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GAO

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

General Government Division

B-260230

April 5, 1996

The Honorable Paul S. Sarbanes
United States Senate

Dear Senator Sarbanes:

This letter responds to a request we received from former Representative Kweisi Mfume asking us to provide information on the status of African-Americans in the Social Security Administration's (SSA) workforce in the Baltimore, Maryland, area. As Mr. Mfume's office and your office agreed, we are sending you the information Mr. Mfume requested. Specifically, Mr. Mfume asked us to update our 1987 report[1] on SSA's Baltimore area workforce[2] with regard to

- the representational status of African-Americans, overall and by pay grade, in fiscal year 1994 as compared to fiscal year 1989 and

- how African-Americans fared in hires, promotions, separations, awards, training, and disciplinary actions since fiscal year 1989.

SUMMARY

In September 1994, African-Americans accounted for nearly 44 percent of SSA's Baltimore area workforce, which was about 0.8 percent lower than in September 1989. African-American women made up 36 percent of the workforce in 1994; African-American men almost 8 percent. The former constituted a slight decrease from 1989; the latter, a slight increase.

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[1]Affirmative Action: Social Security Can Do More to Improve Blacks' Representation in Its Workforce (GAO/HRD-87-2, Jan. 2, 1987).

[2]Throughout this letter, we use the term "Baltimore area workforce" to refer to employees in SSA Headquarters, the Office of Central Operations, and the Office of Disability and International Operations. As explained in the Background section, these offices were essentially the ones we covered in our 1987 report.

In September 1994, about 97 percent of SSA's Baltimore area employees were in the General Schedule (GS) pay plan. For these employees, we combined data into four pay-grade groups for analytical purposes. More than two-thirds of the employees in grades 1-4 and 5-8 were African-American. About 34 percent of the employees in grades 9-12 were African-Americans, as were approximately 14 percent in grades 13-15. Representation of African-Americans in grades 1-4 was about 2.5 percent lower than in September 1989, while representation of African-Americans in the latter three categories was about 6, 7, and 4 percent higher, respectively.

The percentage of African-Americans in the Senior Executive Service (SES) had also increased since 1989, from 17 percent to 27 percent. Enclosure I contains more information about the representational status of African-American employees in SSA's Baltimore area workforce.

In addition, African-Americans accounted for or received about

- 34 percent of SSA's Baltimore area hires in fiscal year 1994 compared to 61 percent in fiscal year 1989;
- 53 percent of the promotions awarded to SSA's Baltimore area employees in fiscal year 1994 compared to 49 percent in fiscal year 1989;
- 31 percent of the Baltimore area employees who separated from SSA employment in fiscal year 1994 compared to 52 percent in fiscal year 1989;[3]
- 42 percent of the awards SSA gave to its Baltimore area employees in fiscal year 1994 compared to 37 percent in fiscal year 1989;
- 37 percent of the training opportunities provided to SSA's Baltimore area employees in fiscal year 1994 compared to 36 percent in fiscal year 1989; and
- 57 percent of the disciplinary actions taken against SSA's Baltimore area employees in fiscal year 1994 compared to 55 percent in fiscal year 1989.

Enclosure II contains more information on hiring, promotions, separations, awards, training, and disciplinary actions.

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[3]These percentages do not include separations due to death or voluntary or disability retirement.

BACKGROUND

The Baltimore area workforce we reported on in 1987 was employed at SSA headquarters, the Office of Central Records Operations (OCRO), and the Office of Disability Operations. It numbered about 15,300 employees in 1985, which was the last year examined in the 1987 report. The Office of Disability Operations was reorganized after 1985 into the Office of Disability and International Operations (ODIO).

In September 1989, SSA Headquarters, OCRO, and ODIO together employed about 14,900 employees. In September 1994, they employed about 14,100 employees. SSA refers to offices at SSA Headquarters as staff offices, and these offices accounted for about 48 percent of the 14,100 employees. OCRO and ODIO, which SSA considers to be operational offices, accounted for about 53 percent of those employees.

