

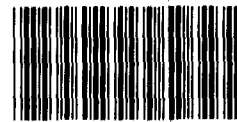
GAO

Report to the Chairman, Committee on
Ways and Means, House of
Representatives

March 1993

SOCIAL SECURITY

Telephone Busy Signal
Rates at Local SSA
Field Offices



148807

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

Human Resources Division

B-249693

March 4, 1993

The Honorable Dan Rostenkowski
Chairman, Committee on Ways and Means
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

In 1988, the Social Security Administration (SSA) sought to improve telephone service for the public by replacing the telephone service offered by many of its individual field offices with a nationwide, toll-free 800 number telephone system. This change in telephone service raised congressional concerns that the public no longer had direct telephone access to SSA's field offices. As a result, the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990 (OBRA) directed SSA to restore the public's telephone access to local offices at the level generally available on September 30, 1989. While SSA restored public access to its field offices, it did not restore the same number of telephone lines for many of these offices.

On June 12, 1992, you requested that we review SSA local office telephone busy signal rates to determine how readily callers can reach the SSA offices that restored local access under OBRA. In particular, you asked us to compare busy signal rates for offices that restored the same number of general inquiry telephone lines as they had before October 1989 (the effective date of OBRA requirements) with the busy signal rates for offices that restored fewer lines than they had before. During a follow-up meeting, your staff requested that we present the results of our study in detail. Appendixes I and II detail the results of our survey on a weekly, daily, hourly, and SSA regional basis.

Background

Before the installation of SSA's nationwide 800 telephone service, about 50 percent of the population (generally those in larger metropolitan areas) calling SSA did so through centralized answering centers known as teleservice centers (TSC). The remaining 50 percent called their local SSA offices directly or used small, centralized answering units.

In October 1988, SSA introduced its 800 telephone service in the first of two phases. During phase 1, the change in service was having the public reach the TSCs by a single toll-free 800 number rather than through each TSC's own telephone number. The service was also made available to about

10 percent of the public that formerly had to make toll calls to reach a local SSA office.

SSA initiated phase 2 of the 800 service in October 1989. This phase involved redirecting the remaining 40 percent of the public's calls still being placed to local offices or statewide answering units to the 800 number. Offices in the phase 2 transition placed an intercept message on their general inquiry lines that redirected callers to the 800 number. This meant that the public could only reach SSA by telephone via the 800 service. SSA provided telephone numbers of the local offices only at a caller's insistence.

As phase 2 was being implemented, the 800 number became deluged with calls. During peak calling periods, busy signal rates reached levels ranging from 50 to 90 percent. The combination of poor 800 service and no telephone access to local offices concerned the Congress so much that a provision was included in the 1990 OBRA legislation directing the Secretary of Health and Human Services to restore telephone access to local offices to the level generally available on September 30, 1989. As a result, SSA was required to restore phone service to the 834 district and branch offices involved in phase 2 of its effort to install the nationwide 800 telephone service.

We previously reported that these 834 phase 2 offices can be divided into two groups, based on the way OBRA was implemented.¹ The first group consists of 475 offices that restored the same number of general inquiry telephone lines as they had before SSA's nationwide toll-free 800 number was fully implemented. The second group consists of 359 offices that restored fewer general inquiry lines than they had before the 800 number was fully implemented.

SSA receives comprehensive data on the 800 number. The data include the number of calls placed, connected, and busy on a daily and weekly basis. However, comparable data are not obtained for the 834 phase 2 offices that deal with many different phone companies. Consequently, we had to conduct a telephone survey to obtain this information.

Scope and Methodology

To estimate the public's ability to contact phase 2 offices by telephone, we made a total of 4,800 phone calls to the 834 offices affected by OBRA (2,400 telephone calls were made to each group of offices). The calls were made

¹Social Security: Telephone Access to Local Field Offices (GAO/HRD 91-112, Sept. 1991).

between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. (SSA's normal office hours are from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.), during the period of July 20 through August 14, 1992. We divided the hours into 15-minute intervals and then randomly selected the offices to be called within these time intervals.

To reduce the number of telephone calls needed for a statistically reliable study and meet Committee time frames, we divided SSA's work week into three intervals—Monday, Tuesday through Thursday, and Friday. Appendix IV provides further information on the methodology we used for this study.

Results in Brief

Our calls to the local Social Security offices accepting calls from the public frequently encountered busy signals. The overall busy signal rate for the 834 offices was 47.3 percent, with little variation by week of the month, day of the week, or time of the day. Further, the offices that restored fewer general inquiry lines had higher busy signal rates than the offices that restored the same number of lines as they had before phase 2 began (52.6 percent versus 43.2 percent, respectively). See appendix I for details on busy signal rates.

The busy signal rate does not accurately measure the public's ability to contact these local SSA offices, ask a question, and receive a reply. An additional 8.7 percent of our calls were not completed due to situations that prevented or discouraged the successful completion of connected calls. Situations preventing call completion included being disconnected during the call and encountering some type of recorded message. In addition, we counted as unsuccessful those calls where we were placed on hold for more than 2 minutes or did not get an answer after 10 rings. In these situations, we hung up.

Overall, we were unable to complete 56 percent of the calls we made. We failed to complete 60 percent of the calls to offices with fewer general inquiry lines and 51 percent of the calls to offices restoring the same number of lines. See appendix II for details on failure rate to complete calls.

To provide a complete picture of the public's ability to telephone SSA during this period, we also obtained busy signal data for SSA's 800 number. SSA's nationwide 800 number had an overall busy rate of 25.2 percent. SSA does not maintain data that would allow us to develop a comparable call

completion rate. See appendix III for more information on 800 number busy rates.

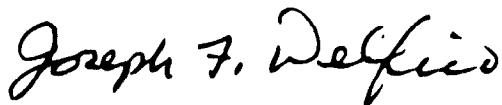
Agency Comments

SSA stated that it was aware that the public may encounter difficulties when attempting to contact local field offices by telephone. It said that the access difficulties are related to inadequate staffing in some field offices. SSA noted that while OBRA mandated restoration of telephone service, it did not provide funding for additional staffing in the affected offices. SSA provided other comments that are contained in appendix V along with our assessment.

As agreed with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days from the date of this letter. At that time, we will send copies to the Secretary of Health and Human Services, the Commissioner of Social Security, and congressional committees with oversight responsibility for Social Security issues. We will make copies available to others upon request.

If you have any questions or would like additional information, please call me at (202) 512-7215. Appendix VI lists the major contributors to this report.

Sincerely yours,



Joseph Delfico
Director, Income Security Issues

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Abbreviations

GAO	General Accounting Office
OBRA	Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990
SSA	Social Security Administration
TSC	teleservice center

SSA Local Office Busy Rates

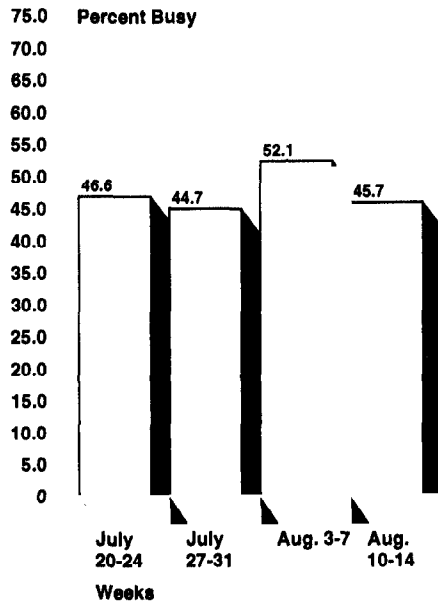
This appendix presents information on busy signal rates for the phase 2 offices by week, day, time of day, and the Social Security Administration's (SSA) regional offices. It presents the information for all 834 offices that restored local phone service. The information is separated for both the offices that restored the same number of telephone lines that they had before the 800-number service and for those that restored fewer lines. Generally, we found that telephone lines at local offices were busy a high percentage of the time regardless of when a call was made.

Overall Busy Signal Rates at All Phase 2 Offices

The overall busy signal rate for all 834 phase 2 offices was 47.3 percent, and it was fairly consistent even when examined on a weekly, daily, hourly, or geographic basis. The overall weekly busy signal rate during our survey was fairly constant, as shown in figure I.1. The third week of our test had the highest busy signal rate. In our study, the third week was the first week in August. The first week of each month is the week when beneficiaries receive their Social Security checks. This may cause a larger volume of calls than in other weeks of the month and may explain the higher busy signal rates.

