



# The Nation's Long-Term Fiscal Outlook

## April 2008 Update

### GAO's Long-Term Fiscal Simulations

Since 1992, GAO has published long-term fiscal simulations of what might happen to federal deficits and debt levels under varying policy assumptions. We developed our long-term model in response to a bipartisan request from Members of Congress who were concerned about the long-term effects of fiscal policy.

Our simulations were updated with the Trustees 2008 intermediate projections and continue to indicate that the long-term federal fiscal outlook remains unsustainable. This update combined with our analysis of the fiscal outlook of state and local governments demonstrates that the fiscal challenges facing all levels of government are linked and should be considered in a strategic and integrated manner.

We update our simulations three times a year as new estimates become available from

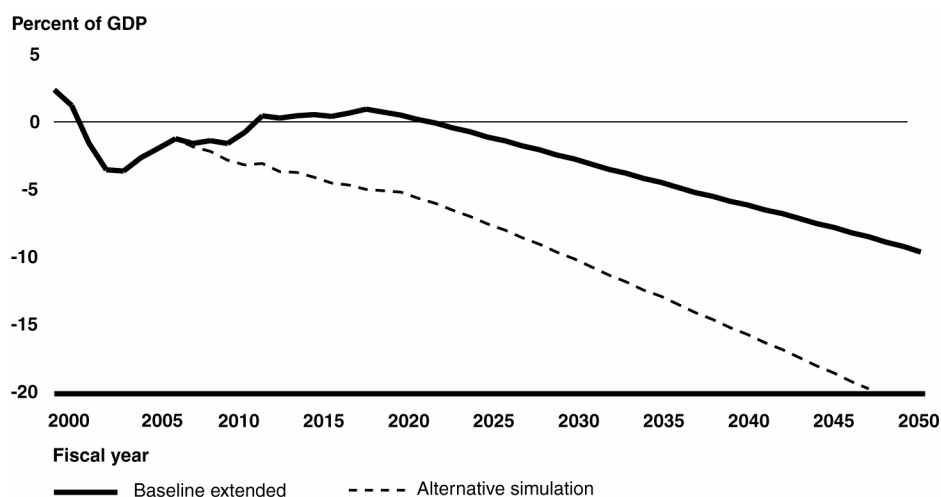
- the Congressional Budget Office's (CBO) *Budget and Economic Outlook* (January),
- Social Security and Medicare *Trustees Reports* (spring), and
- CBO's *Budget and Economic Outlook: An Update* (late summer).

This product responds to congressional interest in receiving updated simulation results. Additional information about the GAO model, its assumptions, data, and charts can be found at <http://www.gao.gov/special.pubs/longterm/>. For more information, contact Susan J. Irving at (202) 512-9142 or [irvings@gao.gov](mailto:irvings@gao.gov).

## Health Care Cost Growth and Demographic Trends Drive the Long-Term Fiscal Challenge

Our updated simulations continue to illustrate that the long-term fiscal outlook is unsustainable. (See fig. 1) Despite some improvement in the long-term outlook for federal health and retirement spending, the federal government still faces large and growing structural deficits driven primarily by rising health care costs and known demographic trends. In fact, the oldest members of the baby boom generation are now eligible for Social Security retirement benefits and will be eligible for Medicare benefits in less than 3 years. According to the Social Security Administration nearly 80 million Americans will become eligible for Social Security retirement benefits over the next two decades—an average of more than 10,000 per day. Although Social Security is important because of its size, the real driver of the long-term fiscal outlook is health care spending. Medicare and Medicaid are both large and projected to continue growing rapidly in the future.

