service as good. Figure 3.6 shows overall results.

Figure 3.5: Respondents' Satisfaction With the Amount of Time Taken by SSA to Resolve Their Business



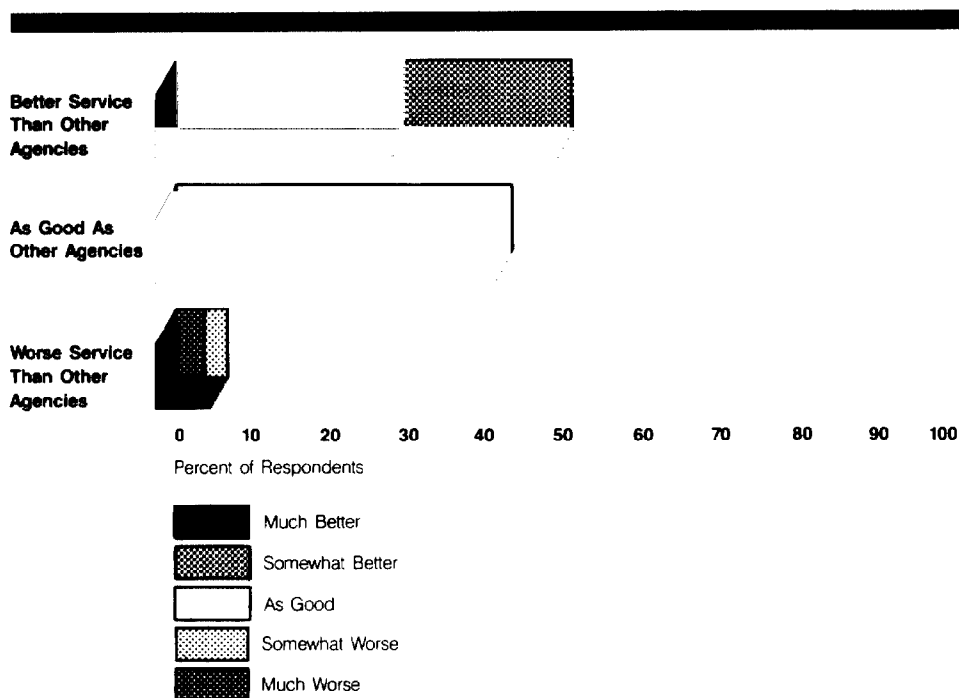
Comparison comments included the following:

“I find that the federal social security is very good. The State (SSI) Department is fair to good.”—a 72-year-old female SSI recipient from California.

“Very pleased with the personnel and service of my local office. Questions answered and follow thru on problems in a courteous fashion. Not like our state agencies where you’re made to feel like you’re a ward of the state and are trying to cheat them.”—a 56-year-old disabled male beneficiary from New Mexico.

“Social Security gives much better service than OPM that handles federal employees’ retirement benefits.”—62-year-old OASDI male beneficiary from Massachusetts.

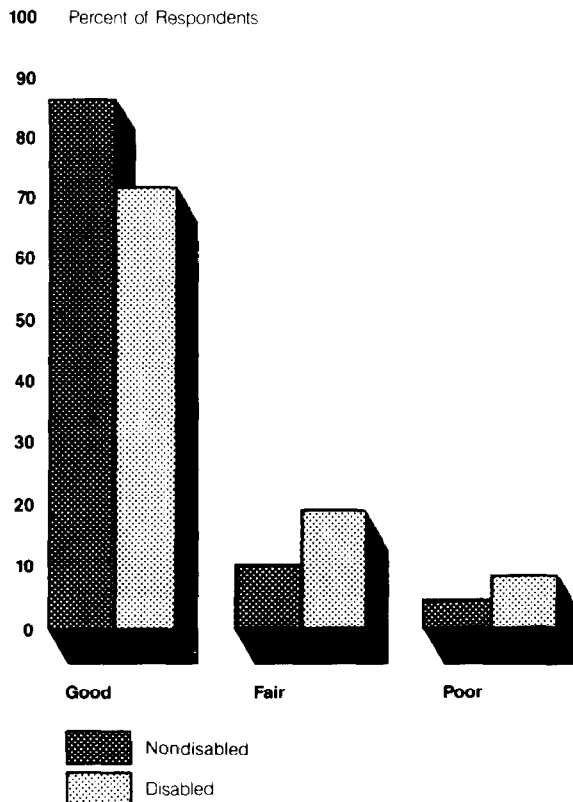
Figure 3.6: Respondents' Opinions About Service Received From SSA Compared to That of Other Government Agencies



Service Perceptions Vary by Client Characteristics

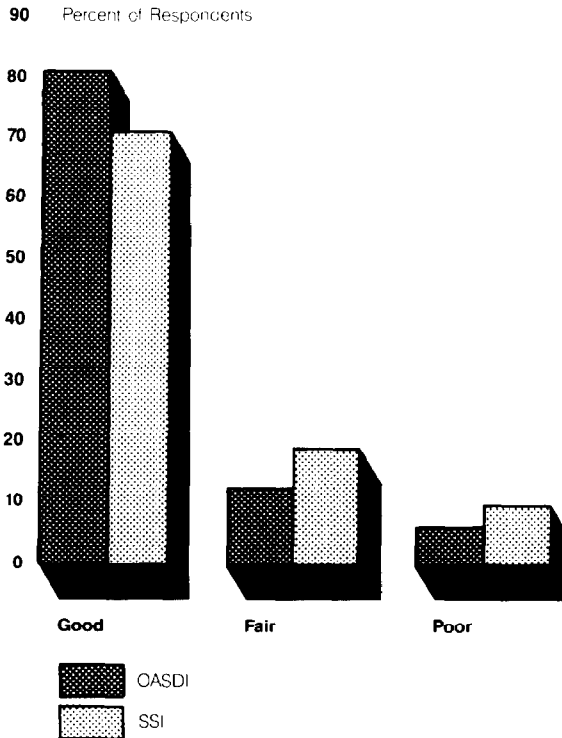
Statistically significant differences in opinions of SSA service were noted between (1) disabled and nondisabled beneficiaries, (2) OASDI and SSI participants, and (3) approved and denied claimants. Figures 3.7, 3.8, and 3.9 show differences for the overall ratings, which we further discuss below.

Figure 3.7: Respondents' Overall Opinions About SSA Service by Disability Status



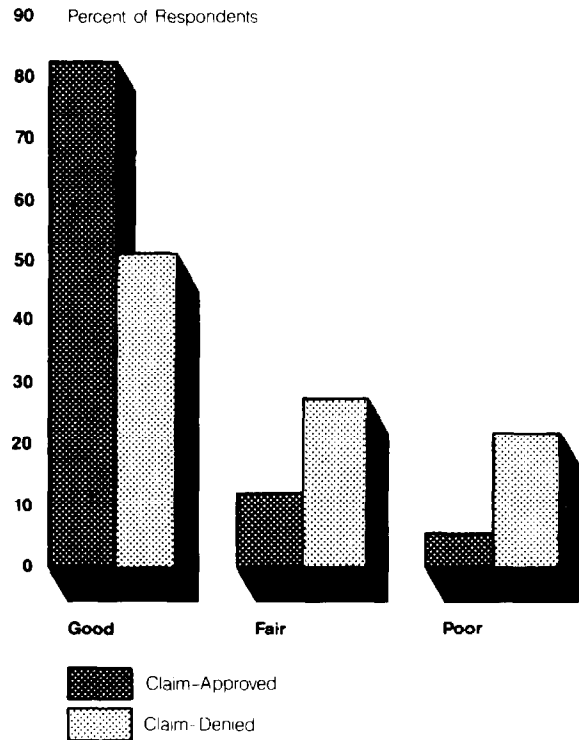
Compared with their counterparts, SSI clients, disabled beneficiaries, and denied claimants said that they had somewhat less privacy than they needed and were less satisfied with the time it took to handle their business and that SSA employees were somewhat less courteous. For example, 4 of every 10 SSI clients waited 30 minutes or more to be served and were at the office more than 1 hour, according to their responses. In contrast, 3 of every 10 OASDI clients claimed waits of 30 minutes or more. Also, 26 percent of SSI clients, compared to 20 percent of OASDI clients, considered the wait longer than expected.

Figure 3.8: Respondents' Overall Opinions About SSA Service by Program Participation



The reason that SSI clients perceived longer waiting times, according to an SSA headquarters official, could be that SSI clients sometimes are required to file a corresponding claim to determine entitlement to OASDI benefits. This means they may be rerouted to the reception area until a claims representative is free to process the second application. In our opinion, the additional wait for a second interview may have been considered when clients answered the question.

Figure 3.9: Respondents' Overall Opinions About SSA Service by Claim Status



More than 84 percent of nondisabled beneficiaries were satisfied to very satisfied with the time SSA took to handle the purpose of the visit. Among disabled beneficiaries, the satisfaction rate was 69 percent.