On March 31, 1995, SSA became an independent agency, separate from the oversight of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). At that time, SSA assumed responsibility for personnel and management activities that HHS formerly performed, such as operating a discrimination complaint processing system.

APPROACH

To determine the extent of any change in the representation of African-Americans since our 1987 report, we obtained workforce data for SSA headquarters, OCRO, and ODIO.[4] The data were of persons employed as of September 30 of fiscal years 1989 and 1994 in all permanent positions. The data showed the employees' race, national origin, gender, and pay grade.

To determine the rate at which African-Americans were hired, promoted, trained, and received awards or disciplinary actions, we obtained SSA data that identified the number of such events or "transactions" during fiscal years 1989 and 1994. The data also identified the race, national origin, and gender of the affected employees.

The workforce and transaction data we used came from SSA's Human Resource Management Information System (HRMIS). We did not verify these data.

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[4]These offices do not cover every SSA employee in the Baltimore area. Information on employees in SSA "field" offices are excluded from SSA headquarters, OCRO, and ODIO data.

Although Mr. Mfume originally asked us to use fiscal year 1985 as the beginning year for our comparisons, we were unable to do so because the complete workforce and transaction data we needed were not available. According to an SSA official, fiscal year 1989 was the earliest year for which complete HRMIS data were available. As agreed with Mr. Mfume's office, we therefore determined changes in SSA's Baltimore area workforce between fiscal years 1989 and 1994.

We performed our work in the Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, Maryland, metropolitan areas, between October 1994 and December 1995 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

AGENCY COMMENTS AND OUR EVALUATION

We met on March 21, 1996, with the Deputy Commissioner for Human Resources, the Director of the Office of Civil Rights and Equal Opportunity, and other SSA officials to discuss a draft of this letter. They generally characterized the letter as being fair and the data as accurate. The agency officials also noted that it would be useful to provide a benchmark against which to compare some of the key data on SSA. However, such a comparison was beyond the scope of our work.

The officials said that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) requires them to make comparisons of workforce data to the appropriate labor pool, which in this case is the Baltimore Civilian Labor Force (CLF),[5] and that CLF data show that African-Americans represented 23.2 percent of the Baltimore CLF in 1990. According to the officials, using this figure as a basis for comparison, the 1994 SSA data we present would appear even more positive. For example, the 34 percent rate at which African-Americans were hired in 1994 was above the Baltimore area CLF representation rate for African-Americans.

Likewise, the SSA officials noted that the 44 percent African-American employee representation rate in the SSA Baltimore area workforce was about twice that for the Baltimore metropolitan area CLF. The officials also pointed out that the increase in the percent of promotions going to African-Americans from 49 to 53 percent during the 1989-1994 period appears even more positive when viewed in light of the SSA workforce's 44 percent African-American representation.

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[5]The CLF, derived from the most recent decennial census, includes all persons 16 years of age or older who were employed or seeking employment. It excludes those persons in the armed forces.

The agency officials also made a suggestion for clarifying the presentation of data in table I.2. The table has been modified to address this suggestion.

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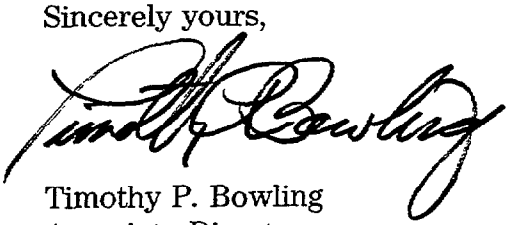
As arranged with Mr. Mfume's office, unless you publicly release its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this correspondence until 10 days after its issuance date. At that time, we will send copies to the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration and other interested parties. Copies will also be made available to others upon request. Please call Xavier Richardson, Assistant Director, or me on (202) 512-3511 if you have any further questions.

Sincerely yours,



Timothy P. Bowling
Associate Director
Federal Management and
Workforce Issues

Enclosures 2

AFRICAN-AMERICAN EMPLOYMENT RATES IN SSA'S BALTIMORE AREA WORKFORCE

In September 1994, African-American employees represented 43.8 percent of SSA's workforce in the Baltimore area. This was 0.8 percent lower than in September 1989. (See table I.1.)