**Figure 1: Unified Surpluses and Deficits as a Share of GDP under Alternative Fiscal Policy Simulations**



Source: GAO's April 2008 analysis.

| Report Documentation Page                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                    |                                     |                                                           | Form Approved<br>OMB No. 0704-0188                  |                                 |
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| Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. |                                    |                                     |                                                           |                                                     |                                 |
| 1. REPORT DATE<br><b>APR 2008</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                    | 2. REPORT TYPE                      |                                                           | 3. DATES COVERED<br><b>00-00-2008 to 00-00-2008</b> |                                 |
| 4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE<br><b>Health Care Cost Growth and Demographic Trends Drive the Long-Term Fiscal Challenge</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 5a. CONTRACT NUMBER                                 |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 5b. GRANT NUMBER                                    |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER                          |                                 |
| 6. AUTHOR(S)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 5d. PROJECT NUMBER                                  |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 5e. TASK NUMBER                                     |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER                                |                                 |
| 7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)<br><b>U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Washington, DC, 20548</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER            |                                 |
| 9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)                    |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                                                           | 11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)              |                                 |
| 12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT<br><b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                    |                                     |                                                           |                                                     |                                 |
| 13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                    |                                     |                                                           |                                                     |                                 |
| 14. ABSTRACT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                    |                                     |                                                           |                                                     |                                 |
| 15. SUBJECT TERMS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                    |                                     |                                                           |                                                     |                                 |
| 16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     | 17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT<br><b>Same as Report (SAR)</b> | 18. NUMBER OF PAGES<br><b>14</b>                    | 19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON |
| a. REPORT<br><b>unclassified</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | b. ABSTRACT<br><b>unclassified</b> | c. THIS PAGE<br><b>unclassified</b> |                                                           |                                                     |                                 |

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Figure 1 shows two alternative fiscal paths. The first is “Baseline Extended,” which follows the CBO’s January baseline estimates for the first 10 years and then simply holds revenue and spending other than large entitlement programs constant as a share of gross domestic product (GDP). The second is the “Alternative simulation” based on historical trends and recent policy preferences. Under these alternative assumptions, discretionary spending grows with the economy rather than inflation during the first 10 years, Medicare physician payments are not reduced as in current law,<sup>1</sup> and revenues are brought down to their historical level.

Simulations are not forecasts or predictions. They are designed to ask the question “what if?” Our “what ifs” include what if discretionary spending is lower than the 20-year historical average and revenue higher than the historical average (as in Baseline Extended) or nearly at the historical averages (as in the Alternative). Although the timing of deficits and the resulting debt buildup varies depending on the assumptions used, both simulations show that the federal government is on an unsustainable fiscal path.

By definition, what is unsustainable will not be sustained. The question is how and when the nation’s current imprudent and unsustainable path will end. At some point, action will be taken to change the nation’s fiscal course. The longer action to deal with the nation’s long-term fiscal outlook is delayed, the greater the risk that the eventual changes will be disruptive and destabilizing. Acting sooner rather than later will provide more time to phase in gradual changes, while also providing more time for those likely to be most affected to make compensatory changes.

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## What Drives Our Nation’s Bleak Long-Term Fiscal Outlook?

The long-term fiscal outlook results from a large and persistent gap between expected revenues and expected spending. The spending that drives the outlook is primarily spending on the large federal entitlement programs (i.e., Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security), especially health care programs. The retirement of the baby boom generation is one key element of this. Already the first members of the baby boom generation have begun receiving Social Security retirement benefits and in 2011 will become eligible for Medicare benefits. In the next two decades America’s population will age dramatically, and relatively fewer workers will be asked to support ever-larger costs for retirees.

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<sup>1</sup>Under the sustainable growth rate system in current law, physician payments are scheduled to be reduced by 10 percent in 2008 and 2009 and by 5 percent for nearly every year from 2010 through 2016.

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Although Social Security is a major part of the fiscal challenge, it is far from the biggest challenge. Spending on the major federal health programs (i.e., Medicare and Medicaid) represents a much larger, faster growing, and more immediate problem. In fact, the federal government's future obligations for Medicare Part D alone exceed the unfunded obligations for Social Security. Over the past several decades, health care spending per capita has grown on average about 2.5 percent faster than average annual GDP per capita, absorbing increasing shares of the nation's resources, and this rapid growth is projected to continue. For this reason and others, rising health care costs pose a fiscal challenge not just to the federal budget but to American business and our economy and society as a whole.