**Appendix I
SSA Local Office Busy Rates**

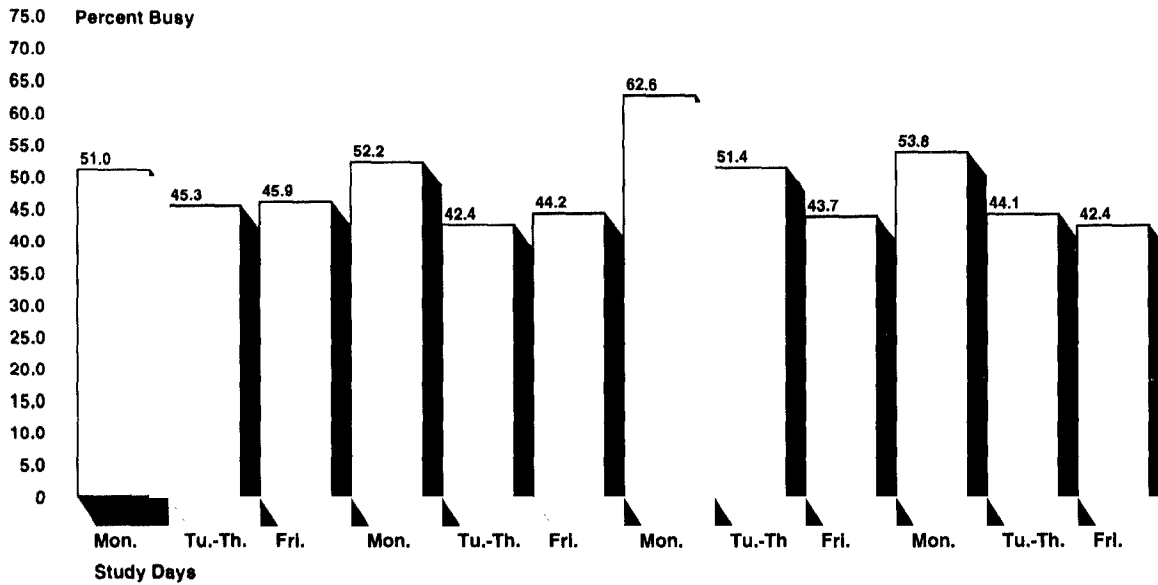
Figure I.1: Overall Weekly Telephone Busy Signal Rate for SSA Phase 2 Offices



Note: Sampling error does not exceed ± 3.2 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

Consistently high busy signal rates are also evident when results are examined on a daily basis. There is, however, a more noticeable variation in busy rates on a day-to-day basis, ranging from about 42 to almost 63 percent. Mondays were busier than the other days, with the busiest day being the first Monday of the month (62.6 percent). (See fig.I.2.) This was the date when recipients were supposed to receive their August benefit payment.

Figure I.2: Overall Daily Telephone Busy Signal Rates for SSA Phase 2 Offices



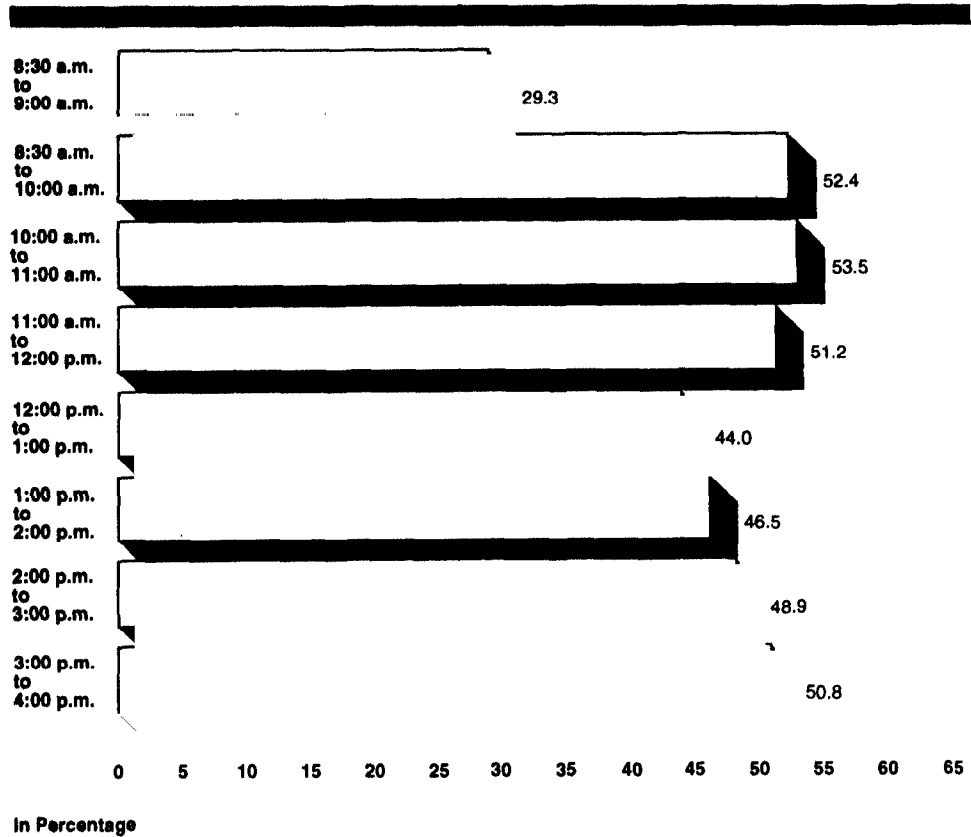
Note: Sampling error does not exceed ± 4.9 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

Our study also showed that local office telephones were busy at all times of the day. As shown in figure I.3, only the 8:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. time period showed a noticeably lower busy signal rate. This lower busy signal rate is most likely caused by many offices using a recording to notify callers that telephone calls were not being accepted until after 9:00 a.m.¹

¹SSA permits local field offices some discretion in setting their hours. Although the offices are open, they can use the first hour of the morning to get caught up with administrative work and training before answering public telephone calls.

**Appendix I
SSA Local Office Busy Rates**

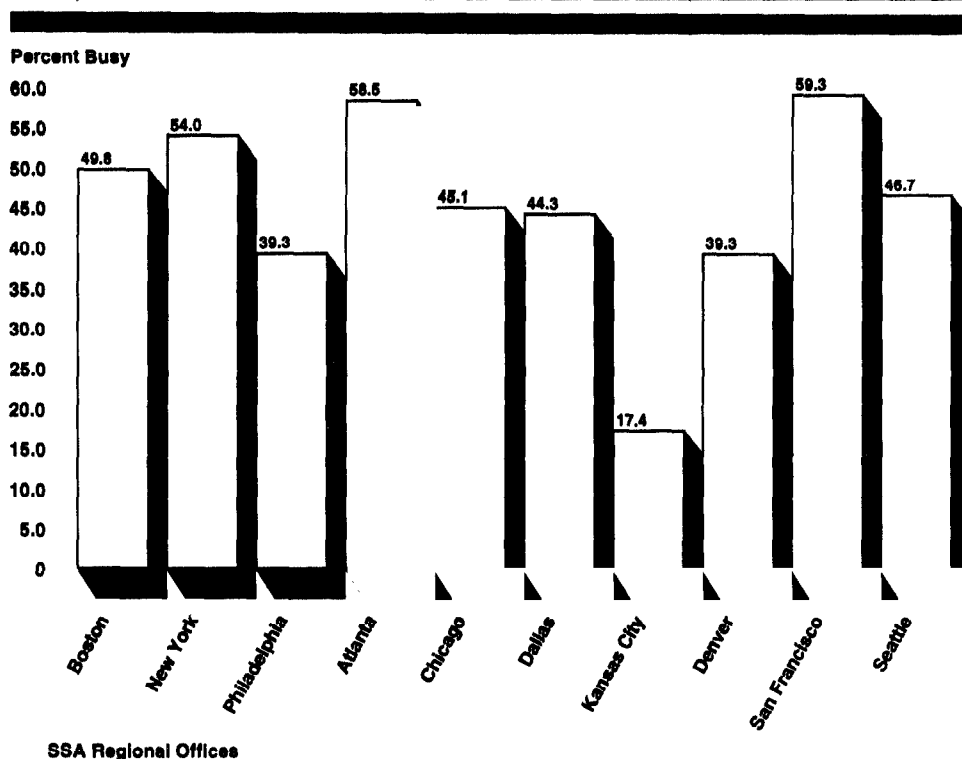
Figure I.3: Overall Hourly Telephone Busy Signal Rates for SSA Phase 2 Offices



Note: Sampling error does not exceed ± 4.9 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

Finally, we examined busy rates on a geographic basis. As shown in figure I.4, the busy rates within SSA regions were generally high except for offices in the Kansas City region.

