

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-67](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

As the nation's largest employer, the federal government employed about 2.7 million workers in 2019. Although the pay gap between men and women in the federal workforce is smaller than it is for the entire U.S. workforce and has narrowed over time, studies show that pay disparities continue to exist. GAO was asked to explore the current status of pay equity in the federal workforce.

This report examines how the pay gap between men and women in the federal workforce has changed since 1999, and what factors account for any remaining gap; and the extent to which OPM and EEOC have monitored and taken steps to address the pay gap in the federal workforce, including assessing potential disparities in promotions; among other objectives. GAO analyzed OPM's Enterprise Human Resources Integration data on about 2.1 million federal employees from September 1999 to September 2017 (the most recent reliable data available at the time of GAO's review); reviewed federal agency promotion data collected by EEOC for fiscal years 2015 through 2017 (the most recent available data); and interviewed OPM and EEOC officials and reviewed relevant documentation.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that EEOC take steps to assess the quality of federal agency promotion data and address missing data with agencies in a timelier manner. EEOC neither agreed nor disagreed with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-21-67](#). For more information, contact Cindy Brown Barnes at (202) 512-7215 or brownbarnesc@gao.gov.

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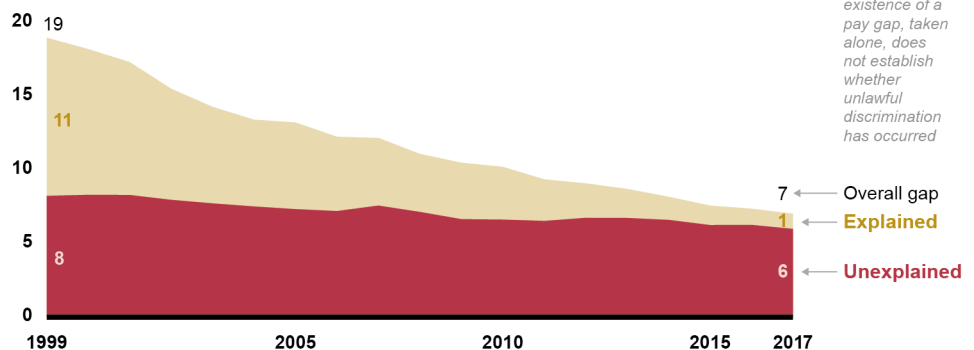
GENDER PAY DIFFERENCES

The Pay Gap for Federal Workers Has Continued to Narrow, but Better Quality Data on Promotions Are Needed

What GAO Found

The overall pay gap between men and women in the federal workforce has narrowed considerably, from 19 cents on the dollar in 1999 to 7 cents in 2017, but the current pay gap is greater for certain groups of women, according to GAO's analysis of data from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). Two trends help explain why the pay gap has narrowed: (1) men and women have become more similar in measurable factors related to pay, such as occupation; and (2) women have earned slightly higher rates of pay increases than men. In 2017, most of the overall pay gap—or 6 of 7 cents on the dollar—was not explained by differences between men and women in measurable factors (see figure). This unexplained portion of the pay gap may be due to factors not captured in the data GAO analyzed, such as work experience outside the federal government, or factors that cannot be measured, such as discrimination and individual choices. In 2017, the overall and unexplained gaps were greater for certain groups. For example, compared to White men, the unexplained gap was greater for Hispanic/Latina, Black, and American Indian or Alaska Native women than for White and Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander women.

Pay Gap between Men and Women in the Federal Workforce, 1999 to 2017
Pay gap (in cents on the dollar)



Note: The existence of a pay gap, taken alone, does not establish whether unlawful discrimination has occurred

Source: GAO analysis of the Office of Personnel Management's Enterprise Human Resources Integration data. | GAO-21-67

OPM and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) have taken steps to analyze data on the pay gap and help agencies address it. From 2014 to 2016, OPM implemented a government-wide strategy to address the pay gap, and officials said their future efforts will include monitoring the pay gap periodically. EEOC annually collects workforce data from agencies and provides related technical assistance, and officials said they plan to expand these efforts. These data include promotions by gender and race and ethnicity, which EEOC and agencies use to identify potential barriers to career advancement, but GAO found these data were not sufficiently complete. Of the 51 data tables GAO requested, 35 were either missing or had at least one incomplete data element. EEOC officials said this is partly due to promotion applicants not being required to provide demographic information. However, EEOC has not fully assessed the reliability of these data and generally does not follow up with agencies about missing data between technical assistance visits. Without taking steps to assess and improve the quality of these data in a timelier manner, EEOC may miss opportunities to ensure equal opportunity for all promotion applicants.