Figures 2 and 3 look behind the deficit path to the composition of federal spending under the two scenarios. Both figures show that the estimated growth in the major entitlement programs leads to an unsustainable fiscal future—whether revenues as a share of GDP are above historical levels, as in Baseline Extended, or at about historical levels, as in the Alternative simulation. In these figures the category “all other spending” includes much of what many think of as “government”—discretionary spending on such activities as national defense, homeland security, veterans health benefits, national parks, highways and mass transit, and foreign aid, plus mandatory spending on the smaller entitlement programs such as Supplemental Security Income, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and farm price supports.<sup>2</sup> The growth in Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and interest on debt held by the public dwarfs the growth in all other types of spending.

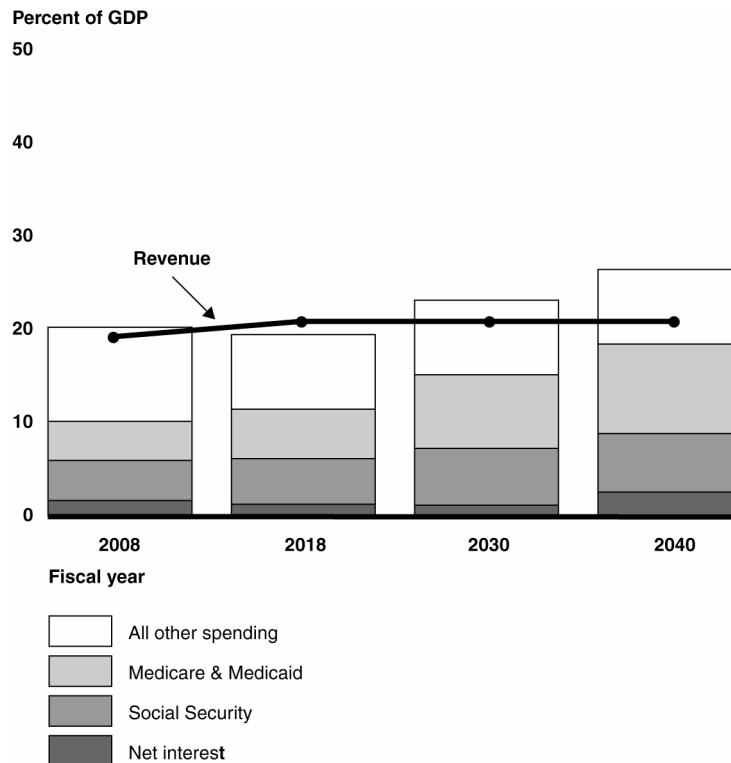
Under Baseline Extended (see fig. 2) we follow CBO's January baseline for the first 10 years: tax provisions that are scheduled to expire are assumed to do so (including the temporary increase in the alternative minimum tax (AMT) exemption amount) and discretionary spending is assumed to grow with inflation. At the end of the 10-year period, revenues in Baseline Extended are at 20.3 percent of GDP—a couple of points above the 20-year historical average. Discretionary spending is at 6.1 percent of GDP—somewhat below the 20-year historical average of 7.6 percent of GDP. For the remainder of the simulation period, levels of revenues and discretionary spending as shares of GDP are held constant, and for Social Security and Medicare, we use the Trustees' 2008 intermediate estimates. The Medicare estimates assume the continuation of current law, under

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<sup>2</sup>Discretionary spending refers to spending based on authority provided in annual appropriations acts. Mandatory spending refers to spending that Congress has authorized in legislation other than appropriations acts that entitles beneficiaries to receive payment or that otherwise obligates the government to make payment.

which fees for physicians treating Medicare patients would be cut in future years.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 2: Potential Fiscal Outcomes under Baseline Extended: Revenues and Composition of Spending as Shares of GDP**



Source: GAO's April 2008 analysis.

Notes: In addition to the expiration of tax cuts, revenue as a share of GDP increases through 2018 because of (1) real bracket creep, (2) more taxpayers becoming subject to the AMT, and (3) increased revenue from tax-deferred retirement accounts. After 2018, revenue as a share of GDP is held constant—implicitly assuming that action is taken to offset increased revenue from real bracket creep, the AMT, and tax-deferred retirement accounts.