Figure I.4: Overall Telephone Busy Signal Rates for SSA Phase 2 Offices by SSA Region



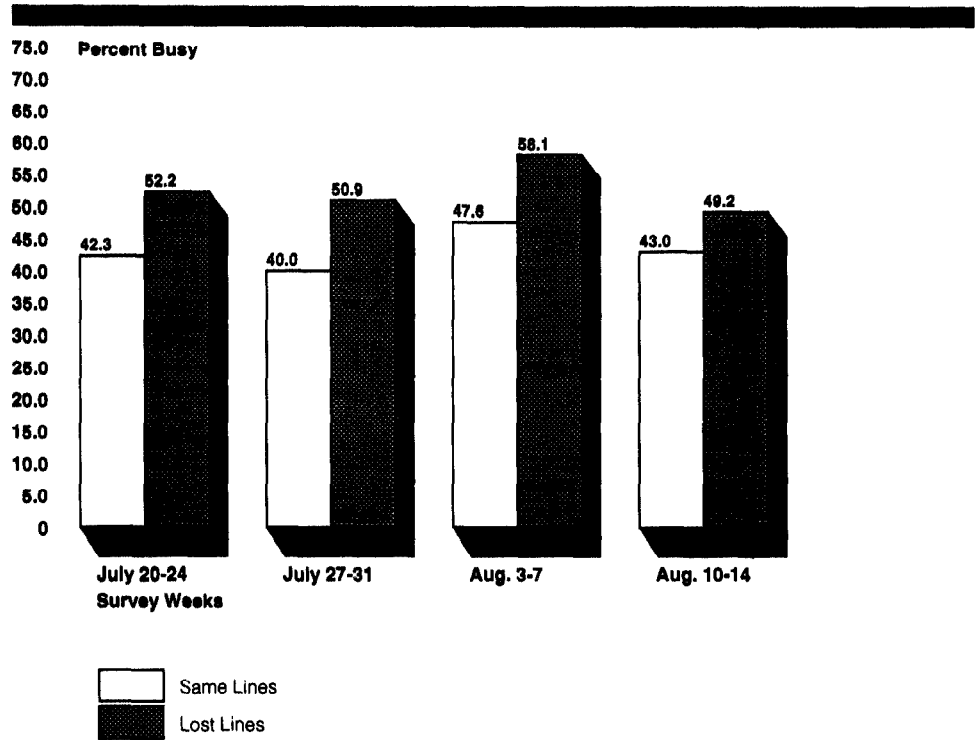
Note: Sampling error does not exceed + 13.7 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

Busy Signal Rates for the Two Groups of Phase 2 Offices

Overall, the busy signal rates were higher in the offices that restored fewer general inquiry lines under the requirements in OBRA than offices that restored the same number of lines. The former group of offices had a 52.6 percent busy signal rate, and the latter group a 43.2 percent busy signal rate.

Our study showed that those offices restoring fewer general inquiry lines were the most difficult to contact on a weekly basis (see fig. I.5). Offices that restored fewer general inquiry lines had weekly busy signal rates ranging from 49 to more than 58 percent. In contrast, offices that restored the same number of lines had busy signal rates ranging from 40 to about 48 percent. For both groups of offices, the highest busy signal rate occurred during the first week of the month (Aug. 3-7), the week benefit checks arrived.

Figure I.5: Weekly Telephone Busy Signal Rates for the Two Groups of SSA Phase 2 Offices

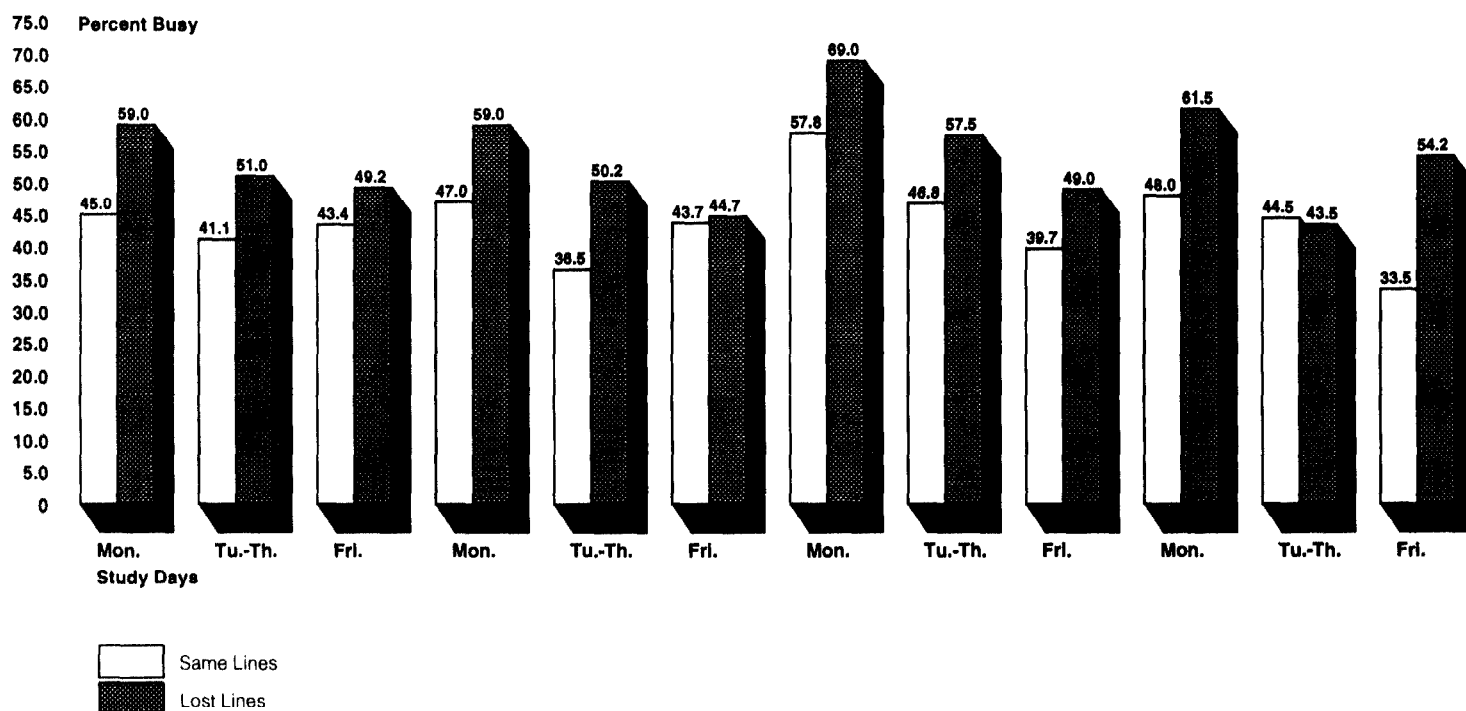


Note: Sampling error does not exceed + 4.6 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence for both groups of offices.

On a daily basis, we experienced the same pattern of busy signal rates for the two types of offices. As shown in figure I.6, busy signal rates stayed consistently high during each day of the survey. Those offices restoring fewer general inquiry lines had consistently higher busy signal rates (43.5 to 69 percent) than those offices restoring the same number of lines (33.5 to 57.8 percent). Telephone busy signal rates were generally the highest on Mondays.

**Appendix I
SSA Local Office Busy Rates**

Figure I.6: Daily Telephone Busy Signal Rates for the Two Groups of SSA Phase 2 Offices

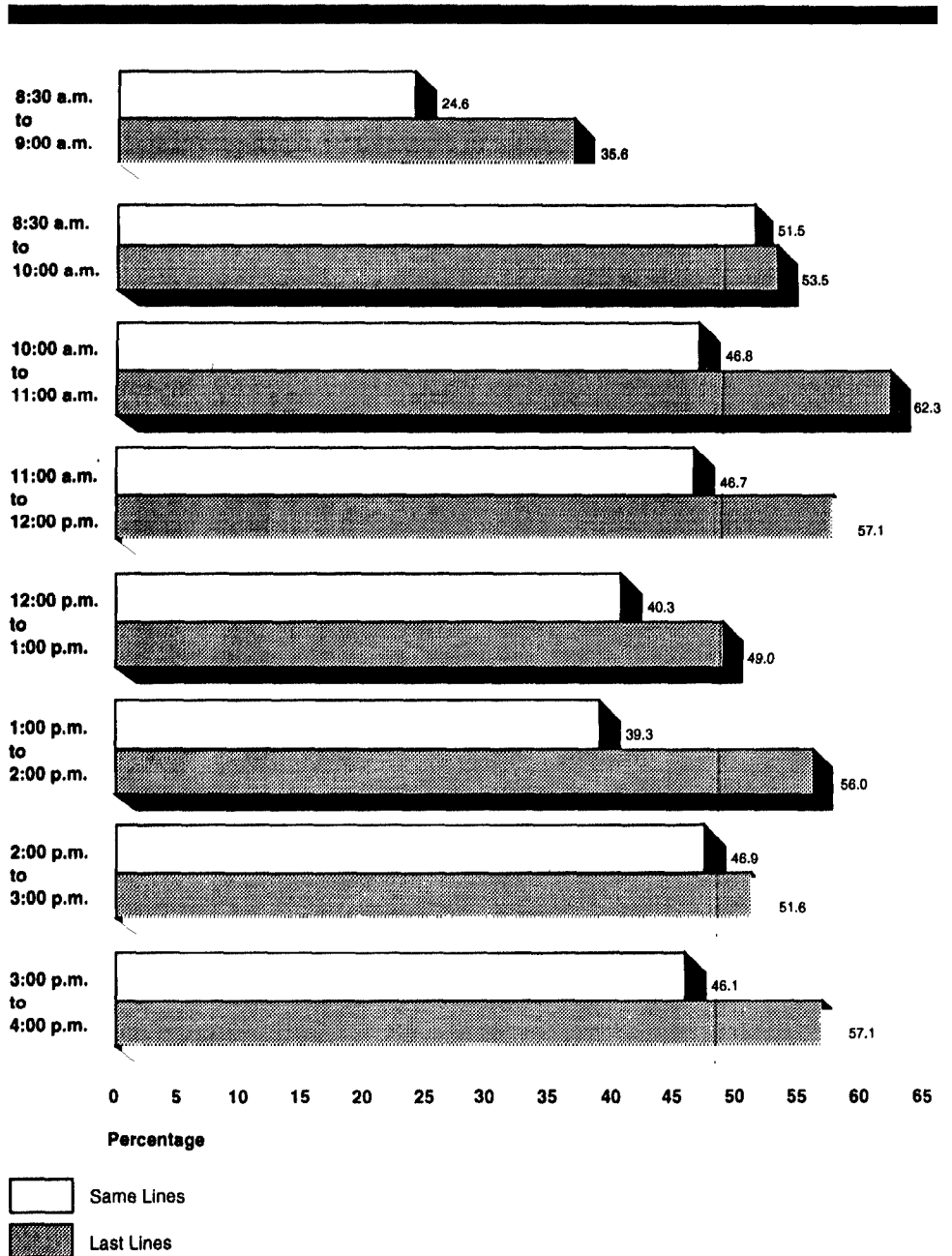


Note: Sampling error does not exceed + 6.9 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence for both groups of offices.