Perceptions of disabled beneficiaries may be somewhat misdirected, causing SSA to bear the brunt of their dissatisfaction. For instance, SSA took an overall average of 74 days to process disability claims during fiscal year 1984. However, on the average, 53 of these days were used by state Disability Determination Services, which accumulate medical evidence needed to process the claims.

SSI clients, disabled beneficiaries, and denied claimants also found mail from SSA more difficult to understand and contacted SSA more often to get the mail explained than did their counterparts. For example, 23 percent of denied claimants said SSA mail was generally difficult to very difficult to understand; 12 percent of approved claimants perceived SSA mail similarly.

Other Response Variables

We also analyzed the questionnaire responses to determine if there were any significant differences in responses based on (1) sex, (2) residence (urban/rural), and (3) SSA region. Our analyses disclosed no statistically significant differences based on sex or residence,¹ but we did find some differences in responses among SSA regions, as illustrated in table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Respondents' Overall Ratings of SSA Service by Region

SSA region	Rating of SSA service (percent)				
	Very good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor
1. Boston	47	32	12	5	4
2. New York	43	41	10	3	3
3. Philadelphia	51	33	10	3	3
4. Atlanta	43	37	12	4	4
5. Chicago	42	37	14	4	3
6. Dallas	38	32	22	4	4
7. Kansas City	37	42	15	2	4
8. Denver	30	51	18	1	0
9. San Francisco	38	35	20	4	3
10. Seattle	52	29	9	5	5
Average rating	42	36	15	4	3

Using the combined good and very good categories to indicate a high rating and the combined poor and very poor categories to indicate a low rating, one of the highest rated regions was Denver—with a combined rating of 81 percent in the good and very good categories and a 1-percent combined rating for the poor and very poor categories. By comparison, Dallas was the lowest rated region with a combined rating of 70 percent for the good and very good categories and 8 percent for the poor and very poor categories.

Visits to an SSA Field Office

As noted earlier in this chapter, SSA clients said they generally received good service during visits to SSA field offices. To supplement this information, we asked questions dealing specifically with service in a field office setting.

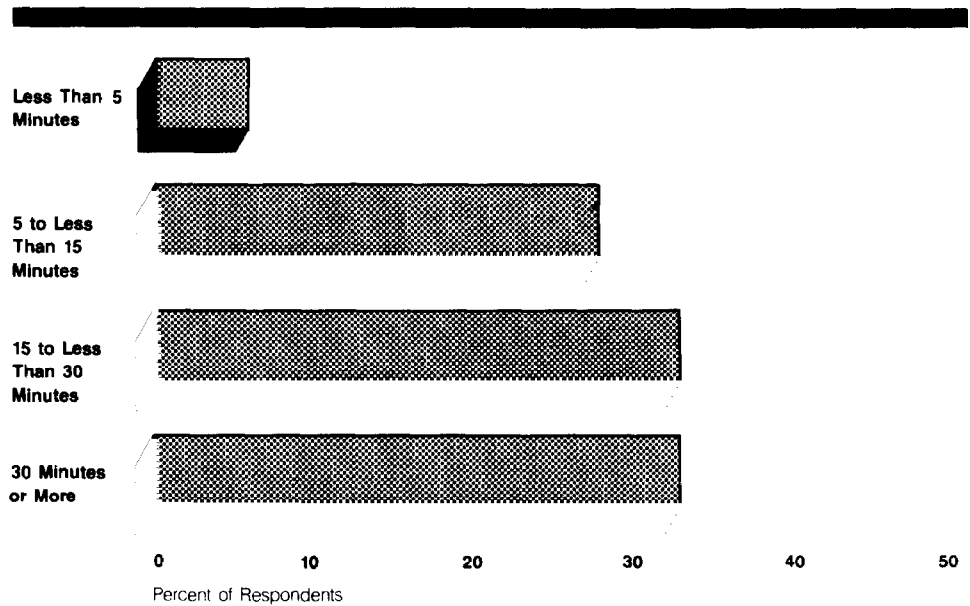
First, we asked the clients whether the waiting area contained enough chairs to accommodate everyone waiting. Seven percent said there were not enough chairs. According to time-of-arrival data we collected, 60

¹A population of 25,000 was used to distinguish between urban and rural areas.

percent of the people who visited an SSA office arrived before 11 a.m., including 13 percent who arrived before the offices opened at 9 a.m.

Long lines frequently are mentioned as an example of deterioration in SSA service. Accordingly, we asked clients how long they had to wait for service. Roughly a third were served in less than 15 minutes, but about another third waited 30 minutes or more. Waiting times are shown in figure 3.10.

Figure 3.10: Respondents' Estimates of Amount of Time Waited at an SSA Field Office Before Being Served



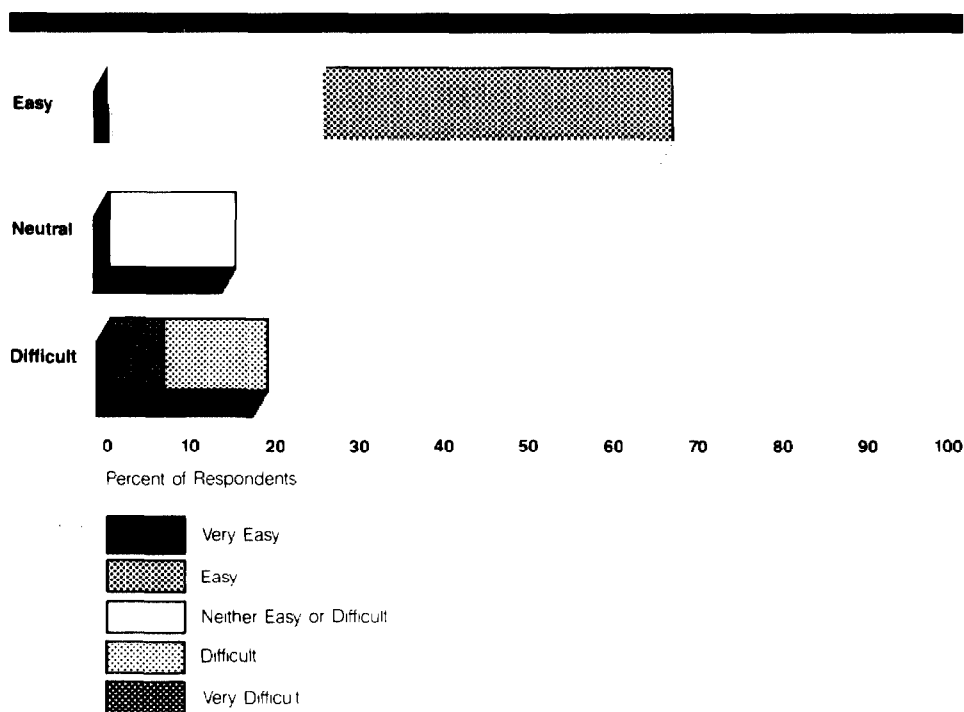
We also asked those who visited whether the length of their wait was what they expected. About half said it was; 21 percent said it was longer than expected; for 30 percent, it was shorter.

Because clients commonly must discuss income, home environment, medical condition, and other personal information in SSA offices, we asked our respondents if they had enough privacy to discuss their business. Eighty-eight percent said they had enough or more than enough; 12 percent contended they had less than enough.

Mail to Clients

Most clients who received mail from SSA considered it to be generally easy to very easy to understand; about 18 percent viewed it as generally or very difficult to understand. How SSA clients rated the understandability of SSA mail is shown in figure 3.11.

Figure 3.11: Respondents' Opinions About the Understandability of SSA Mail



Although most thought SSA mail understandable, about 50 percent of those who received such mail contacted SSA to determine its meaning.

We briefly analyzed a variety of SSA mail and found most of it—pamphlets, brochures, etc.—fairly easy to understand. But the readability of SSA notices, which provide information on changes in benefit amount and reasons for entitlement, has been a long-standing problem. According to field office managers we interviewed, the poor readability of notices causes additional walk-in traffic. One district manager, saying SSA notices have been a well known problem, asserted that they are too long and complicated for the public to understand.

None of our respondents specifically complimented the readability of the notices, and 14 commented negatively, e.g.:

“... The Notices we receive from the SSA ... are sometimes mind boggling. The second or third paragraph of some of these ‘cryptograms’ (for want of a better word) sometimes completely negate what was laboriously ‘spelled out’ in the first paragraph ...”

“... I have visited the Social Security office many, many times to try to get all these overpayment situations taken care of. Sometimes the workers have gotten smart with me but I don’t think I deserve that kind of treatment just because I don’t understand what is happening with this stack of notices I have gotten.”

“... I visited the office for help in clarifying obfuscated, tenebrific, tautologic, opaque government prose in some of Social Security’s written replies to simple questions.”

In an April 1984 Bulletin, SSA’s Acting Commissioner included the issuance of clear notices among eight objectives aimed at providing a high level of service to the public. SSA established the Issue Clear Notices Project, which was designed to study notice problems and develop short- and long-term solutions.