<sup>3</sup>The Trustees noted in their 2008 report that Medicare expenditures “are substantially understated because projected current-law physician payment updates are unrealistically reduced under the sustainable growth rate system by about 10 percent in the second half of 2008, about 10 percent in 2009, and about 5 percent in nearly every subsequent year through 2016. In practice, Congress is virtually certain to prevent some or all of the scheduled reductions through new legislation, as it has for 2003 through the first half of 2008.” In addition, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services assumes excess medical cost growth on average of 1 percent over the long term, which is lower than the historical average of 2.5 percent. Together these differences result in lower Medicare spending than CBO’s long-term projections. See Congressional Budget Office, *The Long-Term Outlook for Health Care Spending* (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 2007).

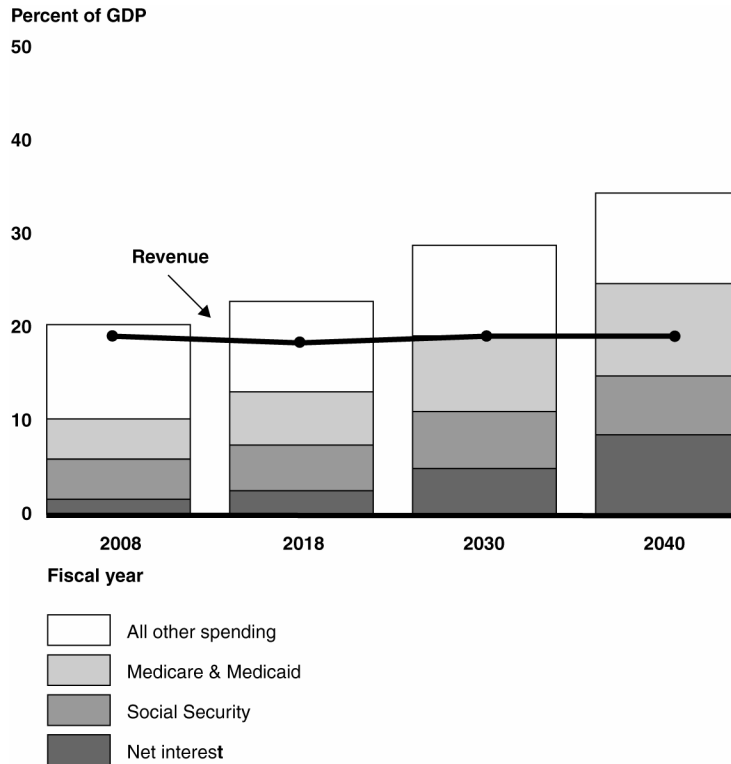
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Under the Alternative scenario (see fig. 3) in the first 10 years we assume that all expiring tax provisions are extended and that the 2007 exemption amount for the AMT is continued but not indexed for inflation. After the first 10 years we bring revenues to their historical share of the economy—18.3 percent—plus expected revenues from deferred taxes (i.e., taxes on withdrawals from retirement accounts). Discretionary spending grows with the economy throughout the simulation period—it remains at 7.7 percent of GDP. This means that over the long term discretionary spending is nearly at its 20-year historical average. In addition, the Alternative scenario uses Medicare estimates developed by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) that assume payment rates to physicians will not be reduced as specified under current law and assumed by the Trustees in their intermediate projections.<sup>4</sup> As in Baseline Extended, the Alternative scenario uses the Trustees' intermediate estimates for Social Security after the first 10 years.

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<sup>4</sup>This reflects the fact that Congress has generally acted to prevent payment rates from being reduced. CMS developed two illustrative Medicare estimates that vary from the intermediate estimates. One set of estimates assumes a 0 percent update to physician fees; the other assumes updates for medical inflation. GAO's Alternative simulation uses the 0 percent update estimates. For more information on these estimates, see CMS's March 2008 memorandum, "Projected Medicare Part B Expenditures under Two Illustrative Scenarios with Alternative Physician Payment Updates," available at [http://www.cms.hhs.gov/ReportsTrustFunds/05\\_alternativePartB.asp](http://www.cms.hhs.gov/ReportsTrustFunds/05_alternativePartB.asp).

**Figure 3: Potential Fiscal Outcomes under Alternative Simulation:  
Revenues and Composition of Spending as Shares of GDP**



Source: GAO's April 2008 analysis.