We also analyzed busy rates by hour of the day. As shown in figure I.7, after 9:00 a.m. the busy signal rate rose sharply for both groups of offices and stayed consistently high throughout the day; the 8:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. time period was the least busy. This occurred because many offices had some type of recorded message instructing the public to call back later. As a result, more connections were made and the number of times a busy signal was recorded was reduced.

**Appendix I
SSA Local Office Busy Rates**

Figure I.7: Telephone Busy Signal Rates for the Two Groups of SSA Phase 2 Offices by Hour

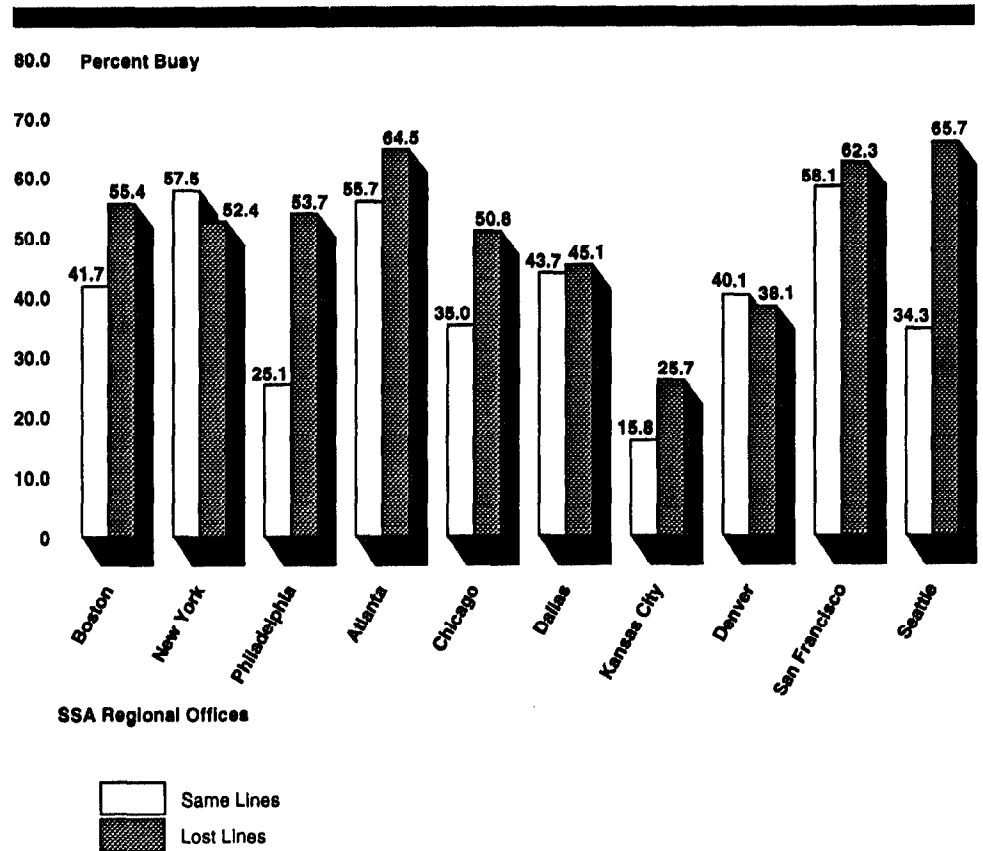


Note: For offices restoring the same number of telephone lines and offices that lost telephone lines, sampling error does not exceed + 6.9 and + 7.7 percentage points, respectively, at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

Appendix I
SSA Local Office Busy Rates

We also looked at busy signal rates in each of SSA's regions for the two groups of offices. As shown in figure I.8, the busy signal rates were generally high for both groups of offices, regardless of their geographic location. The differences within regions are not statistically significant, however, because of the small sample sizes.

Figure I.8: Telephone Busy Signal Rates for the Two Groups of SSA Phase 2 Offices by SSA Region



Note: For offices restoring the same number of telephone lines and offices that lost telephone lines, sampling error does not exceed ± 22.2 and ± 30.1 percentage points, respectively, at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

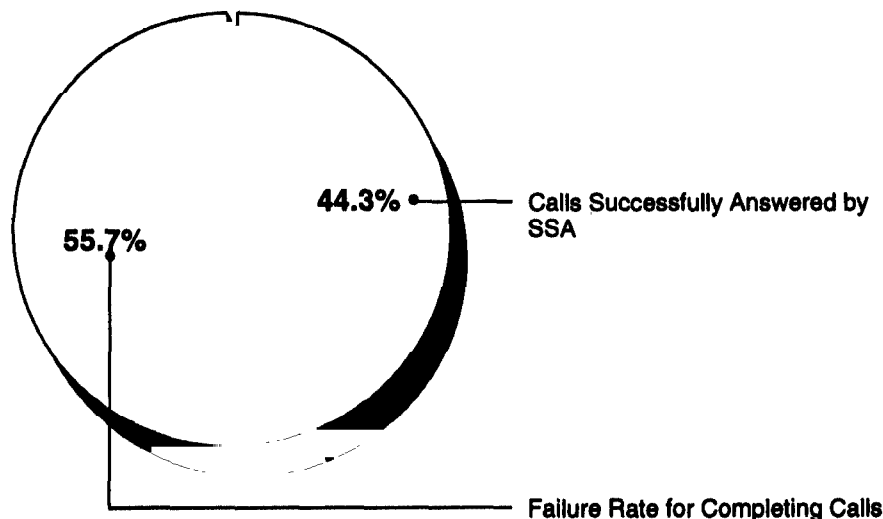
Failure to Complete Calls to SSA Local Offices

Even when a caller to the Social Security Administration (SSA) does not encounter a busy signal, other factors can prevent or discourage him or her from completing the call. Factors that prevented completion of connected calls included being disconnected during the course of the conversation and being connected to a recorded message instructing the caller to call back at a later time. For study purposes, we also defined two factors that would discourage the completion of calls—no answer after 10 rings and being placed on hold for more than 2 minutes. When we encountered these conditions, we hung up. This appendix presents information about our overall ability to access local offices by telephone.

Completing Telephone Calls: Overall Study Results

Considering the additional situations that affect the public's ability to contact SSA offices by telephone, the overall failure rate for completing calls to SSA local offices was about 56 percent. As shown in figure II.1, this consists of calls that were busy and calls that were connected but not completed for various reasons.

Figure II.1: Overall Results of GAO Telephone Study

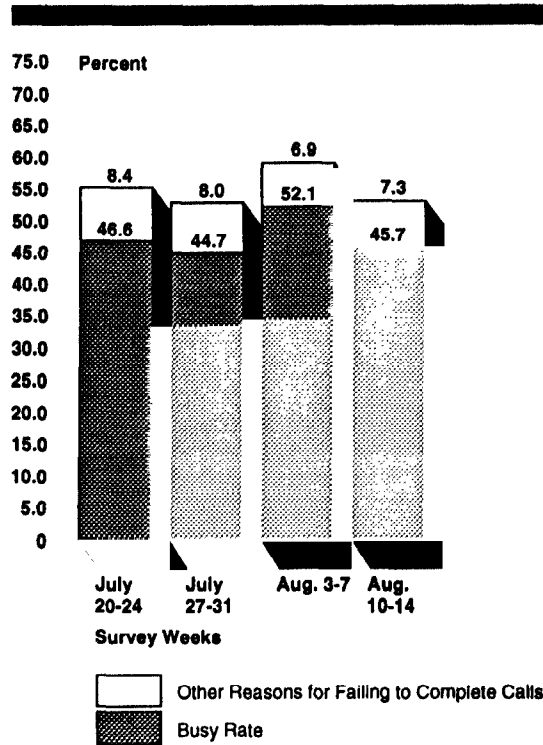


Note: Failure to complete calls includes busy signals, no answer after 10 rings, being disconnected, put on hold after 2 minutes, and a recorded message to call later. Sampling error does not exceed ± 1.6 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

**Appendix II
Failure to Complete Calls to
SSA Local Offices**

The failure rate for completing calls to SSA local offices remained consistently high throughout our study, regardless of the week, day, or hour when calls were made. The overall failure rates for completing calls to SSA phase 2 offices are shown in figures II.2 to II.5.

