

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-16](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Autism—a developmental disorder involving communication and social impairment—is an important public health concern. From fiscal years 2008 through 2012, 12 federal agencies awarded at least \$1.4 billion to support autism research and other autism-related activities. The CAA directed the IACC to coordinate HHS autism activities and monitor all federal autism activities. It also required the IACC to develop and annually update a strategic plan for autism research. This plan is organized into 7 research areas that contain specific objectives.

GAO was asked to examine federal autism efforts. In this report, GAO (1) analyzes the extent to which federal agencies fund potentially duplicative autism research, and (2) assesses the extent to which IACC and agencies coordinate and monitor federal autism activities. GAO analyzed agencies' data and documents, and interviewed federal agency officials and select nonfederal IACC members.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that (1) HHS improve the usefulness of IACC data to enhance coordination and monitoring of federal autism activities, and (2) DOD, Education, HHS, and NSF improve their coordination of autism research. HHS disagreed with the first recommendation stating that it was already making adequate efforts. The agencies supported the need for improved coordination but, except for DOD, disputed that any duplication occurs. GAO continues to believe the recommendations are warranted as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-14-16](#). For more information, contact Marcia Crosse at (202) 512-7114 or crossem@gao.gov.

November 2013

FEDERAL AUTISM ACTIVITIES

Better Data and More Coordination Needed to Help Avoid the Potential for Unnecessary Duplication

What GAO Found

Eighty-four percent of the autism research projects funded by federal agencies had the potential to be duplicative. Of the 1,206 autism research projects funded by federal agencies from fiscal years 2008 through 2012, 1,018 projects were potentially duplicative because the projects were categorized to the same objectives in the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee's (IACC) strategic plan. Funding similar research on the same topic is sometimes appropriate—for example, for purposes of replicating or corroborating results—but in some instances, funding similar research may lead to unnecessary duplication. The potentially duplicative research projects included those funded by the Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Education (Education), National Science Foundation (NSF), and agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)—Administration for Children and Families, Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Each agency funded at least 1 autism research project in the same strategic plan objective as another agency. For example, 5 agencies awarded approximately \$15.2 million for 20 autism research projects related to 1 objective to test methods to improve dissemination, implementation, and sustainability of evidence-based interventions, services, and supports in diverse community settings.

The IACC's and federal agencies' efforts to coordinate and monitor federal autism activities were limited. The IACC—composed of federal and nonfederal members—met regularly and issued several reports, such as a strategic plan and portfolio analysis—a report that provides information on autism research projects, organized by the strategic plan objectives. The IACC has also released a companion database to its portfolio analysis. However, IACC members provided mixed views on the usefulness of the IACC's meetings, strategic plan, and portfolio analysis in aiding coordination and monitoring. While three agencies—CDC, DOD, and NIH—regularly used the committee's strategic plan and portfolio analysis, others did not. Shortcomings in the data the IACC used for its portfolio analysis limited its ability to coordinate HHS autism activities and monitor federal autism activities—as required by the Combating Autism Act of 2006 (CAA). For example, GAO found that the data used by the IACC was outdated, not tracked over time, inconsistent, and incomplete. These weaknesses limited the IACC's ability to monitor its progress on its coordination and monitoring efforts—which, in prior work, GAO established as a best practice for inter-agency collaboration, as well as a federal internal control standard. In addition, these weaknesses limited agencies' ability to use these data to identify coordination opportunities and avoid the potential for unnecessary duplication. Such information is important because of the involvement of multiple agencies. Lastly, apart from their participation on the IACC, there were limited instances of agencies coordinating, and agencies did not have robust or routine procedures for monitoring federal autism activities. Per federal internal control standards, agencies should establish a means of communicating with other agencies; this is important to maximize the efficiency of the federal autism investment and minimize the potential for unnecessary duplication.