Notes: Discretionary spending grows with GDP after 2008. The AMT exemption amount is retained at the 2007 level through 2018 and expiring tax provisions are extended. After 2018, revenue as a share of GDP is brought to its historical level of 18.3 percent plus expected revenues from deferred taxes (i.e., taxes on withdrawals from retirement accounts). Medicare spending is based on the Trustees' 2008 projections adjusted for CMS's alternative assumption that physician payments are not reduced as specified under current law.

Both these figures show that waiting makes the size of the problem worse. For example, even under our more optimistic Baseline Extended scenario, waiting until 2040 to balance the budget would require drastic change. To balance the budget in that year, federal revenue as a share of GDP would have to increase by one-third or noninterest federal spending would have to be cut by one-quarter. If changes in federal individual income taxes were the sole means used to balance the budget, these would have to increase by almost 60 percent in that year assuming no changes to the composition of revenues after 2018. Sudden, drastic changes of either kind—and revenues at such a level—have not been seen in this country since the end of World War II.

# The Fiscal Gap— Another Way to Measure the Challenge

There are many ways to measure the long-term fiscal challenge. One quantitative measure is called the fiscal gap. The fiscal gap is the amount of spending reduction or tax increases that would be needed to keep debt as a share of GDP at or below today's ratio. In contrast to balancing the budget in a particular year, such as in 2040 as described above, the fiscal gap is an estimate of the action needed to achieve fiscal balance over a certain time period, such as 75 years. Another way to say this is that the fiscal gap is the amount of change needed to prevent the kind of debt explosion implicit in figure 1. The fiscal gap can be expressed as a share of the economy or in present value dollars. (See table 1.)

Table 1: Federal Fiscal Gap, 2008–2082

|                   | Fiscal gap                |                | Change required to close gap compared to today's levels |                                             |                                          |
|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
|                   | Trillions of 2008 dollars | Percent of GDP | Percent increase in revenue                             | Percent increase in individual income taxes | Percent decrease in noninterest spending |
| Baseline Extended | 25.7                      | 3.2            | 16.9                                                    | 37.2                                        | 17.0                                     |
| Alternative       | 54.0                      | 6.7            | 35.8                                                    | 78.3                                        | 35.5                                     |

Source: GAO analysis.

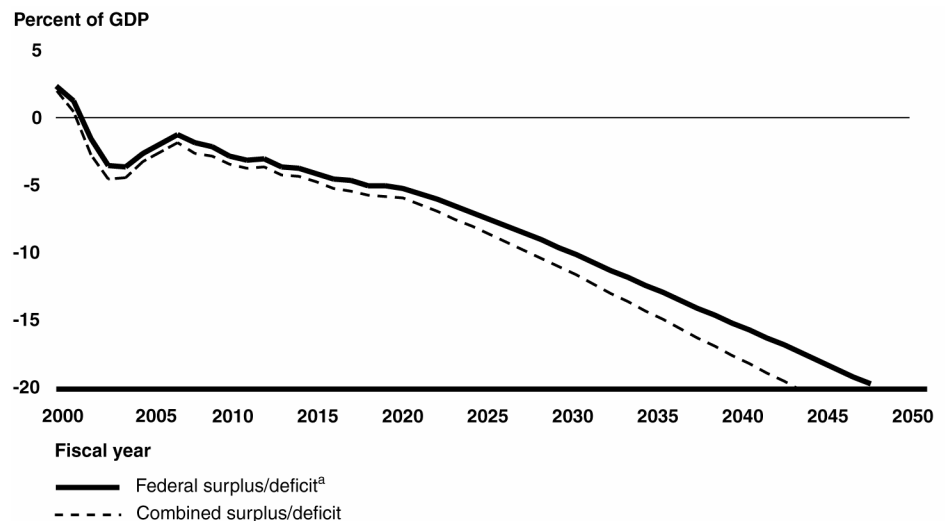
To put this in perspective, the fiscal gap under Baseline Extended could be closed by an increase in today's revenue of about 17 percent or an equivalent reduction in today's programmatic spending and maintained over the entire period. Under our Alternative simulation, the required action would be even more dramatic—about 36 percent of today's taxes or spending. Policymakers could phase in the policy changes so that the tax increases or spending cuts would grow over time and allow people to adjust. However, delaying action would require larger changes. Under our Alternative simulation, waiting even 10 years would require a revenue increase of about 45 percent or noninterest spending cuts of about 40 percent.