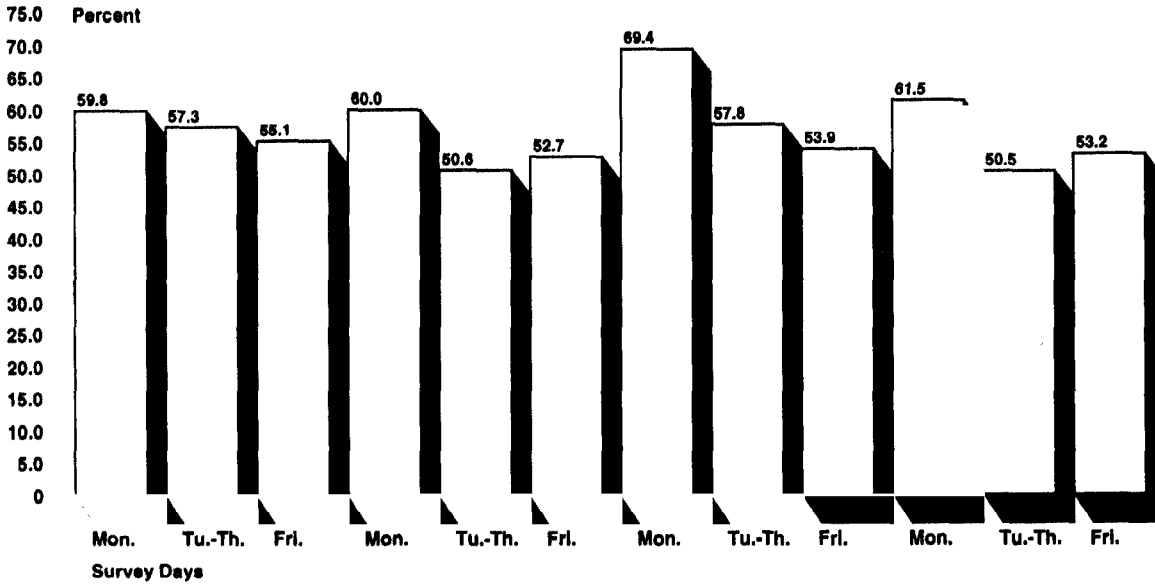
Figure II.2: Failure Rates for Completing Calls to Phase 2 Offices by Week



Note: Sampling error does not exceed + 3.2 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

**Appendix II
Failure to Complete Calls to
SSA Local Offices**

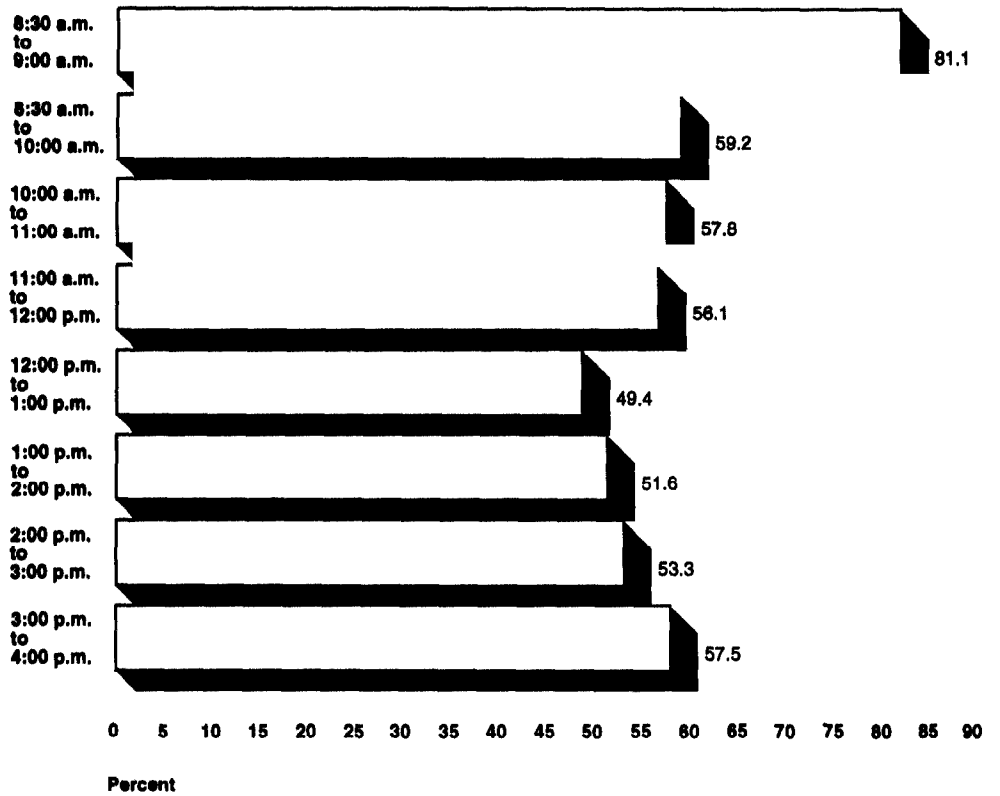
Figure II.3: Failure Rates for Completing Calls to SSA Phase 2 Offices by Study Day



Note: Sampling error does not exceed ± 4.9 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

Appendix II
Failure to Complete Calls to
SSA Local Offices

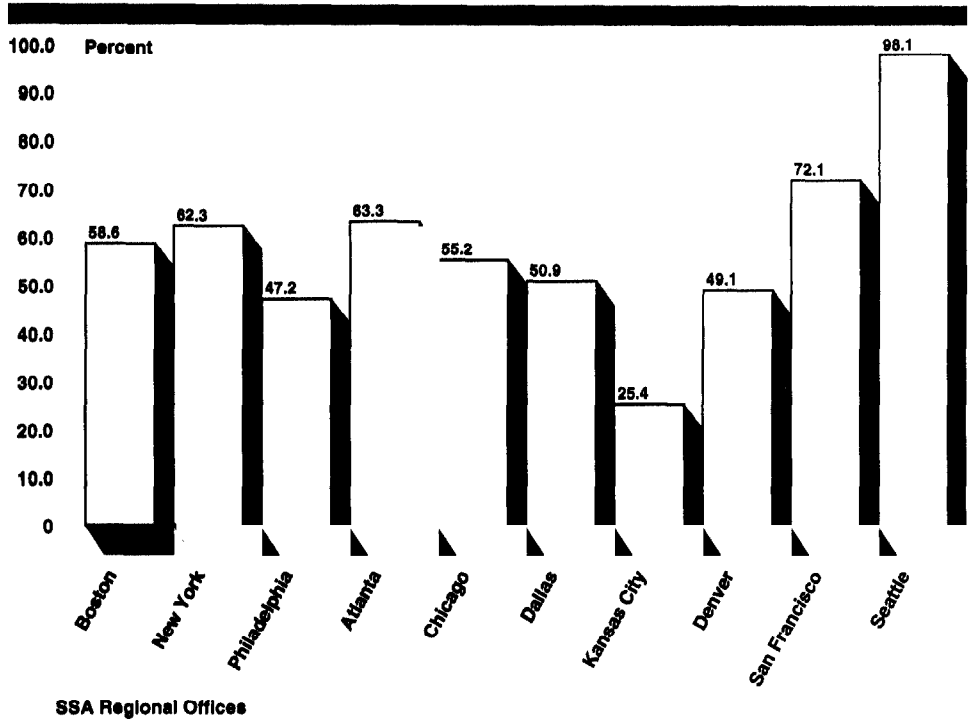
Figure II.4: Failure Rates for
Completing Calls to SSA Phase 2
Offices by Study Hour



Note: Sampling error does not exceed ± 4.3 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

**Appendix II
Failure to Complete Calls to
SSA Local Offices**

**Figure II.5: Failure Rates for
Completing Calls to SSA Phase 2
Offices by SSA Region**



Note: Sampling error does not exceed ± 9.1 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

**Completing Calls:
Results for the Two
Groups of Phase 2
Offices**

Generally, as shown in table II.1, it was more difficult to complete calls to offices that restored fewer general inquiry lines under OBRA than those that restored the same number of lines. Failure rates were about 60 percent for offices that restored fewer lines, as opposed to about 52 percent for offices that restored the same number of lines.