Because notice clarity constitutes a significant problem, in a previous study we took a more in-depth look into SSA plans for improving it. On August 29, 1985, we concluded in a report to the SSA Acting Commissioner that the project had made reasonable progress and was likely to improve SSA notices. The report recommended that SSA obtain periodic feedback from notice recipients and use it to evaluate SSA progress in improving and maintaining notice clarity.

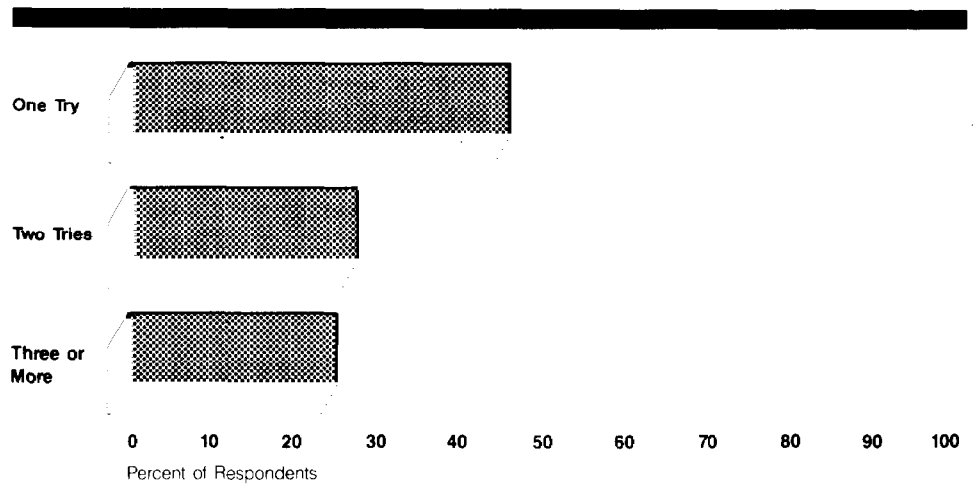
Phone Service

About 47 percent of clients who reached SSA by phone got through on the first try, 28 percent had to call twice before they got through, and 25 percent had to call 3 or more times (see figure 3.12). Callers who made multiple attempts experienced one or more of the following situations on at least one occasion:

- No one answered—about 22 percent,
- Received a busy signal—about 60 percent,
- Were put on hold and eventually hung up after waiting for service—about 17 percent, or
- Were disconnected after reaching SSA—about 8 percent.

(These percentages add up to more than 100 because some respondents had more than one experience in reaching SSA by phone.)

Figure 3.12: Number of Tries It Took Clients to Reach SSA by Phone



A sampling of respondents' narrative comments follows:

"When you phone they put you on hold for 10-15 minutes till you hang up."

"Usually when contacting Social Security by phone, I am told I need to visit the office . . ."

"Went back to work full time. Wanted to withdraw from Social Security payments. Social Security could not find words to explain over the phone."

"Main complaint was could not talk to the same person when you would call back. Must explain same thing to a different person each time you call."

Most field office managers we interviewed concurred that walk-in traffic increases when the public is unable to reach SSA by phone. For example, a February 1982 study in SSA's Philadelphia Region showed that about 15 percent of those surveyed elected to visit field offices because SSA phones were always busy.

Effective phone service is an important element of SSA service. For this reason, we have underway a separate evaluation of SSA telephone service.

Respondents' Narrative Comments

Comments on dealing with SSA that our respondents added to our questionnaires centered around such concerns as: eligibility decisions, erroneous payments, lengthy processing of disability claims, and insufficient benefits for the elderly.

Of 542 narrative comments about SSA from the September and control samples, 320 were negative. The comments covered the following issues:

- Eligibility and appeals (63),
- Amount, timeliness, and accuracy of benefit (53),
- Telephone and written communications (34),
- Timeliness of processing disability claims (18),
- More than one of the above (39), and
- Other than above (113).

The concerns expressed by questionnaire respondents closely parallel some of the issues that compel clients to contact SSA or the Congress. SSA's Office of Governmental Affairs maintains statistics on public inquiries received by SSA or through congressional channels. The volume of such inquiries by subject for calendar year 1984 is shown in table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Public Inquiries to SSA (1984)

Subject	Congressional	Direct to SSA	Total
Disability Insurance	18,627	14,042	32,669
OASDI	8,936	13,028	21,964
Hearings and appeals	19,444	12,988	32,432
SSI	3,918	5,576	9,494
Other	19,277	43,412	62,689
Total	70,202	89,046	159,248
Percent of total	44	56	

These totals do not include congressional inquiries received and handled by SSA field components, which processed more than 57,000 congressional inquiries from July through September of 1984. Between fiscal years 1978 and 1983, field components handled about 983,000 congressional inquiries.

The nature of these 1984 inquiries to the Congress and SSA can be summed up as follows:

- Disability Insurance—Questions about claims at the initial, postentitlement, and reconsideration levels and about continuing disability reviews accounted for more than 70 percent of the disability inquiries. Delay in processing claims also was an issue.
- OASDI—General and postentitlement questions prompted most inquiries. Questions about the retirement test, initial claims, and nonreceipt of checks were the subject of other inquiries.

-
- SSI—The nature of inquiries about this program paralleled those for Disability Insurance.
 - Other—Health insurance, individual earnings records, issuance of Social Security numbers, and individual requests to withdraw from Social Security coverage prompted many inquiries.

SSA Monitoring of Client Perceptions Needed

There have been recent expressions of concern from the Congress, SSA personnel, and clients that the quality of SSA service may be declining. Administration proposals to cut SSA staff by 17,000 full-time equivalent positions and the belief that SSA might close a large number of field offices increased these concerns and led to congressional hearings on the subject on April 3, 1985. While the agency denies that service has deteriorated, it recognizes the need to survey client attitudes to measure how well it is performing its important and highly visible public service role. To date, SSA has not developed a uniform, systematic way to evaluate client satisfaction.

Our questionnaire results provide useful data for SSA analysis. SSA can design a similar data collection instrument to obtain periodically client opinions of SSA service and to measure changes in perception of service over time. Such a tracking system would help the agency identify and respond to problem areas and perceived changes in service levels.

In this chapter, we cover the above matters in some detail, present our conclusions and recommendations, and note comments by HHS on our draft report.

Is SSA Service Deteriorating?

Focusing on public concerns over a possible decline in SSA service, the Senate Special Committee on Aging held hearings in November 1983. The following quotations from testimony illustrate some of the opinions expressed at that occasion:

“... there has been a deterioration in public service that I have witnessed personally in this agency.”—the Deputy Commissioner for Operations.

“... Essentially, the deterioration of public service in Social Security is the erosion of the rights of the individual citizens . . .”—a claims representative, appearing on behalf of a union.

“... I have worked for this Administration for 10 years and I have seen the decline of public service . . .”—another claims representative, who was a union president.

With respect to proposed SSA staffing cuts, a representative of the American Association of Retired Persons testified on April 3, 1985, before the Social Security Subcommittee, House Ways and Means Committee:

“... SSA staff levels have been steadily reduced every year since 1977. During this period, the quality of SSA service has suffered a steady deterioration...”

At this 1985 hearing and others, SSA has steadfastly held that SSA service is not declining—and will not decline if staff is cut by 17,000.

Client Satisfaction a Recognized Indicator of Agency Performance

SSA has recognized that its clients' viewpoints are important indicators of its performance and that there is a need to survey them to measure how well the agency is performing its public service role. In 1975, SSA considered but rejected a program that would gather data on consumer attitudes by geographic region, program, and type of transaction and identify reasons for public dissatisfaction. In February 1978, after what seemed to be increasing criticism of its service, SSA's Acting Commissioner ordered an assessment to identify any problems. The report on the assessment noted that SSA measured speed and accuracy in a variety of ways, but not client satisfaction. That SSA should expedite implementation of a nationwide client satisfaction survey was the report's recommendation.

In April 1978, the Acting Commissioner issued an executive summary entitled “A Comprehensive Mechanism of Measuring Clients' Perceptions of the Quality of Social Security Service.” An uncontested conclusion, it said, was that SSA had no mechanism to provide a continuing, uniform, objective, and comprehensive assessment of how the public felt it was being served when it needed to contact SSA. According to SSA officials, the initiative was not implemented because of budgetary limitations.

SSA Region III in 1982 surveyed public perception at field offices in the region. Other efforts have been made, primarily at the regional and field office levels, through informal surveys of beneficiaries. But basically, prior SSA assessments of public opinion have been done on an ad hoc basis. No uniform, systematic approach has been taken.

In 1984, SSA's Acting Deputy Commissioner for Management and Assessment commented on our draft questionnaire as follows:

“It is important for us to be aware of the public's perception of the quality of service we in SSA provide. Your questionnaire should provide SSA with useful information on our contacts with the public. In view of the Commissioner's emphasis on renewing our commitment to traditional SSA goals and

administrative responsibilities, it is appropriate to conduct an inquiry of this type.”

