



Highlights of [GAO-07-441](#), a report to congressional requesters

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

Processing Trends Show Importance of Improvement Plans

Why GAO Did This Study

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) establishes that federal agencies must provide access to their information, enabling the public to learn about government operations and decisions. To help ensure proper implementation, the act requires that agencies report annually to the Attorney General, giving specific information about their FOIA operations, such as numbers of requests received and processed and median processing times. Also, a recent Executive Order directs agencies to develop plans to improve FOIA operations, including decreasing backlog.

For this study, GAO was asked to examine the status and trends of FOIA processing at 25 major agencies as reflected in annual reports, as well as the extent to which improvement plans contain the elements emphasized by the Executive Order. To do so, GAO analyzed the 25 agencies' annual reports and improvement plans.

What GAO Recommends

GAO suggests that the Congress consider requiring annual reports to provide additional statistics, including arithmetic means. GAO also makes recommendations to strengthen selected improvement plans, among other things. The agencies reviewed generally agreed with the draft report, except that the Treasury partially disagreed with GAO's assessment and associated recommendation. GAO continues to support its assessment and recommendation.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-441.

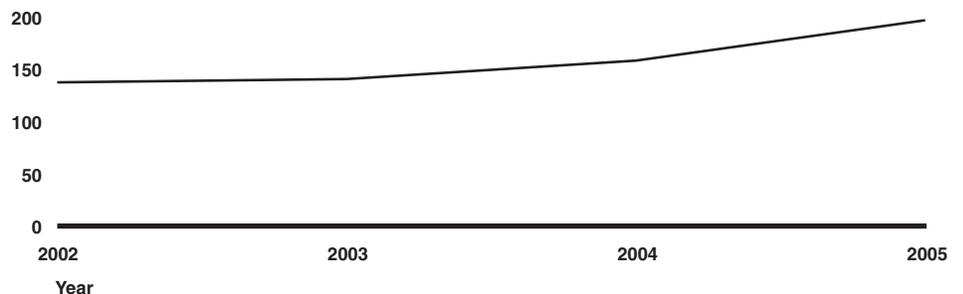
To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Linda Koontz at (202) 512-6240 or koontzl@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Based on data in annual reports from 2002 to 2005, the public continued to submit more requests for information from the federal government through FOIA. Despite increasing the numbers of requests processed, many agencies did not keep pace with the volume of requests that they received. As a result, the number of pending requests carried over from year to year has been steadily increasing (see fig.). Agency reports also show great variations in the median times to process requests (less than 10 days for some agency components to more than 100 days at others). However, the ability to determine trends in processing times is limited by the form in which these times are reported: that is, in medians only, without averages (that is, arithmetical means) or ranges. Although medians have the advantage of providing representative numbers that are not skewed by a few outliers, it is not statistically possible to combine several medians to develop broader generalizations (as can be done with arithmetical means). This limitation on aggregating data impedes the development of broader pictures of FOIA operations, which could be useful in monitoring efforts to improve processing and reduce the increasing backlog of requests, as intended by the Executive Order.

The improvement plans submitted by the 25 agencies mostly included goals and timetables addressing the four areas of improvement emphasized by the Executive Order: eliminating or reducing any backlog of FOIA requests; increasing reliance on dissemination of records that can be made available to the public without the need for a FOIA request, such as through posting on Web sites; improving communications with requesters about the status of their requests; and increasing public awareness of FOIA processing. Most of the plans (20 of 25) provided goals and timetables in all four areas; some agencies omitted goals in areas where they considered they were already strong. Although details of a few plans could be improved, all the plans focus on making measurable improvements and form a reasonable basis for carrying out the goals of the Executive Order.

Total FOIA Requests Pending at End of Year, 2002–2005
Requests pending in thousands



Sources: GAO analysis; FOIA annual reports for fiscal years 2002-2005 (self-reported data).