



Highlights of [GAO-12-754](#), a report to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

FOIA establishes a legal right of access to government information on the basis of principles of openness and accountability in government. To facilitate the public's ability to obtain information on federal agencies' compliance with FOIA and other information related to the act, Justice launched a website—FOIA.gov—in March 2011. Accordingly, GAO was requested to determine (1) the origin and reliability of the data on FOIA.gov and (2) the actions being taken to improve FOIA.gov and develop additional capabilities. To accomplish these objectives, GAO reviewed Justice's plan for the website and analyzed the consistency of the data on FOIA.gov and the completeness of the results provided by the website's feature that allows users to create custom reports. GAO also interviewed cognizant Justice and other agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Justice ensure that the "Advanced Reporting" feature on FOIA.gov produces reports that are complete. In written comments on a draft of this report, the Director of Justice's Office of Information Policy agreed with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-12-754](#). For more information, contact Valerie C. Melvin at (202) 512-6304 or melvinv@gao.gov.

June 2012

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

Key Website Is Generally Reliable, but Action Is Needed to Ensure Completeness of Its Reports

What GAO Found

The Department of Justice's (Justice) website called FOIA.gov presents data from agencies' annual Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) reports. Agencies submit their annual reports to Justice in print and in electronic form and Justice posts the electronic data onto the website. For fiscal year 2010, the data GAO reviewed on the website were generally consistent with the data in the agencies' print versions. According to Justice officials, the department has taken steps to ensure accuracy and consistency of the data. These steps include providing annual training to agency personnel who are responsible for preparation of the FOIA annual reports and posting guidance for report completion and submission on the Office of Information Policy website. In addition, the department has implemented checks to ensure data consistency between the two report versions. Specifically, it has developed and provided agencies with a tool to be used in creating the electronic version for the website. The tool contains features that assist agencies in compiling their data and math checks to help ensure consistency. Further, Justice officials have a checklist they use as a guide for checking the consistency of the electronic versions of agencies' annual reports against the print versions. However, FOIA.gov's "Advanced Reporting" feature, which provides users with the capability to generate custom reports based on user-selected queries, did not always produce complete results. Specifically, certain reports showed data for fewer than the 97 agencies that should have been included. Justice officials stated that they had taken steps to correct the specific instances of incomplete reports that GAO had identified. Nevertheless, GAO's experience in using FOIA.gov raises concerns about whether the website will produce complete reports in response to all queries.

Justice has made improvements to FOIA.gov since the website's initial deployment in March 2011. For example, the department added a search feature to help users locate information on an agency's website, including documents agencies have released in response to previous FOIA requests. Further, in March 2012, the department added information in the Spanish language, as well as links to agencies' FOIA web portals. While Justice does not intend to expand FOIA.gov's capabilities to serve as an internal FOIA processing system, three other agencies—the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Commerce, and the National Archives and Records Administration—have undertaken the development of a multiagency system that is intended to complement FOIA.gov and provide such capabilities.