**Appendix II
Failure to Complete Calls to
SSA Local Offices**

**Table II.1: Call Completion Rates
Among the Two Types of Offices
Restoring Phone Service**

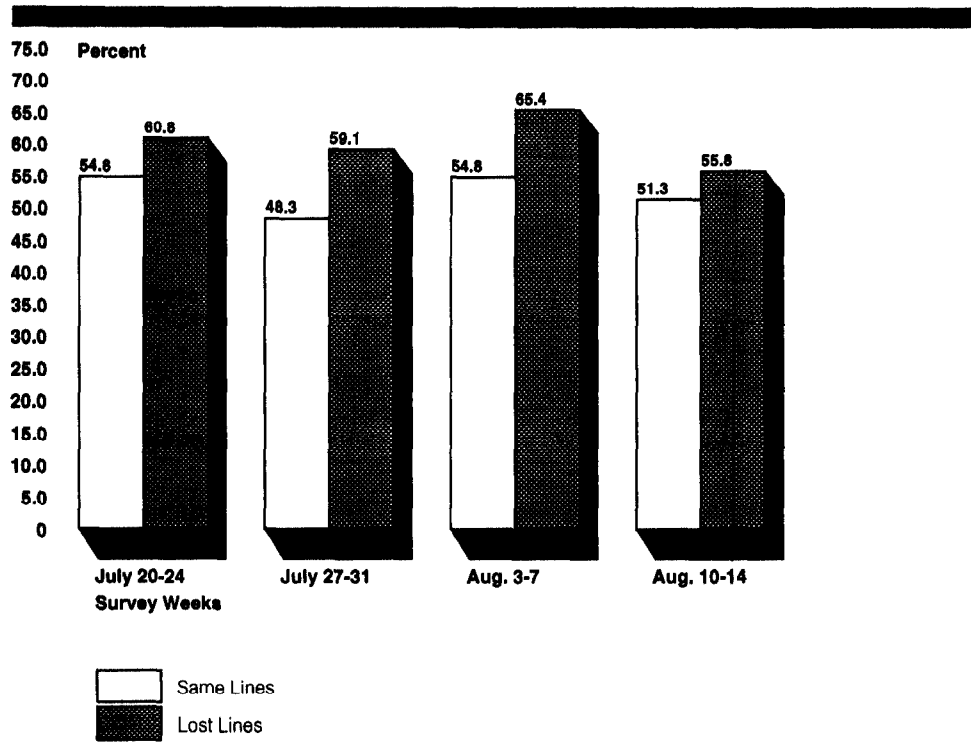
In percent

Results	Calls to offices losing lines	Calls to offices not losing lines
Complete	40.5	48.0
Incomplete:	59.5	52.0
Disconnected during call	0.1	0.2
Connected to a recording	2.0	3.0
Put on hold for more than 2 minutes	1.1	1.8
Not answered after 10 rings	3.7	3.8
Busy signal	52.6	43.2

The failure rate for completing calls to SSA local offices were generally high for both groups of offices. However, failure rates were typically higher for offices that lost lines than for offices that did not. The failure rates for completing calls for these two groups of offices—on a weekly, daily, hourly, and regional basis—are shown in figures II.6 to II.9.

Appendix II
Failure to Complete Calls to
SSA Local Offices

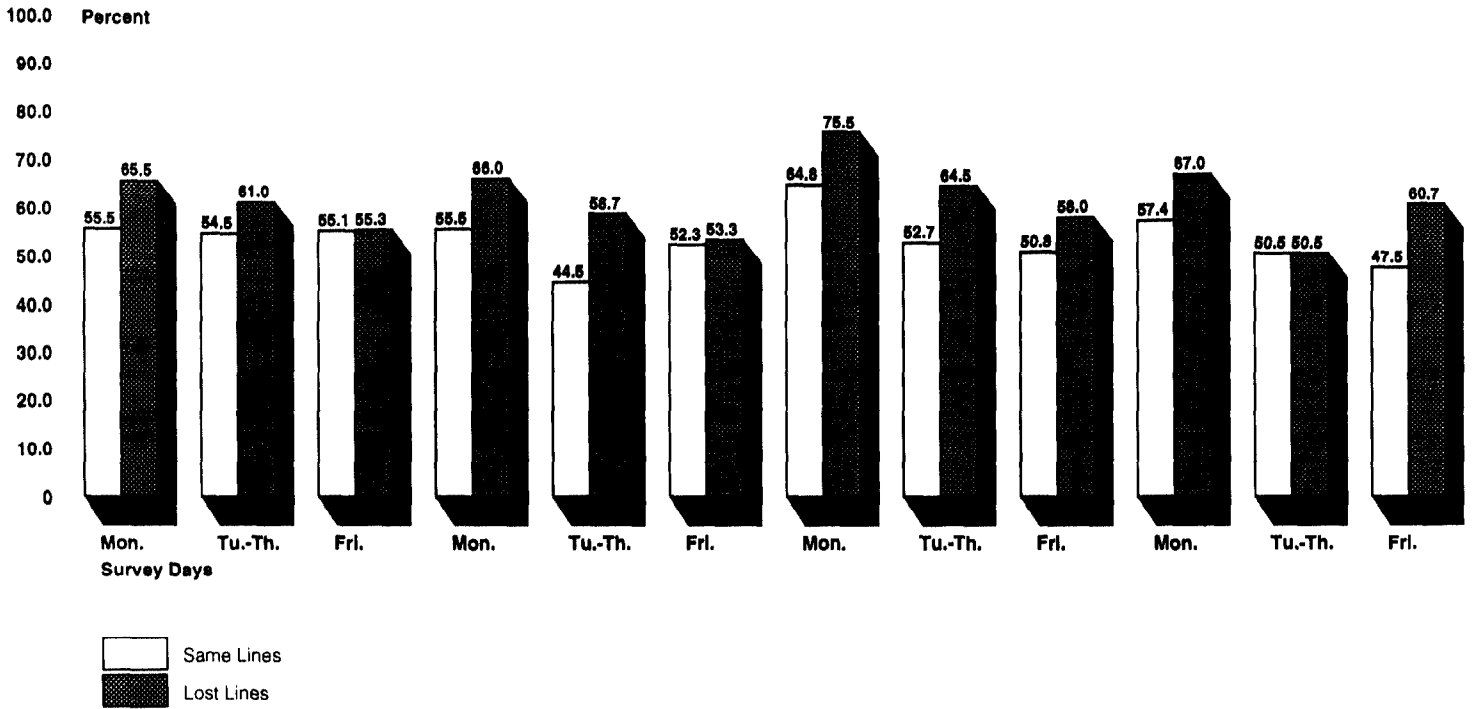
Figure II.6: Failure Rates for
Completing Calls to the Two Groups of
SSA Phase 2 Offices by Week



Note: For offices restoring the same number of telephone lines and offices that lost telephone lines, sampling error does not exceed ± 4.6 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

**Appendix II
Failure to Complete Calls to
SSA Local Offices**

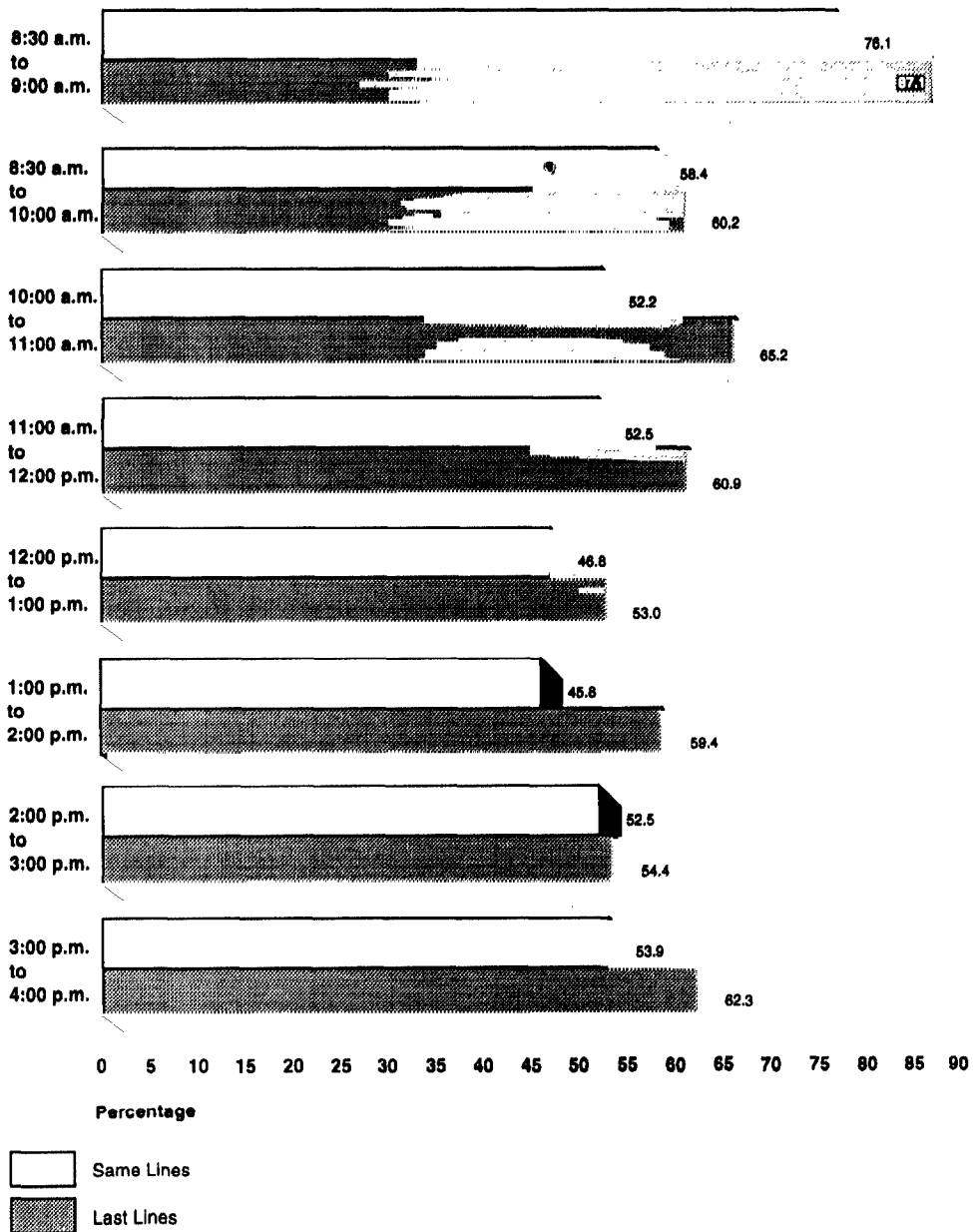
Figure II.7: Failure Rates for Completing Calls to the Two Groups of SSA Phase 2 Offices by Study Day