At the 1985 congressional hearings (discussed in the next section), the Acting Commissioner testified that measuring service quality was difficult, but cited efforts that SSA made.

Despite recognizing the importance of the clients’ viewpoints as indicators of performance, SSA has not developed a uniform and systematic approach to collecting client perceptions of service.

Congressional, Public Interest Renewed by 1986 Budget Proposal

The President’s fiscal year 1986 budget request announced SSA staff reductions of 17,000 through fiscal year 1990. According to SSA, these reductions can be accomplished through attrition rather than a reduction in force, with no adverse effect on service to the public. SSA says its Systems Modernization Plan will be instrumental in providing faster and more efficient service to the public.

In the wake of this budget proposal, the Subcommittee on Social Security, House Committee on Ways and Means, held hearings on April 3, 1985. The Subcommittee Chairman indicated that this was the first of what will be an extensive series of oversight hearings into the quality of SSA service to its clients.

At the April 3rd hearings, the Subcommittee expressed concerns as to whether SSA could make the cutbacks without significant deterioration of public service. A spokesman for the American Association of Retired Persons, which represents 18 million older Americans, also voiced apprehension. He testified that many beneficiaries already drive long distances to get to their local SSA office. When they get there, they encounter long lines, long waiting periods, and insufficient staff.

This charge of insufficient staff may arise to some extent from a recent situation concerning claims representatives, whose work is crucial to SSA’s dealings with its clients. Between fiscal years 1982 and 1984, their numbers fell from 14,154 to 13,699. Formerly, SSA filled vacancies in these positions with new hires, who passed a federal exam. Now, recruits for the claims representative position usually come from SSA’s clerical and technical staff. As a result, some field offices have experienced a shortage of clerical staff. On occasion, clients must wait for service while claims representatives complete clerical work formerly handled by clerical staff.

SSA's plans to trim 17,000 staff are further complicated by indications that SSA will be managing larger caseloads. Between 1982 and 1984, numbers of OASDI and SSI clients increased by more than 800,000—from 39.5 to 40.3 million. By 1990, because of increased birth rates and longer life expectancies, SSA expects the number of OASDI beneficiaries to increase by another 11 percent.

Survey Data Seen Useful to SSA

SSA could use the data in this report as a baseline to measure any change in client attitudes toward overall SSA service and such specific aspects as employee courtesy. For example, our geographic analysis of overall ratings of service by SSA region (see p. 34) showed a range from a low of 70 percent of clients perceiving SSA service as good to very good in Region VI to a high of 84 percent of such clients in Region III. Obtaining and analyzing such information is a useful first step in improving SSA service. Through our questionnaire, we also obtained measurable data on client views on visiting and phoning SSA. Such data could indicate whether staff reductions are affecting service.

The questionnaire results also provided insight into the method of contact people would prefer if they needed future assistance from SSA. For example, of clients who responded, more than 51 percent identified the telephone as a first preference for future contact with SSA, while 45 percent preferred face-to-face contact first. Phone preference ranged from a low of 36 percent in SSA Region II to a high of 64 percent in SSA Region X. Interestingly, 16 percent of the clients did not know SSA handled Social Security business over the phone. Of those who did, 24 percent were unaware that almost all Social Security business can be handled by phone. Information of this nature, tracked over time, could prove useful in determining whether SSA is well organized in terms of telephone and field office support and is adequately informing the public about using the telephone to conduct Social Security business.

Lastly, SSA could modify the questionnaire to include other service features. The client could be asked to estimate the distance and time to reach a field office for his or her most recent visit in comparison to earlier visits. Such information was compiled earlier in a survey of 1,502 people aged 55 and over sponsored by the American Association of Retired Persons and the National Retired Teachers Association. Their November 1981 report noted that about one-third of the 870 respondents who visited a field office got there in less than 15 minutes, and more than 8 of every 10 traveled less than 20 miles to reach the office.

Such data could prove important to SSA in assessing the impact that field office closings would have on public perceptions of SSA service.

During testimony on April 3, 1985, before the Subcommittee on Social Security, House Committee on Ways and Means, we voiced concern about the possible adverse impact on SSA service of planned staff cuts and potential office closings. We indicated that, in addition to routinely tracking payment accuracy and timeliness of claims processing, SSA should regularly measure clients' satisfaction. Such a survey would give SSA useful data on any changes in quality of service occurring over the remaining 5-year life of the staff reduction plan.

Conclusions

As a highly visible, important government agency, SSA seeks to ensure that its clients receive dignified, sensitive, and courteous help with their concerns. Although in the past, SSA has recognized the need to periodically assess client satisfaction with its service, it has not conducted agency-wide, systematic, ongoing evaluations of client's perceptions of its service.

The administration's fiscal year 1986 budget calls for significant staff reductions. SSA believes such reductions can be achieved through its Systems Modernization Plan and other initiatives without damage to service. The Congress is interested in how SSA carries out the administration's budget reduction plans, seeking assurances that the level of service provided to the elderly and disabled will not be seriously reduced.

We believe that, by properly assessing public satisfaction, SSA can give the Congress feedback about the effects of any budget cutbacks. The data developed from our questionnaire establish a base line from which SSA could evaluate its service and assess any impact of staff reductions. Periodic assessment of public opinion can help SSA to identify any problem areas and declining service levels.

SSA will incur increased costs in periodically measuring client satisfaction. Given the magnitude and importance of SSA programs, however, those costs would appear to be justified.

Recommendation to the Secretary of HHS

We recommend that the Secretary of HHS direct the Commissioner of Social Security to conduct periodic surveys of client satisfaction with the quality of SSA service and advise the Congress of the results.

Agency Comments

In commenting on a draft of this report, HHS agreed that periodic surveys of client perceptions of the quality of SSA service should be conducted and the results reported to the Congress. HHS said SSA has begun developing a proposal for measuring its performance in providing service.

GAO Survey Questionnaire



□ □ □ □ □
(1-5)

U.S. GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE STUDY OF HOW WELL SOCIAL SECURITY SERVES THE PUBLIC

INSTRUCTIONS

Please answer the following questions by checking a box or writing in a few words, and return this questionnaire in the enclosed, postage paid envelope. It should take only 10 or 15 minutes to finish. If you have trouble reading or filling out this questionnaire you may have a relative or friend help you. The answers you give, however, should be based on your feelings and opinions, and refer to your experience with Social Security.

This form asks for information about visits and telephone calls you've made to Social Security, and about mail you've received from Social Security. It also asks for your opinion about the way Social Security has served you. There are instructions next to some answers to help you fill it out quickly. These tell you to skip over other questions that won't apply to you.

Your answers will be kept confidential. This survey is being done by the U.S. General Accounting Office, an agency that is not connected with the Social Security Administration. We will not tell Social Security how you personally answered any question, and what you write will not affect your eligibility for, or benefits from any government program. If you have any questions about this questionnaire, please call Dan O'Hara collect at (215) 597-4330. He will be happy to help you.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Return questionnaire in the postage paid envelope to:

Dan O'Hara
U.S. General Accounting Office
434 Walnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19106

PART I
MAIL TO AND FROM SOCIAL SECURITY

1. Have you ever written to Social Security?
(Check one.) (6)
 1. Yes → (Continue.)
 2. No → (Skip to Question 3.)

2. If you have written to Social Security, about how many times in all have you written? (Check one.) (7)
 1. 1 time
 2. 2 times
 3. 3 times
 4. More than 3 times

3. Often Social Security contacts people by mail to give or ask for information. Have you ever received mail, other than a benefit check, itself, from Social Security? (Check one.) (8)
 1. Yes → (Continue.)
 2. No → (Skip to Question 8.)

4. In general, is the mail you've received from Social Security written in a language that you can read? (Check one.) (9)
 1. Yes
 2. No

5. In general, how easy or difficult to understand is the mail you've received from Social Security? (Check one.) (10)
 1. Very easy to understand
 2. Generally easy to understand
 3. Neither easy nor difficult to understand
 4. Generally difficult to understand
 5. Very difficult to understand

6. Have you ever contacted, or thought about contacting Social Security to find out what the mail you'd received from them meant? (Check one.) (11)
 1. Yes, I've contacted them
 2. Yes, I've thought about it, but haven't contacted them
 3. No, I haven't contacted, or thought about contacting them

Appendix I
GAO Survey Questionnaire

7. Have you ever contacted, or thought about contacting either family or friends to ask them what the mail you'd received from Social Security meant? (Check one.) (12)

- 1. Yes, I've contacted them
- 2. Yes, I've thought about it, but haven't contacted them
- 3. No, I haven't contacted, or thought about contacting them

PART II
VISITS TO THE SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE

8. Have you ever visited a Social Security office? (Check one.) (13)

- 1. Yes → (Continue.)
- 2. No → (Skip to Question 22.)