This gap is too large to simply grow out of the problem. To be sure, additional economic growth would help the nation's financial condition and the ability to address the fiscal gap, but it will not eliminate the need for action.

## State and Local Governments Face Similar Long-Term Fiscal Challenges

In 2007 we expanded our work on the long-term fiscal outlook to develop a model of the state and local government sector.<sup>5</sup> Figure 4 presents the results of our simulations that combine the federal government's fiscal outlook with that of the state and local government sector. The simulations imply that the aggregate fiscal outcome of the state and local government sector will add to the nation's fiscal difficulties and suggest that these fiscal challenges cannot be remedied simply by shifting the burden from one sector to another.

**Figure 4: Federal and Combined Federal, State, and Local Surpluses and Deficits as a Share of GDP**



Source: GAO's April 2008 analysis.

<sup>a</sup>Under GAO's Alternative simulation.

Rapidly rising health care costs are not simply a federal budget problem; they are our nation's number one fiscal challenge. Growth in health-related spending—Medicaid and health insurance for state and local employees and retirees—is the primary driver of the fiscal challenges facing the state and local governments. As we have noted elsewhere, the expected continued rise in health care costs poses a fiscal challenge not just to

<sup>5</sup>GAO, *State and Local Governments: Growing Fiscal Challenges Will Emerge during the Next 10 Years*, GAO-08-317 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2008) and *State and Local Governments: Persistent Fiscal Challenges Will Likely Emerge within the Next Decade*, GAO-07-1080SP (Washington, D.C.: July 18, 2007).

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government budgets, but to American business and society as a whole.<sup>6</sup> In short, the fundamental fiscal problems facing all levels of government are similar and are linked. As such, solutions to address these challenges should be considered in tandem.

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## Key Assumptions in GAO's Federal Simulations

We run two simulations that illustrate a range of possible outcomes based on different policy decisions for the long-term budget outlook. The first, Baseline Extended, is more optimistic and follows CBO's January baseline estimates over the next 10 years; beyond the 10-year projection period, revenue and spending on programs other than large entitlements are held constant as a share of GDP.<sup>7</sup> CBO's baseline is not a forecast of future outcomes; rather, it is based on the assumption that current laws and policies remain the same.<sup>8</sup> As such, we change some assumptions in our Alternative simulation to reflect historical trends and recent policy preferences. Table 2 lists the key assumptions incorporated in the Baseline Extended and Alternative simulations.

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<sup>6</sup>For example, see GAO, *Highlights of a Forum: Health Care 20 Years From Now—Taking Steps Today to Meet Tomorrow's Challenges*, GAO-07-1155SP (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2007).

<sup>7</sup>The CBO report can be accessed at [www.cbo.gov](http://www.cbo.gov).

<sup>8</sup>The Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985, which established rules that govern the calculation of CBO's baseline, expired on September 30, 2006. CBO continues to prepare baselines according to the methodology prescribed in that law.