Note: For both groups of offices, sampling error does not exceed ± 6.9 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

**Appendix II
Failure to Complete Calls to
SSA Local Offices**

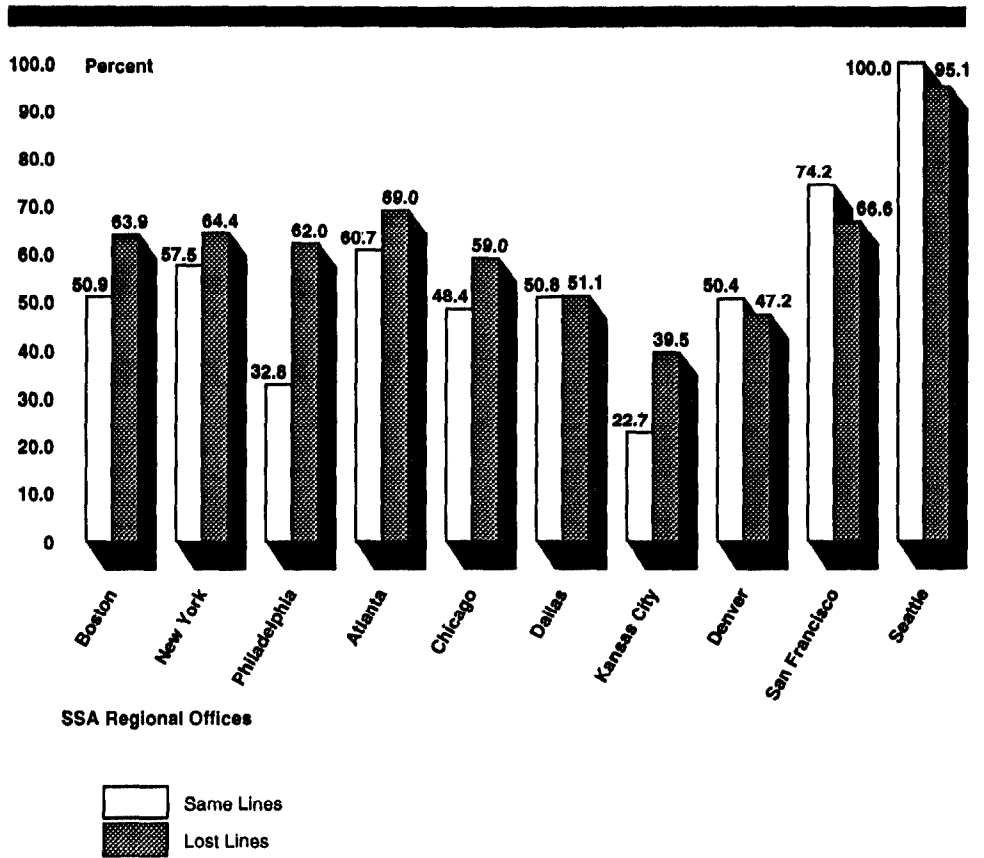
**Figure II.8: Failure Rate for Completing
Calls to the Two Groups of SSA
Phase 2 Offices by Hour**



Note: For offices restoring the same number of telephone lines and offices that lost telephone lines, sampling error does not exceed + 6.8 and - 5.9 percentage points, respectively, at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

**Appendix II
Failure to Complete Calls to
SSA Local Offices**

**Figure II.9: Failure Rates for
Completing Calls to the Two Groups of
SSA Phase 2 Offices by SSA Region**

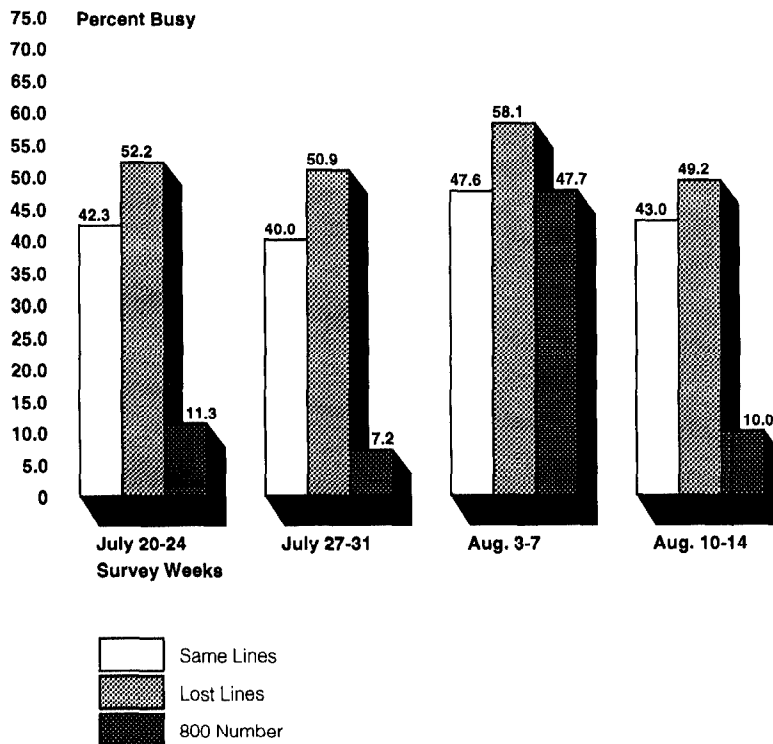


Note: For offices restoring the same number of telephone lines and offices that lost telephone lines, sampling error does not exceed + 22.2 and + 13.6 percentage points, respectively, at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

Busy Signal Rate for SSA's 800 Number

To provide a more complete picture of telephone access to the Social Security Administration (SSA) during the test period, we also obtained data on busy signal rates for SSA's 800 number. SSA's 800 number vendor counts on an hourly and daily basis the number of calls made to the 800 number and records the exact number of times the lines are busy. We were unable to get comparable information to measure the call completion rates. The overall busy signal rate for the 800 number during our test period was 25.2 percent. Comparing weekly busy rates for SSA's 800 number with the phase 2 offices shows that the public experienced lower busy rates by using the 800 number (See fig III.1).

Figure III.1: Comparison of Weekly Busy Signal Rates for the 800 Number and Our Study of SSA Phase 2 Offices

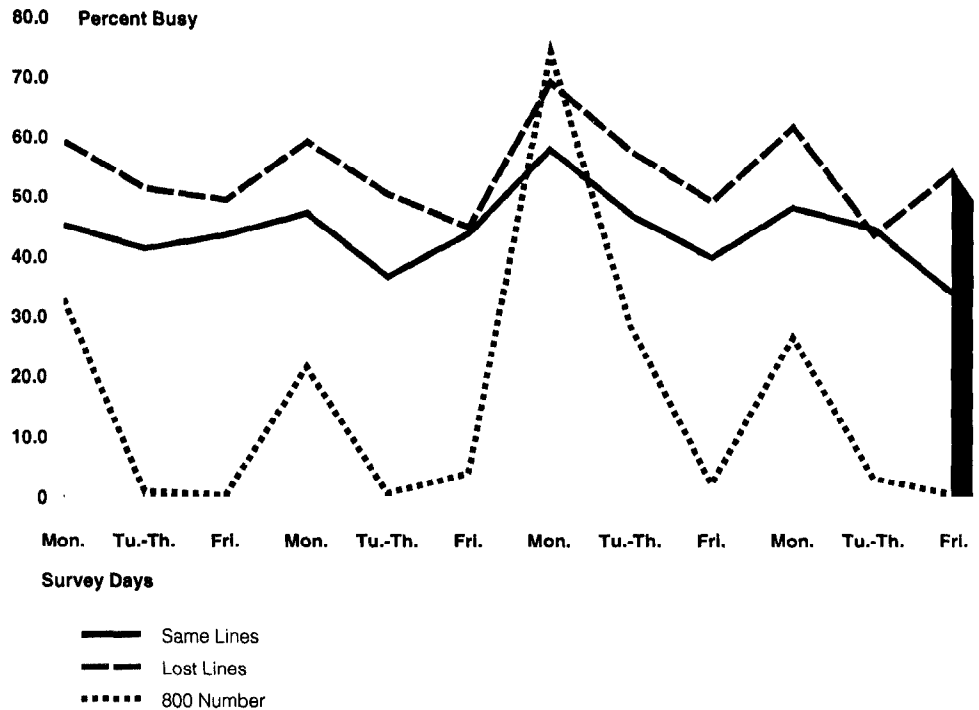


Note: Sampling error does not exceed + 4.6 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence for both groups of phase 2 offices that restored telephone lines.