9. About how many times in all have you visited a Social Security office? (Check one.) (14)

- 1. 1 time
- 2. 2 times
- 3. 3 times
- 4. More than 3 times

QUESTIONS 10 THROUGH 21 ARE ABOUT YOUR LAST VISIT TO THE SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE. PLEASE ANSWER THEM ABOUT THAT VISIT ONLY. IF YOU'VE NEVER VISITED A SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE, **SKIP TO QUESTION 22.**

10. About how long ago did you last visit the Social Security office? (Check one.) (15)

- 1. Within the last 3 months
- 2. At least 3 but less than 6 months ago
- 3. At least 6 but less than 9 months ago
- 4. At least 9 but less than 12 months ago
- 5. 12 months ago or more

**Appendix I
GAO Survey Questionnaire**

11. Listed below are several reasons why a person might visit the Social Security office. Indicate whether or not your last visit had something to do with each. (Check one box for each row.)

	Yes	No	
	1	2	
1. You filed a claim for retirement benefits			(16)
2. You filed a claim for disability benefits			(17)
3. You filed a claim for survivors benefits			(18)
4. You filed a claim for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits			(19)
5. You asked for help concerning Medicare			(20)
6. You asked about a notice or other mail you'd gotten from Social Security			(21)
7. You notified Social Security of a name or address change			(22)
8. Social Security asked you to contact them			(23)
9. You visited the office for some other reason (Please specify.) _____ _____ _____ _____			(24)

Appendix I
GAO Survey Questionnaire

12. About what time did you get to the Social Security office that day? *(Check one.)* (25)

- 1. Before 9 AM/before it opened
- 2. 9 AM to before 11 AM
- 3. 11 AM to before 1 PM
- 4. 1 PM to before 3 PM
- 5. 3 PM to before 5 PM
- 6. At 5 PM or later

13. We would like to know how crowded or empty the Social Security office waiting area was. Was there room for everyone to sit in a chair during most of the time you were there? *(Check one.)* (26)

- 1. Yes
- 2. No

14. About how much time did you spend waiting to be helped at the Social Security office that day? *(Check one.)* (27)

- 1. Less than 5 minutes
- 2. 5 to less than 15 minutes
- 3. 15 to less than 30 minutes
- 4. 30 minutes or more

15. Considering the reason for your visit and the number of people there waiting to be helped, was your wait longer than, about as long as, or shorter than you expected? *(Check one.)* (28)

- 1. Longer than expected
- 2. About as long as expected
- 3. Shorter than expected

16. How much privacy did you have at the Social Security office to talk about your business? Did you have more than, about as much as, or less than you needed? *(Check one.)* (29)

- 1. Had more privacy than needed
- 2. Had about as much privacy as needed
- 3. Had less privacy than needed

17. In general, how courteous or discourteous were Social Security employees to you during your last visit? *(Check one.)* (30)

- 1. Very courteous
- 2. Generally courteous
- 3. Neither courteous nor discourteous
- 4. Generally discourteous
- 5. Very discourteous

Appendix I
GAO Survey Questionnaire

18. How clearly or unclearly did they explain the rules or program that applied to you? (Check one.) (31)

- 1. Clearly
- 2. Somewhat clearly
- 3. Unclearly

19. Think about the reason for your last visit to the Social Security office. Do you think Social Security has done a very good, good, fair, poor or very poor job handling this matter so far? (Check one.) (32)

- 1. Very good job
- 2. Good job
- 3. Fair job
- 4. Poor job
- 5. Very poor job

20. Once again, think about the reason for your last visit. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the amount of time it has taken Social Security, so far, to take care of this matter? (Check one.) (33)

- 1. Very satisfied
- 2. Generally satisfied
- 3. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 4. Generally dissatisfied
- 5. Very dissatisfied

21. Altogether, about how long were you at the Social Security office that day? (Check one.) (34)

- 1. Less than 15 minutes
- 2. At least 15 but less than 30 minutes
- 3. At least 30 minutes but less than 1 hour
- 4. At least 1 but less than 1-1/2 hours
- 5. At least 1-1/2 but less than 2 hours
- 6. 2 hours or more

22. Has anyone ever visited the Social Security office for you? (Check one.) (35)

- 1. Yes
- 2. No

PART III
TELEPHONING SOCIAL SECURITY

23. Do you know that Social Security business can be taken care of over the telephone? (Check one.) (36)

- 1. Yes → (Continue.)
- 2. No → (Skip to Question 25.)

24. Do you know that almost all Social Security business can be taken care of over the telephone? (Check one.) (37)

- 1. Yes
- 2. No

25. Have you ever reached or tried to contact Social Security by telephone? (Check one.) (38)

- 1. Yes, I've reached them by phone } (Continue.)
- 2. Yes, I've tried to contact them by phone, but never reached them } (Skip to Question 36.)
- 3. No, I've never reached or tried to contact them by phone }

26. About how many times in all have you reached Social Security by telephone? (Check one.) (39)

- 1. 1 time
- 2. 2 times
- 3. 3 times
- 4. More than 3 times

QUESTIONS 27 THROUGH 35 ARE ABOUT THE LAST TIME YOU REACHED SOCIAL SECURITY BY TELEPHONE. PLEASE ANSWER THEM ABOUT THAT PHONE CALL ONLY. IF YOU'VE NEVER REACHED SOCIAL SECURITY BY PHONE, SKIP TO QUESTION 36.

27. About how long ago did you last reach Social Security by telephone? (Check one.) (40)

- 1. Within the last 3 months
- 2. At least 3 but less than 6 months ago
- 3. At least 6 but less than 9 months ago
- 4. At least 9 but less than 12 months ago
- 5. 12 months ago or more

**Appendix I
GAO Survey Questionnaire**

28. The last time you reached Social Security by phone, about how many times did you try before you got through?
(Check one.) (41)

- 1. 1 time, got through on the first try
- 2. 2 times
- 3. 3 times
- 4. More than 3 times

29. Indicate whether or not each of the following things happened to you the last time you reached Social Security by phone. (Check one box for each row.)

	Yes	No	
	1	2	
1. Before you got through, you hung up because no one answered			(42)
2. Before you got through, you hung up because you got a busy signal			(43)
3. Once you got through, you were put on hold			(44)
4. Once you got through, you were put on hold and you hung up while you were waiting			(45)
5. Once you got through, you were disconnected			(46)

**Appendix I
GAO Survey Questionnaire**

30. Listed below are several reasons why a person might telephone the Social Security office. Indicate whether or not your last phone call had something to do with each. (Check one box for each row.)

	Yes	No	
	1	2	
1. You filed a claim for retirement benefits			(47)
2. You filed a claim for disability benefits			(48)
3. You filed a claim for survivors benefits			(49)
4. You filed a claim for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits			(50)
5. You asked for help concerning Medicare			(51)
6. You asked about a notice or other mail you'd gotten from Social Security			(52)
7. You notified Social Security of a name or address change			(53)
8. Social Security asked you to contact them			(54)
9. You telephoned Social Security for some other reason (Please specify.) _____ _____ _____ _____			(55)

Appendix I
GAO Survey Questionnaire

31. In general, how courteous or discourteous were Social Security employees to you, during this call? (Check one.) (56)

- 1. Very courteous
- 2. Generally courteous
- 3. Neither courteous nor discourteous
- 4. Generally discourteous
- 5. Very discourteous

32. How clearly or unclearly did they explain the rules or program that applied to you? (Check one.) (57)

- 1. Clearly
- 2. Somewhat clearly
- 3. Unclearly

33. Think about the reason why you last reached Social Security by phone. Have they done a very good, good, fair, poor or very poor job handling this matter so far? (Check one.) (58)

- 1. Very good job
- 2. Good job
- 3. Fair job
- 4. Poor job
- 5. Very poor job

34. Once again, think about the reason why you last reached Social Security by phone. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the amount of time it has taken them, so far, to take care of this matter? (Check one.) (59)

- 1. Very satisfied
- 2. Generally satisfied
- 3. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- 4. Generally dissatisfied
- 5. Very dissatisfied

35. About how long (including the time you waited, if any) did this phone call last? (Check one.) (60)

- 1. Less than 3 minutes
- 2. At least 3 but less than 10 minutes
- 3. At least 10 but less than 20 minutes
- 4. 20 minutes or more

36. Has anyone ever telephoned Social Security for you? (Check one.) (61)

- 1. Yes
- 2. No

**Appendix I
GAO Survey Questionnaire**

**PART IV
SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS**

37. Listed below are several kinds of Social Security benefits. Indicate whether or not you are currently receiving each. *(Check one box for each row.)*

Receiving:	Yes	No	
	1	2	
1. Old age retirement benefits			(62)
2. Disability retirement benefits			(63)
3. Survivors benefits			(64)
4. Supplemental Security Income (SSI)			(65)

IF YOU ARE CURRENTLY RECEIVING SOCIAL SECURITY RETIREMENT, DISABILITY, SURVIVORS OR SSI BENEFITS, ANSWER QUESTIONS 38 THROUGH 40. IF YOU ARE NOT, SKIP TO QUESTION 41.