**Table 2: Assumptions for Baseline Extended and Alternative Simulations**

| Model inputs                     | Baseline Extended                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Alternative                                                                                                                                                                      |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Revenue                          | CBO's January 2008 baseline through 2018; thereafter remains constant at 20.3 percent of GDP (CBO's projection in 2018)                                                                                                    | All expiring tax provisions are extended through 2018; thereafter equal to the 40 year historical average of 18.3 percent of GDP plus revenue from tax-deferred retirement plans |
| Social Security Spending (OASDI) | CBO's January 2008 baseline through 2018; thereafter based on 2008 Social Security Trustees' intermediate projections                                                                                                      | Same as Baseline Extended                                                                                                                                                        |
| Medicare spending                | CBO's January 2008 baseline through 2018; thereafter 2008 Medicare Trustees' intermediate projections that assume per enrollee Medicare spending grows on average 1 percent faster than GDP per capita over the long term. | 2008 Trustees intermediate projections adjusted for the CMS's alternative assumption of 0 percent physician payment updates in the first 10 years                                |
| Medicaid spending                | CBO's January 2008 baseline through 2018; thereafter CBO's December 2007 long-term projections adjusted to reflect excess cost growth consistent with the 2008 Medicare Trustees' intermediate projections                 | Same as Baseline Extended                                                                                                                                                        |
| Other mandatory spending         | CBO's January 2008 baseline through 2018; thereafter remains constant as a share of GDP at 1.9 percent of GDP (i.e., increases at the rate of economic growth)                                                             | Baseline Extended through 2011, then adjusted for extension of certain tax credits through 2018; thereafter remains constant at 2.0 percent of GDP                               |
| Discretionary spending           | CBO's January 2008 baseline through 2018; thereafter remains constant at 6.1 percent of GDP                                                                                                                                | Increases at the rate of economic growth starting after 2008 (i.e., remains constant at 7.7 percent of GDP)                                                                      |

Source: GAO.

One assumption we change in our Alternative simulation is discretionary spending. CBO's projections of discretionary spending for fiscal years 2009 through 2018 are based on fiscal year 2008 funding enacted to date, including any supplemental appropriations. CBO assumes discretionary spending grows over the next 10 years at the rate of inflation. As such, the use of supplemental appropriations and their timing can cause sharp swings in discretionary outlay projections.

For example, \$88 billion had been appropriated for operations in Iraq and the Global War on Terror (GWOT) thus far for fiscal year 2008. In contrast, \$170 billion in supplemental appropriations was provided for Iraq and GWOT in fiscal year 2007. As a result, both CBO's 10-year discretionary spending estimates and our long-term assumption for discretionary

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spending in our Baseline Extended simulation are lower than if the full year's funding had been appropriated. However, this change may only be temporary; the administration requested additional supplemental funding of more than \$100 billion for this fiscal year, which will lead to higher discretionary spending projections in CBO's August 2008 baseline (and subsequently our simulations). Despite these swings in discretionary spending, our simulations continually show that the nation is on an unsustainable fiscal path.

A more detailed description of the federal model and key assumptions can be found at <http://www.gao.gov/special.pubs/longterm/simulations.html>. Details on the state and local fiscal model can be found in appendix I of *State and Local Governments: Growing Fiscal Challenges Will Emerge during the Next 10 Years*.<sup>9</sup>

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## Changes to the Federal Model in This Update

GAO's simulations were updated using estimates from the Social Security and Medicare Trustees. The Trustees' March 2008 reports can be accessed at <http://www.ssa.gov/OACT/TR/TR08/index.html>.

The long-term outlook for both Social Security and Medicare improved somewhat because of changes in assumptions about immigration. The Trustees changed their methodology and updated data related to the "other than legal permanent resident population" (i.e., undocumented and temporary legal immigrants) and increased their projection of net legal immigration by 25 percent from 600,000 to 750,000. Both changes increase the working age population relative to Social Security and Medicare beneficiaries. This increases labor force growth and GDP more than benefit payments. However, increasing immigration alone will not close the long-term fiscal imbalance. In addition, the projected cost of Medicare Part D—Prescription Drugs—declined somewhat because costs in 2006 were lower than expected and projected trends in drug costs nationally over the next 10 years were lowered.

While the reports contain some good news, the financial condition of the programs remains problematic and the projected long-run program costs are not sustainable under current financing arrangements. An actuarial deficit of 1.70 percent of taxable payroll remains for the Social Security program and the Medicare Hospital Insurance program's actuarial deficit remains virtually the same as last years at 3.54 percent of taxable payroll. Total federal spending for Medicare as a share of GDP is projected to more

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<sup>9</sup>GAO-08-317.

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than triple from 3.2 percent today to 10.8 percent at the end of the 75-year projection period.

We conducted this work from March 2008 through May 2008 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

This product is based on our work on the long-term fiscal challenge, including reports and testimonies. Related products can be found at <http://www.gao.gov/special.pubs/longterm/longtermproducts.html>.

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