In September 1994, African-American men made up 7.8 percent of SSA's Baltimore area workforce, which was slightly higher than in September 1989. African-American women made up 36 percent of SSA's Baltimore area workforce in September 1994, which was 1 percent lower than in September 1989. (See table I.1.)

Table I.1: Percentage of SSA's Baltimore Area Workforce by Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Group, September 1989 and September 1994

EEO group	Percentage of SSA Baltimore area workforce	
	September 1989	September 1994
African-American male	7.6%	7.8%
African-American female	37.0	36.0
White male	27.2	27.4
White female	26.3	26.3
All others-male	1.0	1.2
All others-female	0.9	1.3

Note: "All others" includes Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American employees, as well as employees of unspecified race or ethnicity.

Source: HRMIS data.

GRADE-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT

In September 1989 and September 1994, nearly all of SSA's Baltimore area employees were in "white-collar" jobs and paid under the GS and SES pay plans. The GS plan comprises pay grades 1 through 15. For analytical purposes, we combined GS data into four pay-grade groups: grades 1-4, 5-8, 9-12, and 13-15. Employees in pay grades 13 through 15 are often considered the government's middle managers. Members of the SES are the government's top career managers.
As table I.2 shows, most African-American employees in SSA's Baltimore area workforce were in grades 1 through 8.

Table I.2: Number and Percentage of All Employees and African-American Employees by Pay Plan in SSA's Baltimore Area Workforce, September 1989 and September 1994

Pay plan and grade	As of September 1989				As of September 1994			
	All employees		African-American employees		All employees		African-American employees	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
GS pay-grade range								
1-4	2,476	16.6%	1,859	28.0%	1,778	12.6%	1,290	20.9%
5-8	4,709	31.6	2,941	44.3	3,306	23.5	2,267	36.7
9-12	5,014	33.7	1,342	20.2	5,970	42.4	2,042	33.1
13-15	2,217	14.9	219	3.3	2,575	18.3	350	5.7
SES	53	0.4	9	0.1	62	0.4	17	0.3
Wage System	425	2.9	270	4.1	381	2.7	203	3.3
Other	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.0	0	0.0
Total	14,894	100.0%	6,640	100.0%	14,073	100.0%	6,169	100.0%

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: HRMIS data.

As table I.2 also shows, SSA's Baltimore area workforce included 62 SES members in September 1994, of whom 17 (27.4 percent) were African-Americans. Their numbers and percentage had increased since September 1989 when 9 of the 53 SES members, or 17 percent, were African-Americans.

The Federal Wage System pay plan listed in table I.2 covers SSA's "blue-collar" jobs. In September 1994, African-American employees accounted for 53.3 percent of the wage plan employees in SSA's Baltimore area workforce. In September 1989, they accounted for 63.5 percent.

Table I.3 provides further information about African-American employees in the GS pay-grade range. It shows the percentage of GS employees by pay-grade range and the percentage of African-American employees within that same grade range. For example, in September 1994, 13 percent of all GS employees were in grades 1-4. African-American employees accounted for 72.6 percent of the employees in grades 1-4.

Table I.3: Percentage of All Employees by GS Pay-Grade Range and Percentage of African-American Employees Within Those Ranges, September 1989 and September 1994

GS pay-grade range	Percentage as of September 1989		Percentage as of September 1994	
	All GS employees	Employees **within** pay-grade range who were African-American	All GS employees	Employees **within** pay-grade range who were African-American
1 - 4	17.2%	75.1%	13.0%	72.6%
5 - 8	32.7	62.5	24.3	68.6
9 - 12	34.8	26.8	43.8	34.2
13 - 15	15.4	9.9	18.9	13.6

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: HRMIS data.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN REPRESENTATION IN SELECTED JOBS

In our 1987 report, we examined African-American representation in five job series that were mainstream to SSA in the Baltimore area. We reexamined the five for this review.