38. Do you usually get your benefit check on time?
(Check one.) (66)

1. Yes
2. No

39. Have you ever contacted, or thought about contacting Social Security because your check did not come on time? *(Check one.)* (67)

1. Yes, I've contacted them
2. Yes, I've thought about it, but haven't contacted them
3. No, I haven't contacted or thought about contacting them

40. Have you ever asked, or thought about asking Social Security if the amount of your benefit is correct? *(Check one.)* (68)

1. Yes, I've asked them
2. Yes, I've thought about it, but haven't asked them
3. No, I've never asked or thought about asking them

(GO ON TO THE LAST PAGE.) →

PART V
OVERALL QUALITY OF SOCIAL SECURITY'S SERVICE

41. Overall, how would you rate the service that Social Security has given you? *(Check one.)* (69)

- 1. Very good
- 2. Good
- 3. Fair
- 4. Poor
- 5. Very poor

42. How would you rate Social Security's service in comparison to the service you get from other Federal, State and local government agencies? Is Social Security's service better, about as good as, or worse? *(Check one.)* (70)

- 1. Social Security much better than others
- 2. Social Security somewhat better than others
- 3. Social Security is about as good as others
- 4. Social Security somewhat worse than others
- 5. Social Security much worse than others
- 6. Can't say, have had no contact with other government agencies

43. If you must contact Social Security in the future, would your first preference be to write, telephone, or visit? *(Check one.)* (71)

- 1. Write
- 2. Telephone
- 3. Visit

1 (80)

44. Thank you for your cooperation. We appreciate your help. If you have any comments about how Social Security has served you please write them in the space below.

Responses to GAO Questionnaire (Overall, by Program, and by Status)

Numerals are percentages

Question	Overall	By program ^a		By status ^a	
		OASDI	SSI	Disabled	Nondisabled
Part I: Mail to and from Social Security					
1. Have you ever written to SS?					
Yes (continue)	27	29	21	33	29
No (skip to Q 3)	73	71	79	67	71
2. If you have written to SS, about how many times in all have you written?					
1 time	33	35	22	36	32
2 times	25	25	29	18	29
3 times	16	16	15	14	17
More than 3 times	26	25	33	32	23
3. Often SS contacts people by mail to give or ask for information. Have you ever received mail, other than a benefit check itself, from SS?					
Yes (continue)	76	75	80	79	75
No (skip to Q 8)	24	25	20	21	25
4. In general, is the mail you've received from SS written in a language that you can read?					
Yes	88	88	88	85	88
No	12	12	12	15	12
5. In general, how easy or difficult to understand is the mail you've received from SS?					
Very easy to understand	25	25	25	25	24
Generally easy to understand	42	43	38	38	44
Neither easy nor difficult to understand	15	14	16	17	14
Generally difficult to understand	12	12	14	15	11
Very difficult to understand	6	6	7	6	7
6. Have you ever contacted, or thought about contacting SS to find out what the mail you'd received from them meant?					
Yes, I've contacted them	49	46	58	58	46
Yes, I've thought about it, but haven't contacted them	8	8	8	10	7
No, I haven't contacted, or thought about contacting them	43	46	34	33	47
7. Have you ever contacted, or thought about contacting either family or friends to ask them what the mail you'd received from SS meant?					
Yes, I've contacted them	32	28	45	31	29
Yes, I've thought about it, but haven't contacted them	6	5	6	6	6
No, I haven't contacted, or thought about contacting them	62	66	49	63	65

**Appendix II
Responses to GAO Questionnaire
(Overall, by Program, and by Status)**

Question	Overall	By program ^a		By status ^a						
		OASDI	SSI	Disabled	Nondisabled					
Part II: Visits to the Social Security Office										
8. Have you ever visited an SS office?										
Yes (continue)	91	91	91	91	90					
No (skip to Q 22)	9	9	9	9	10					
9. About how many times in all have you visited an SS office?										
1 time	15	17	9	8	16					
2 times	22	24	15	21	23					
3 times	21	22	18	18	25					
More than 3 times	43	38	58	53	36					
10. About how long ago did you last visit the SS office?										
Within the last 3 months	39	36	51	30	29					
At least 3 but less than 6 months ago	18	17	20	12	16					
At least 6 but less than 9 months ago	8	8	8	10	10					
At least 9 but less than 12 months ago	6	6	5	14	4					
12 months ago or more	29	33	16	34	41					
11. Listed below are several reasons why a person might visit the SS office. Indicate whether or not your last visit had something to do with each.										
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No				
You filed a claim for retirement benefits	26	74	32	68	8	92	7	93	36	64
You filed a claim for disability benefits	23	77	20	80	31	69	46	54	8	92
You filed a claim for survivors benefits	16	84	19	81	6	94	9	91	25	75
You filed a claim for SSI benefits	19	81	8	92	53	47	12	88	5	95
You asked for help concerning Medicare	13	87	11	89	19	81	12	88	10	90
You asked about a notice or other mail you'd gotten from SS	30	70	30	70	30	70	39	61	31	69
You notified SS of a name or address change	22	78	21	79	28	72	26	74	23	78
SS asked you to contact them	27	73	22	78	43	57	36	65	19	81
You visited the office for some other reason	20	80	20	80	21	79	24	76	19	81
12. About what time did you get to the SS office that day?										
Before 9 a.m./before it opened	13		13		13		20		10	
9 a.m. to before 11 a.m.	47		46		51		38		51	
11 a.m. to before 1 p.m.	15		15		14		16		14	
1 p.m. to before 3 p.m.	19		20		16		21		19	
3 p.m. to before 5 p.m.	6		6		6		6		7	
At 5 p.m. or later	0		0		0		1		0	

**Appendix II
Responses to GAO Questionnaire
(Overall, by Program, and by Status)**

Question	Overall	By program ^a		By status ^a	
		OASDI	SSI	Disabled	Nondisabled
13. We would like to know how crowded or empty the SS office waiting area was. Was there room for everyone to sit in a chair during most of the time you were there?					
Yes	93	94	91	91	95
No	7	6	9	9	5
14. About how much time did you spend waiting to be helped at the SS office that day?					
Less than 5 minutes	6	6	6	5	7
5 to less than 15 minutes	28	30	23	21	34
5 to less than 15 minutes	28	30	23	21	34
15 to less than 30 minutes	33	33	31	28	37
30 minutes or more	33	30	40	46	22
15. Considering the reason for your visit and the number of people there waiting to be helped, was your wait longer than, about as long as, or shorter than you expected?					
Longer than expected	21	20	26	36	14
About as long as expected	49	49	48	43	53
Shorter than expected	30	31	26	21	34
16. How much privacy did you have at the SS office to talk about your business? Did you have more than, about as much as, or less than you needed?					
Had more privacy than needed	9	9	10	7	10
Had about as much privacy as needed	79	81	75	71	84
Had less privacy than needed	12	11	15	23	6
17. In general, how courteous or discourteous were SS employees to you during your last visit?					
Very courteous	57	59	50	54	58
Generally courteous	32	31	36	29	34
Neither courteous nor discourteous	7	7	9	11	5
Generally discourteous	2	1	4	2	1
Very discourteous	2	2	1	3	2
18. How clearly or unclearly did they explain the rules or program that applied to you?					
Clearly	72	71	72	63	73
Somewhat clearly	22	22	22	25	21
Unclearly	6	7	6	12	5

**Appendix II
Responses to GAO Questionnaire
(Overall, by Program, and by Status)**

Question	Overall	By program ^a		By status ^a	
		OASDI	SSI	Disabled	Nondisabled
19. Think about the reason for your last visit to the SS office. Do you think SS has done a very good, good, fair, poor or very poor job handling this matter so far?					
Very good job	38	39	32	29	42
Good job	35	35	34	31	37
Fair job	15	14	20	23	11
Poor job	7	7	8	7	7
Very poor job	5	5	6	9	4
20. Once again, think about the reason for your last visit. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the amount of time it has taken SS, so far, to take care of this matter?					
Very satisfied	43	45	38	34	49
Generally satisfied	35	35	34	35	35
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	8	8	9	14	6
Generally dissatisfied	6	5	9	7	5
Very dissatisfied	8	7	10	11	6
21. Altogether, about how long were you at the SS office that day?					
Less than 15 minutes	9	10	8	12	10
At least 15 but less than 30 minutes	29	30	25	21	35
At least 30 minutes but less than an hour	33	34	30	30	35
At least 1 but less than 1-1/2 hours	15	14	19	16	11
At least 1-1/2 but less than 2 hours	6	6	7	11	5
2 hours or more	8	6	11	11	5
22. Has anyone ever visited the SS office for you?					
Yes	14	11	26	17	9
No	86	89	74	83	91
Part III: Telephoning Social Security					
23. Do you know that SS business can be taken care of over the telephone?					
Yes (continue)	84	85	81	88	86
No (skip to Q 25)	16	15	19	12	14
24. Do you know that almost all SS business can be taken care of over the telephone?					
Yes	76	76	77	72	79
No	24	24	23	28	21
25. Have you ever reached or tried to contact SS by telephone?					
Yes, I've reached them by phone (continue)	72	71	76	81	68
Yes, I've tried to contact them by phone, but never reached them (skip to Q 36)	4	4	3	4	5
No, I've never reached or tried to contact them by phone (skip to Q 36)	24	25	21	16	27