**Appendix III
 Busy Signal Rate for SSA's 800 Number**

The daily busy signal rate is provided in figure III.2. It shows that the busiest day was Monday, August 3, the first day of the month. This is the first day Social Security checks are received and is typically the busiest day for the 800 number.

Figure III.2: Comparison of Daily Busy Signal Rates for SSA's 800 Number and Our Study of SSA Phase 2 Offices



Note: For both groups of phase 2 offices that restored telephone lines, sampling error does not exceed + 6.9 percentage points at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

The objective of our review was to determine the telephone busy signal rates for SSA local offices that received calls from the public. In addition, we wanted to compare the busy signal rates for two groups of offices that restored telephone service differently under OBRA requirements:

- offices that restored the same number of general inquiry telephone lines as they had before 800 service was initiated and
- offices that restored fewer general inquiry lines than they had before 800 service was initiated.

The Committee asked that our samples be large enough to provide statistically reliable estimates of the busy signal rates on a weekly, daily, and hourly basis.

To accomplish these objectives, we designed and conducted a telephone survey of a random sample of SSA's 834 local offices that were required to restore telephone service to the public at the levels generally available on September 30, 1989. These consisted of 475 offices that had restored the same number of general inquiry lines and 359 offices that had restored fewer general inquiry lines. We conducted the survey from July 20 through August 14, 1992, making calls on each business day between the hours of 8:30 a.m and 4:00 p.m (local time), which is when local offices are open.

We designed the survey, using statistical sampling principles, so that calls would be randomly distributed across offices, the 4-week survey period, days of the week, and times within the work day. We made calls to separate random samples of each of the two types of offices; that is, offices restoring the same number of lines and offices restoring fewer lines. For each week of the survey, we allocated a sufficient number of sample calls to each Monday, each Friday, and each Tuesday through Thursday so that both the first and last day of the week would be adequately covered, as well as midweek. For an individual day (or days), we randomly assigned calls to 15-minute intervals from office opening to closing to assure the entire work day would be adequately covered.

We tracked the results of our calls to account for the type of events that can occur when placing telephone calls. This included such events as being connected to an SSA local office, asking a question and receiving a response to it, being disconnected during the conversation before the call was completed, being connected to a recorded message, encountering a busy signal, not getting an answer after 10 rings, and being placed on hold for more than 2 minutes after being connected to SSA.

For each week of the survey, we made 200 calls on each Monday, each Friday, and each Tuesday through Thursday, for a total of 600 calls per week or 2,400 calls for each of the two groups of offices. Therefore, we made a total of 1,200 calls each week or 4,800 calls for the entire survey.

Based on our survey results, we computed estimates of the percentage of the calls made to SSA's local offices that received a busy signal. Because our estimates—which apply only to the period of our survey—are based on samples, each estimate has an associated sampling error. These errors were computed at the 95-percent level of statistical confidence. Sampling errors of our estimates vary depending on the factor (week, day, hour, and region) measured. We obtained information regarding the busy rate of the 800 number from SSA.

Comments From the Social Security Administration

Note: GAO comments supplementing those in the report text appear at the end of this appendix.



THE COMMISSIONER OF SOCIAL SECURITY
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND 21235

January 27, 1993

Mr. Joseph F. Delfico
Director, Income Security
Issues
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Delfico:

Enclosed are our comments to your draft report, "Social Security Administration: Telephone Busy Signal Rates at Local Field Offices" (GAO/HRD-93-49).

We appreciate the opportunity to review the report. Please let us know if we may be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Louis D. Enoff".

Louis D. Enoff
Acting Commissioner
of Social Security

Enclosure

cc:
Bryan B. Mitchell

Appendix V
Comments From the Social Security
Administration

COMMENTS OF THE SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION ON THE GENERAL
ACCOUNTING OFFICE DRAFT REPORT, "SOCIAL SECURITY: TELEPHONE
BUSY SIGNAL RATES AT LOCAL SSA FIELD OFFICES" (GAO/HRD-93-49)

We appreciate the work of the General Accounting Office (GAO) in reviewing the Social Security Administration (SSA) busy signal rates in local field offices (FO). We are aware that the public may encounter difficulties when attempting to contact local FOs by telephone. Access difficulties are related to inadequate staffing in some FOs. The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990, which mandated the restoration of telephone access to levels available prior to October 1989, did not provide funding for additional staffing in the affected offices.

However, the national 800 number service, established in order to improve overall service to the public, has over 3,500 teleservice representatives, located in 37 teleservice centers, who are trained to respond to all types of inquiries from the public. There is an additional cadre of 655 employees to respond to calls from the public on the busiest days. Over 55 million calls to the 800 number were answered during fiscal year 1992. Internal studies show that about 80 percent of calls to the 800 number are handled to completion while the caller is on the line. These studies also show that 94 percent of callers expressing an opinion were satisfied with the manner in which the call was handled.

According to AT&T, SSA's provider of telecommunication services under FTS2000, the 800 number received 4,130,185 calls during the period that GAO conducted this study. Since converting to FTS2000 in October 1991, SSA has also measured the public's access to the 800 number by computing the percent of total callers who successfully get through on the same day that the call is initiated. As the report indicates, the 800 number busy rate for the period July 20 through August 14, 1992 was 25.2 percent. However, AT&T statistics during the same period confirm that 93.6 percent of those who called the 800 number got through on the same day.

Other Comments

According to the report, unsuccessful calls included those that were disconnected, encountered a recorded message, were placed on hold for more than 2 minutes or did not get an answer after 10 rings. GAO's definition of unsuccessful calls appears to be too broad. For example, some FOs have call sequencing equipment which includes, as one of its features, a recorded message which delivers general information (e.g., directions to the office) prior to the call being answered by an employee. Or the call might be answered, the nature of the caller's business

See comment 1 (p. 34).

**Appendix V
Comments From the Social Security
Administration**

2

established and the caller put on hold while the issue is researched. Neither example should be considered an unsuccessful call.

See comment 2 (p. 34).

We suggest that GAO reword the footnote on page 11 of Appendix I to omit the reference to the office being "open" before 9 a.m. even though FO employees are on duty before that time. The reader could assume that the public is ignored during the first hour of the business day. In setting its hours, the FO does not advertise that it is open to the public during the initial period in the morning.

See comment 3 (p. 34).

Figures II.5 and II.9 on pages 23 and 28, respectively, portray regional data on incomplete calls. Both show that San Francisco and Seattle Regions had substantially higher rates of incomplete calls compared to the national and other regional statistics. There is no narrative of the number of calls attempted by region or the number of offices called which might explain the higher busy rates for the west coast offices.

The following are GAO's comments on Social Security's letter dated January 27, 1993.

GAO Comments

1. We do not concur with SSA's concern about our definition of unsuccessful calls for the following reasons: First, SSA's comments—that recorded calls should not always be considered unsuccessful because some of its offices have call-sequencing equipment, allowing them to include general information in the recorded message before the call is answered—are not consistent with our survey experiences. Although we did not capture information to identify all the types of recordings encountered, we cannot, among the 4,800 phone calls that were made, recall any recordings that provided information other than suggesting to call back at a later time.

Second, we arbitrarily determined that being placed on hold for more than 2 minutes was a reasonable indication of an unsuccessful call because the questions we asked were very basic and should not have required an extensive amount of time to research. For example, one question that we frequently asked was this: "Are survivor benefits subject to cost-of-living increases?"

Finally, we have used similar criteria in our past reports on SSA telephone service. For example, in reports issued in 1986 and 1987, we considered being placed on hold for more than 2 minutes as representing "difficult" access to SSA.¹

2. Contrary to SSA's view, we believe the footnote on p. 10 of appendix I adequately explains that local SSA offices often use the first hour of the day for administrative purposes.

3. We are unable to explain the higher busy signal rates for the Seattle and San Francisco regions. The objective of this review was simply to measure telephone access to the phase 2 offices. We did no field work to independently determine either the causes of the busy rates or the reasons for variations such as those SSA mentions.

All the data presented in this report are statistically valid within the ranges noted for the various figures. The footnotes to figures II.5 and II.9 indicate that the sampling error rates for the regional data are among the highest

¹Social Security: Improved Telephone Accessibility Would Better Serve the Public (GAO/HRD-86-85, Aug. 29, 1986) and Social Security: Telephone Accessibility (GAO/HRD-87-138, Sept. 16, 1987)

presented in this report. These higher sampling error rates result from our study being designed to measure local telephone service on a weekly, daily, and hourly basis, rather than designed to measure local telephone service on a regional basis.

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