Job Series 301, General Clerical and Administrative. In September 1994, about 47 percent of the 155 employees in this job series were African-Americans. Of the 155 employees, 60 (about 39 percent) were in grades 9-12, and 13 (about 8 percent) were in grades 13-15. African-Americans accounted for 36.7 percent of the employees in grades 9-12. There were no African-Americans at grades 13-15. The percentages of African-Americans in grades 9-12 and 13-15 were the same in September 1989 as they were in September 1994–36.7 percent and 0 percent.

Job Series 305, Mail and File Clerk. In September 1994, SSA's Baltimore workforce included 1,042 mail and file clerks, 75 percent of whom were African-Americans. All but 14 of the 1,042 clerks were in grades 1-8. Of the remaining 14 clerks, 12 were in grades 9-12, and 2 were in grades 13-15. Eight of the 12 (66.7 percent) and 1 of the 2 (50 percent) were African-Americans. In September 1989, the Baltimore workforce included 8 clerks at grades 9-12, and 6 (75 percent) were African-Americans. There were 13 clerks at grades 13-15, and 4 (30.8 percent) were African-Americans.

Job Series 334, Computer Specialist. In September 1994, about 1,900 SSA employees in the Baltimore area were computer specialists; about 18 percent of these were African-Americans. Most of the computer specialists (about 63 percent) were in grades 9-12. The next greatest number (about 30 percent) were in grades 13-15. African-Americans accounted for 19.6 percent of the employees in grades 9-12 and 7.8 percent of the employees in grades 13-15. These percentages are higher than they were in September 1989, when African-Americans accounted for 14.5 percent of the computer specialists in grades 9-12 and 6.1 percent of those in grades 13-15.

Job Series 993, Social Insurance Claims Examiner. In September 1994, about 1,900 SSA employees in the Baltimore area were claims examiners. About 51.2 percent of these were African-Americans. The largest number of examiners–1,472 or 77 percent–were in grades 9-12. About 48.6 percent of these employees were African-American. There were 97 employees at grades 13-15, and about 24.7 percent of these employees were African-Americans. In September 1989, African-Americans accounted for 33.8 percent of the examiners at grades 9-12 and 17.3 percent of those at grades 13-15.

Job Series 998, Claims Clerk. In September 1994, this series included 1,332 employees from SSA's Baltimore area workforce. Most of these employees, about 77 percent, were African-American. The vast majority of the 1,332 employees, approximately 86.5 percent, were in grades 1-8. However, 171 employees (about 12.8 percent) were in grades 9-12, and 8 employees (about 0.6 percent) were in grades 13-15. Of the employees in grades 9-12, 107 (62.6 percent) were African-Americans. Of the employees in grades 13-15, 3 (37.5 percent) were African-Americans. In September 1989, African-Americans accounted for 134 (59.8 percent) of the clerks in grades 9-12 and 1 (12.5 percent) of the 8 clerks in grades 13-15.

PERSONNEL TRANSACTIONS THAT AFFECTED SSA'S BALTIMORE AREA WORKFORCE IN FISCAL YEARS 1989 AND 1994

EMPLOYEE HIRING

SSA's Baltimore area offices hired 256 employees in fiscal year 1994, about 34 percent of whom were African-Americans. About 27 percent of the African-American hires were male, and 73 percent were female.

All but 9 of the 256 new hires were placed in GS positions. Those hired into GS positions most frequently started at grades 1-4 (about 46 percent) and grades 9-12 (about 35 percent). All of the African-Americans hired went into GS positions. About 80 percent started at grades 1-4, and about 12 percent started at grades 9-12.

In fiscal year 1989, 382 people were hired by the Baltimore area offices. Of that number, about 61 percent were African-American. Nearly all of the 382 people who were hired went into GS positions, and of those that did, about 72 percent went into grades 1-4. Of the African-American hires who went into GS positions, about 90 percent went into grades 1-4. (See table II.1 for data on hires during fiscal year 1989 and fiscal year 1994.