**Appendix II
Responses to GAO Questionnaire
(Overall, by Program, and by Status)**

Question	Overall	By program ^a		By status ^a		
		OASDI	SSI	Disabled	Nondisabled	
26. About how many times in all have you reached SS by telephone?						
1 time	15	16	12	11	14	
2 times	21	21	21	17	20	
3 times	20	21	17	20	22	
More than 3 times	44	42	50	52	44	
27. About how long ago did you last reach SS by telephone?						
Within the last 3 months	48	43	61	42	38	
At least 3 but less than 6 months ago	20	21	18	19	23	
At least 6 but less than 9 months ago	8	9	7	11	8	
At least 9 but less than 12 months ago	5	5	6	8	4	
12 months ago or more	19	22	8	21	26	
28. The last time you reached SS by phone, about how many times did you try before you got through?						
1 time, got through on the first try	47	48	44	43	49	
2 times	28	27	29	26	29	
3 times	11	11	13	13	10	
More than 3 times	14	14	14	19	13	
29. Indicate whether or not each of the following things happened to you the last time you reached SS by phone.						
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Before you got through, you hung up because no one answered	12	88	11	89	14	86
Before you got through, you hung up because you got a busy signal	35	65	33	67	40	60
Once you got through, you were put on hold	46	54	45	55	49	51
Once you got through, you were put on hold and you hung up while you were waiting	10	90	10	90	12	88
Once you got through, you were disconnected	5	95	5	95	7	93
30. Listed below are several reasons why a person might telephone the SS office. Indicate whether or not your last phone call had something to do with each.						
You filed a claim for retirement benefits	14	86	17	83	4	96
You filed a claim for disability benefits	17	83	14	86	28	72
You filed a claim for survivors benefits	10	90	12	88	6	94
You filed a claim for SSI benefits	15	85	6	94	42	58
You asked for help concerning Medicare	14	86	12	88	20	80
You asked about a notice or other mail you'd gotten from SS	40	60	37	63	48	52
You notified SS of a name or address change	22	78	20	80	29	71
SS asked you to contact them	26	74	21	79	40	60
You telephoned SS for some other reason	25	75	27	73	19	81

**Appendix II
Responses to GAO Questionnaire
(Overall, by Program, and by Status)**

Question	Overall	By program ^a		By status ^a	
		OASDI	SSI	Disabled	Nondisabled
31. In general, how courteous or discourteous were SS employees to you during this call?					
Very courteous	55	58	46	55	60
Generally courteous	34	33	37	33	34
Neither courteous nor discourteous	8	7	12	10	6
Generally discourteous	2	1	4	1	1
Very discourteous	1	1	1	2	0
32. How clearly or unclearly did they explain the rules or program that applied to you?					
Clearly	70	72	64	68	74
Somewhat clearly	23	21	28	25	19
Unclearly	7	7	8	7	7
33. Think about the reason why you last reached SS by phone. Have they done a very good, good, fair, poor or very poor job handling this matter so far?					
Very good job	40	42	33	35	46
Good job	35	36	33	33	37
Fair job	15	13	22	18	10
Poor job	6	5	7	8	4
Very poor job	4	4	5	7	3
34. Once again, think about the reason why you last reached SS by phone. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the amount of time it has taken them, so far, to take care of this matter?					
Very satisfied	42	44	37	36	48
Generally satisfied	36	35	38	39	32
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	10	10	9	14	9
Generally dissatisfied	5	5	6	4	6
Very dissatisfied	7	7	9	9	5
35. About how long (including the time you waited, if any) did this phone call last?					
Less than 3 minutes	25	25	24	17	27
At least 3 but less than 10 minutes	55	56	52	58	57
At least 10 but less than 20 minutes	15	14	17	18	13
20 minutes or more	5	5	6	7	4
36. Has anyone ever telephoned SS for you?					
Yes	18	12	37	18	11
No	82	88	63	82	90

**Appendix II
Responses to GAO Questionnaire
(Overall, by Program, and by Status)**

Question	Overall	By program ^a		By status ^a		
		OASDI	SSI	Disabled	Nondisabled	
Part IV: Social Security Benefits						
37. Listed below are several kinds of SS benefits. Indicate whether or not you are currently receiving each.						
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Old age retirement benefits	33	67	38	62	15	85
Disability retirement benefits	22	78	24	76	17	83
Survivors benefits	17	83	21	79	7	93
SSI	25	75	9	91	73	27
38. Do you usually get your benefit check on time?						
Yes	96		96		97	
No	4		4		3	
39. Have you ever contacted, or thought about contacting SS because your check did not come on time?						
Yes, I've contacted them	25		23		30	
Yes, I've thought about it, but haven't contacted them	2		1		5	
No, I haven't contacted or thought about contacting them	73		76		64	
40. Have you ever asked, or thought about asking SS if the amount of your benefit is correct?						
Yes, I've asked them	28		27		29	
Yes, I've thought about it, but haven't asked them	11		11		11	
No, I've never asked or thought about asking them	61		62		60	
Part V: Overall Quality of Social Security's Service						
41. Overall, how would you rate the service that SS has given you?						
Very good	42		43		41	
Good	36		38		30	
Fair	14		13		19	
Poor	4		3		6	
Very poor	3		3		4	
42. How would you rate SS's service in comparison to the service you get from other Federal, State, and local government agencies? Is SS's service better, about as good as, or worse?						
SS much better than others	29		28		30	
SS somewhat better than others	22		22		21	
SS is about as good as others	43		44		41	
SS somewhat worse than others	4		3		5	
SS much worse than others	3		3		2	
Can't say, have had no contact with other government agencies	0		0		0	

**Appendix II
Responses to GAO Questionnaire
(Overall, by Program, and by Status)**

Question	Overall	By program ^a		By status ^a	
		OASDI	SSI	Disabled	Nondisabled
43. If you must contact SS in the future, would your first preference be to write, telephone, or visit?					
Write	4	3	5	2	4
Telephone	51	50	52	58	48
Visit	45	47	42	40	48
44. Thank you for your cooperation. We appreciate your help. If you have any comments about how SS has served you, please write them in the space below.					
Positive comment	30	31	27	15	38
Negative comment	58	57	60	74	51
Mixed comment	12	11	13	9	12

^aResponses are weighted.

Notes: 1. Except where otherwise indicated, respondent was instructed to check one response to each question.

2. The sum of individual percentages may not equal 100 percent due to independent rounding.

Note: D Disabled; ND Nondisabled; Q Question; SS Social Security.

Sampling and Estimation Methodology

SSA data bases lack the capability to identify precisely the universe of SSA/client contacts. Consequently, in preparing to conduct a nationwide survey concerning the perceived quality of SSA services, we had to estimate the total universe size. To do this, we worked with SSA officials to identify and select SSA computerized files and transaction codes that, in our judgment and SSA's, indicated an SSA/client contact. While this approach may lack desired precision, we believe it was adequate because our objective was to develop a universe of SSA clients who had high probabilities of having had recent contact with SSA.

Development of a Sampling List

To select a sample of persons to receive mail questionnaires, we first obtained a list of the universe of SSI and OASDI client transactions. SSA's data processing cycles determined which transaction files would be complete and ready for our use. Based on our anticipated dates for mailing the questionnaires to assure a recent contact, we selected September 1984 transactions. Due to the large volume of transactions, we randomly selected 4 days (1 in each of the 4 weeks in September) of transactions meeting our criteria for type of contact. These 684,586 transactions constituted the list from which we drew our sample.

Sample Selection

From our 4-day list of transactions, we drew an initial random sample of each of the four SSA program categories and their corresponding transaction groups—SSI initial claims, SSI postentitlements, OASDI initial claims, and OASDI postentitlements. We then matched these records, by Social Security number, to SSA's Master Beneficiary Record (for OASDI beneficiaries) and Supplemental Security Record (for SSI recipients) to obtain additional information needed to select a final sample and mail questionnaires. After deleting records of deceased individuals, absent or unusable mailing addresses, and duplicate individuals to the extent practicable, we randomly selected a subsample from each group, thereby limiting our survey to a manageable number of questionnaires. Our final sample size was 1,633, as table III.1 shows.

Table III.1: Development of Final Sample for Survey

Program	Type of transaction	4-day sampling frame	Initial sample	Final sample
SSI	Initial claim	24,856	245	169
SSI	Postentitlement	147,297	1,510	527
OASDI	Initial claim	96,838	1,000	442
OASDI	Postentitlement	415,595	3,000	495
Total		684,586	5,755	1,633^a

^a1,680 questionnaires were mailed; undeliverables and additional deceased individuals reduced the sample to 1,633.

