



Highlights of [GAO-04-257](#), a report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Update on Freedom of Information Act Implementation Status

Why GAO Did This Study

Based on principles of openness and accountability in government, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) establishes that federal agencies must provide the public with access to government information, thus enabling them to learn about government operations and decisions. To ensure appropriate implementation of FOIA, Congress requires that agencies report annually to the Attorney General information about agencies' FOIA operations.

GAO has recently reported twice on the annual FOIA reports of 25 agencies. In 2001, GAO reported that data-quality issues limited the usefulness of agencies' annual reports. In 2002, GAO reported that fewer agency FOIA reports had data-quality and consistency problems in fiscal year 2001 compared with fiscal year 2000, although some fiscal year 2001 reports did have data anomalies.

GAO was asked, among other things, to determine (1) trends of reported FOIA implementation between 2000 and 2002 and (2) progress the 25 agencies have made addressing reporting inconsistencies and data-quality problems in annual FOIA reports.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-257.

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

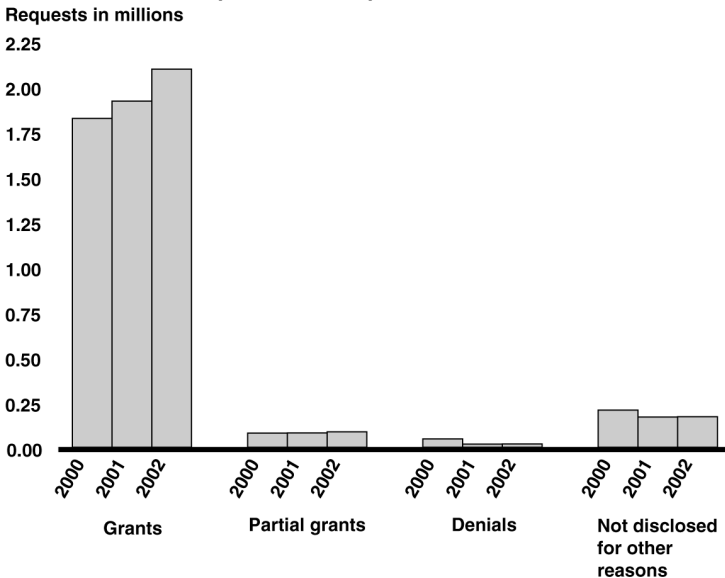
What GAO Found

The data from 2000 to 2002 reveal the following governmentwide trends: (1) agencies reported receiving and processing more requests governmentwide (however, the Department of Veterans Affairs accounts for approximately 60 percent of the requests received and processed, and when it is excluded, the governmentwide total of requests received and processed decreased in this time period); (2) agencies also reported a decrease in the backlog of pending requests remaining at the end of each year; (3) of the FOIA requests processed, agencies granted or partially granted more requests each year; and (4) the number of FOIA requests denied dropped dramatically between 2000 and 2001, and remained low in 2002. The figure below shows the number of requests granted, partially granted, denied, and not disclosed for other reasons for fiscal years 2000, 2001, and 2002.

In response to GAO's 2001 and 2002 reports, the Department of Justice worked with agencies to improve the quality of data in FOIA annual reports. Results were mixed in 2002 in three key reporting areas: requests processed, administrative appeals processed, and pending requests. On the one hand, regarding reported numbers of requests processed and administrative appeals processed, fewer agencies had data-quality problems in 2002 than in 2001. On the other hand, regarding the number of reported pending requests, more agencies had data-quality problems in 2002 than in 2001.

In commenting on a draft of this report, Justice officials generally agreed with its content.

Governmentwide Disposition of Requests, Fiscal Years 2000–2002



Source: FOIA annual reports for fiscal years 2000–2002 (self-reported data).