Table II.1: Number of Persons Hired for SSA's Baltimore Area Workforce, by EEO Group and Pay Plan, Fiscal Years 1989 and 1994

EEO group	GS grades				SES	Wage
	1-4	5-8	9-12	13-15		
Fiscal year 1989						
African-American	201	14	7	2	0	8
White	48	35	18	19	1	6
All others	17	3	1	2	0	0
Fiscal year 1994						
African-American	69	6	10	1	0	0
White	33	29	70	6	1	7
All others	11	4	7	1	1	0

Note: "All others" includes Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American employees, as well as those of unspecified race or ethnicity.

Source: HRMIS data.

EMPLOYEE PROMOTIONS

During fiscal year 1994, SSA's Baltimore area offices awarded 1,400 promotions. About 52.6 percent of the promotions went to African-American employees.

All but 22 of the 1,400 promotions were in the GS pay plan. Of the GS promotions, most were to grades 5-8 (34 percent) and grades 9-12 (54 percent). About 66.5 percent of the promotions to grades 5-8 and about 46 percent of the promotions to grades 9-12 went to African-American employees. African-American employees received 27 percent of the 88 promotions to grades 13-15.

During fiscal year 1989, SSA's Baltimore area offices awarded 2,229 promotions. About 48.7 percent of the promotions went to African-American employees. About 98

percent of the 2,229 promotions were in the GS pay plan, and of those, most were for grades 5-8 (38.5 percent) and grades 9-12 (36.8 percent). African-American employees received 65.8 percent of the promotions to grades 5-8 and 31.1 percent of those to grades 9-12. They received about 17.1 percent of the 258 promotions to grades 13-15. (See table II.2 for data on promotions during fiscal year 1989 and fiscal year 1994.)

Table II.2: Number of Promotions in SSA's Baltimore Area Workforce, by EEO Group and Pay Plan, Fiscal Years 1989 and 1994

EEO group	GS grades				SES	Wage	Other
	1-4	5-8	9-12	13-15			
Fiscal year 1989							
African-American	210	553	250	44	0	29	0
White	69	272	537	202	0	15	1
All others	3	15	17	12	0	0	0
Fiscal year 1994							
African-American	49	307	344	24	0	12	0
White	29	143	372	55	0	9	0
All others	4	12	30	9	0	1	0

Note: "All others" includes Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American employees, as well as those of unspecified race or ethnicity.

Source: HRMIS data.

EMPLOYEE SEPARATIONS

In fiscal year 1994, 548 employees from SSA's Baltimore area workforce separated from SSA employment. This number included 298 employees who retired (voluntary or disability retirement) or died.

For analytical purposes, we examined the remaining 250 separations. About 31 percent of the 250 employees who separated were African-American.

In fiscal year 1989, 979 Baltimore area employees separated from SSA employment. That number included 282 who died or retired (voluntary or disability retirement). Of the remaining 697 employees who separated, about 52 percent were African-American employees.

SSA recorded the separations under the following categories:

- discharged during probation or trial period,
- removal,
- resignation,
- resignation in lieu of involuntary action,
- retirement in lieu of involuntary action,
- termination of appointment,
- involuntary termination, and
- transfer to other HHS units.

Table II.3 shows the total number of separations in each category and the number of separated employees who were African-American.

Table II.3: Number of Employees (Total and African-American) in SSA's Baltimore Area Workforce Who Separated From SSA Employment, by Separation Category, Fiscal Years 1989 and 1994

Separation action	Number of separations FY89		Number of separations FY94	
	Total	African-American employees	Total	African-American employees
Discharge during probation or trial period	12	11	3	3
Removal	13	11	19	11
Resignation	284	153	65	31
Resignation in lieu of involuntary action	144	68	68	10
Retirement in lieu of involuntary action	0	0	67	12
Appointment termination	144	90	14	8
Involuntary termination	2	1	0	0
Transfer to other HHS units	98	30	14	3
Total	697	364	250	78

Source: HRMIS data.

EMPLOYEE AWARDS

Employees may receive cash or honorary awards based on their work performance. Honorary awards are generally citations by the Commissioner, a Deputy Commissioner, or an Associate Commissioner. Employees can receive more than one award in a fiscal year.