Estimation to the Universe of Clients

Because we randomly sampled September 1984 transactions that met our criteria as being initiated by telephone, mail, or personal contacts, we projected our sample results to the September universe of SSA clients. We used appropriate statistical formulas for a stratified random sample design to determine our universe of SSA clients, estimated responses based on questionnaires completed and returned, and sampling errors of the estimates. Our September SSA client universe was more than 2.7 million people. All percentages in this report, unless otherwise noted, reflect expected response rates had we actually sent questionnaires to all clients in all four groups. Table III.2 shows the response rates by transaction group.

Table III.2: Questionnaire Response Rates

Program	Type of transaction	Number sampled	Number responding	Response rate (percent)
SSI	Initial claim	169	135	79.9
SSI	Postentitlement	527	430	81.6
OASDI	Initial claim	442	390	88.2
OASDI	Postentitlement	495	436	88.1
Total		1,633	1,391	85.2

Estimates and Confidence Intervals for Selected Questionnaire Responses

Variable	Universe ^a	Estimate (percent)	Estimated range ^b (percent)	
			Lower limit	Upper limit
Understandability of mail received from SSA	2,009,901			
Very to generally easy		67.0	63.5	70.5
Neither easy nor difficult		14.6	12.0	17.2
Generally to very difficult		18.3	15.4	21.2
Waiting time during last visit to SSA	2,448,092			
Longer than expected		21.3	18.6	24.0
As long as expected		49.0	45.7	52.3
Shorter than expected		29.7	26.7	32.7
Privacy afforded to conduct business at SSA	2,441,981			
More than needed		9.0	7.1	10.9
As much as needed		79.3	76.6	82.0
Less than needed		11.7	9.6	13.8
Courteousness of SSA employees during last visit	2,449,503			
Very to generally courteous		88.7	86.6	90.8
Neither courteous nor discourteous		7.5	5.8	9.2
Generally to very discourteous		3.9	2.6	5.2
During last visit, the clarity of explanation by SSA of the applicable rules or programs	2,401,958			
Clear		71.7	68.6	74.8
Somewhat clear		21.8	19.0	24.6
Unclear		6.5	4.8	8.2
During last phone call, the courtesy of SSA employees	1,781,810			
Very to generally courteous		89.2	86.9	91.5
Neither courteous nor discourteous		8.3	6.2	10.4
Generally to very discourteous		2.4	1.3	3.5
During last phone call, the clarity of explanation by SSA of the applicable rules or programs	1,768,632			
Clear		70.4	66.8	74.0
Somewhat clear		22.8	19.5	26.1
Unclear		6.8	4.8	8.8

**Appendix IV
 Estimates and Confidence Intervals for
 Selected Questionnaire Responses**

Variable	Universe ^a	Estimate (percent)	Estimated range ^b (percent)	
			Lower limit	Upper limit
Overall rating of SSA service	2,674,866			
Very good to good		78.7	76.2	81.2
Fair		14.4	12.2	16.6
Poor to very poor		6.8	5.3	8.3

^aRepresents the estimated total number of September 1984 SSA clients who would have responded to the question.

^bComputed at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence; e.g., we are 95 percent confident that the true proportion of persons is between the ranges specified.

Representativeness of the Sample of SSA Clients

We selected our samples of SSA clients to receive questionnaires from transaction records of 4 randomly chosen days in September 1984. Also, since we exercised some judgment in refining the sample to include only those persons having made telephone, mail, or personal contacts with SSA, we wanted to confirm that our sampling strategy did not introduce any biases in the responses. In other words, we wanted assurance that our September sample groups were representative of the overall OASDI and SSI populations. We therefore sent identical questionnaires to two “control groups”—that is, random samples of the entire OASDI beneficiary and SSI recipient populations, provided by SSA officials. Details of the control group samples and responses are shown in table V.1.

Table V.1: Client Control Group Responses

Program	Sample	Number of responses	Response rate (percent)
SSI	475	382	80.4
OASDI	480	431	89.8
Total	955^a	813	85.1

^a994 questionnaires were mailed; however, undeliverables and deceased individuals reduced the sample to 955.

We used appropriate statistical tests of significant differences¹ to compare the responses to certain questions by the September sample groups and the control groups. We also compared demographic data, such as sex and age for these groups. Generally, the differences between the groups were not statistically significant.² From this, we concluded that our September sample groups were representative of the overall OASDI and SSI populations and that our sampling strategy did not introduce significant biases in the responses. In a few cases, however, certain questions or categories within questions exhibited statistically significant differences between the September and control groups’ responses. We believe there are two reasons for this:

1. The relatively large sample sizes can result in a statistical difference even when the absolute value of the observed difference is small. For example, question 41 in our questionnaire asked the client to rank the overall service provided by SSA, from “1” indicating “very good” to “5”

¹The statistical “t-test” and “Chi-Square” tests were used. These tests are intended to determine whether differences found in a sample indicate an underlying, systematic difference (statistically significant), or conversely, should only be attributed to normal random sampling variation (not statistically significant).

²The significances of differences were computed at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

indicating “very poor.” The average ranking by the OASDI control group was 1.61, that is, between “very good” and “good.” The average ranking by the OASDI September sample group was 1.85, also between “very good” and “good.” Although the 0.24 ranking points difference was found to be statistically significant, we believe that the two groups do not really differ in a practical sense because both essentially believe that the service is “good.”

2. Our September samples and control groups did differ substantially in one critical element: the recency of contacts with SSA. More than 75 percent of the 1,391 respondents from the September sample had visited and/or phoned SSA within the previous 6 months, while only 31 percent of the 813 respondents from the control sample had done so. This was precisely our original objective in refining SSA’s data bases into a relevant client universe from which to derive a sample. We wanted to focus on persons who had recent contacts with SSA, thereby permitting an up-to-date assessment of how they perceived SSA service.

We believe, however, that those differences between the September and control group samples found to be statistically significant can be attributed to the length of time since the most recent contacts were made, rather than to the September group’s not being representative of the overall populations. We found that similar differences, based on the length of time since contact, existed within the September sample group itself. For example, the average ranking for question 41 by September clients who had contacted SSA more than 6 months ago was 1.65, that is, between “very good” to “good.” The average ranking by September clients who had contacted SSA within the last 6 months was 2.02, that is, primarily at the “good” level.

Advance Comments From the Department of Health and Human Services



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Office of Inspector General

Washington, D.C. 20201

JCT 15 1985


Mr. Richard L. Fogel
Director, Human Resources
Division
United States General
Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Fogel:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on your draft report, "The Public Says It Gets Good Service From Social Security." The enclosed comments represent the tentative position of the Department and are subject to reevaluation when the final version of this report is received.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on this draft report before its publication.

Sincerely yours,

for 
Richard P. Kusserow
Inspector General

Enclosure

THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES' COMMENTS ON THE
GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE'S DRAFT REPORT, "THE PUBLIC SAYS IT
GETS GOOD SERVICE FROM SOCIAL SECURITY"

General

We agree with the conclusions in the draft report and are pleased that it is favorable to the Social Security Administration (SSA). Most of the public feel that they get good service from us, and many of the problems identified in the survey are already being worked on by SSA components. The report acknowledges our commitment to service by quoting SSA values, including "provide courteous, sensitive and dignified service to the public." We believe the independence of the GAO Survey contributed to the high response rate by the sampled people and will give the report readers confidence in the validity of GAO's generally favorable findings.

General Accounting Office (GAO) Recommendation

That the Secretary direct the Commissioner of Social Security to conduct periodic surveys of client satisfaction with the quality of SSA service and advise the Congress of the results.

Department of Health and Human Services Comment

We agree. Periodic surveys of client perceptions of the quality of SSA services should be conducted and the results reported to Congress. SSA staff are now developing a proposal for measurement of our performance in providing service.

Other Matters

Other specific comments are as follows:

1. The information presented in Appendix II indicates that Supplemental Security Income respondents gave negative answers about service more frequently than those in other programs. Staff working in that area would like to do a more detailed analysis of these findings. To assist them, could you please provide, at the staff level, copies of the other "analyses" referred to on page 6 of the report.
2. Page 12 of the report discusses SSA teleservice centers. The language is misleading in that it suggests that only some of the population is served by district and branch offices. We suggest restating to clarify that all the population is served by district and branch offices, and 50 percent of the population also has access to an SSA teleservice center.

Now on pp. 14-15.

Now on p. 19.

**Appendix VI
Advance Comments From the Department of
Health and Human Services**

2

Now on p. 34.

Now on p. 33.

3. The analysis of questionnaire responses by SSA region on page 27 is expressed by percentages only. To be more meaningful to SSA the numbers of respondents per region is needed. The same is true of the analysis of approved vs. denied claimants on page 24.

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