As can be computed from table II.4, SSA gave nearly 21,200 awards to employees in the Baltimore area during fiscal year 1994, and African-American employees received about 42 percent of these. In fiscal year 1989, SSA gave about 10,300 awards to its Baltimore area employees, with African-American employees receiving about 37 percent.

Table II.4: Number of Awards Received by Employees in SSA's Baltimore Area Workforce, by EEO Group and Pay Plan, Fiscal Years 1989 and 1994

EEO group	GS grades				SES	Wage
	1-4	5-8	9-12	13-15		
Fiscal year 1989						
African-American	831	1,697	950	195	2	117
White	306	1,203	2,815	1,835	7	93
All others	8	34	115	84	1	3
Fiscal year 1994						
African-American	1,739	3,355	2,805	569	1	350
White	571	1,595	5,810	3,554	3	304
All others	11	65	206	207	1	17

Note: "All others" includes Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American employees, as well as those of unspecified race or ethnicity.

Source: HRMIS data.

EMPLOYEE TRAINING

SSA training data reflects training opportunities taken by employees during the fiscal year by grade grouping. According to SSA, its training records only capture the number of instances of training.

During fiscal year 1994, about 19,250 training opportunities were taken by SSA employees in the Baltimore area. The number was about 12,570 in fiscal year 1989. As can be computed from table II.5, the percentage that African-American employees received was about 37 percent in fiscal year 1994 and 36 percent in fiscal year 1989.

Table II.5: Number of Training Opportunities Received by Employees in SSA's Baltimore Area Workforce, by EEO Group and Pay Plan, Fiscal Years 1989 and 1994

EEO group	GS grades				SES	Wage
	1-4	5-8	9-12	13-15		
Fiscal year 1989						
African-American	607	1,870	1,738	290	2	24
White	166	1,341	4,212	1,911	37	24
All others	20	63	167	92	7	1
Fiscal year 1994						
African-American	761	2,641	2,722	768	61	98
White	189	1,165	5,949	3,907	129	87
All others	8	115	348	288	13	2

Note 1: The numbers in the table for fiscal year 1994 add to 19,251. Two additional training opportunities were received by Hispanic employees in an "other" pay plan.

Note 2: "All others" includes Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American employees, as well as those of unspecified race or ethnicity.

Source: HRMIS data.

DISCIPLINARY ACTIONS

Disciplinary actions are adverse actions taken against an employee for infractions such as violations of rules or regulations, and can be progressive. An employee may receive a verbal notification for the first offense, which could then be followed by a written warning or a written notification of suspension. If the offense is an egregious one, termination may result. Employees may be disciplined for such offenses as poor work attendance, falsification of documents, security breaches, and insubordination.

In fiscal year 1994, 498 disciplinary actions were taken against employees in SSA's Baltimore area workforce. The number was 567 in fiscal year 1989. As table II.6 shows, African-American employees received almost 57 percent of the disciplinary actions in fiscal year 1994 and approximately 55 percent in fiscal year 1989.

Table II.6: Number and Percentage of Disciplinary Actions by EEO Group, SSA's Baltimore Area Workforce, Fiscal Years 1989 and 1994

EEO group	Fiscal year 1989		Fiscal year 1994	
	Number of disciplinary actions	Percentage of disciplinary actions	Number of disciplinary actions	Percentage of disciplinary actions
African-American male	56	9.9%	55	11.0%
African-American female	255	45.0	228	45.8
White male	94	16.6	87	17.5
White female	154	27.2	119	23.9
All others–male	3	0.5	2	0.4
All others–female	5	0.9	7	1.4

Note 1: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Note 2: "All others" includes Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American employees, as well as those of unspecified race or ethnicity.

Source: HRMIS data.

An SSA official told us that the issue of disciplinary actions has been studied and efforts are under way to address the matter. Specifically, SSA plans to provide managers and employees with increased training on workforce diversity. It also plans to involve management, employee groups, and employee counseling and personnel staff to provide further intervention and support by identifying employee behavior that may lead to disciplinary actions.

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