

The IRS is struggling to hire, which means a massive backlog of tax returns and refunds, government watchdog says

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By [Michelle Singletary](#)

Columnist

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Still waiting for your tax refund? Blame the processing backlog on an IRS staff shortage. And broken printers.

During a [recent online discussion](#) about the upcoming May 17 tax deadline, many readers submitted questions expressing frustration about returns not yet processed and refunds delayed much longer than usual.

[Where's my tax refund? The Post's personal finance columnist answers your tax deadline questions.](#)

“Any idea when the IRS may issue me my tax refund for 2019?” one taxpayer asked. “I was unable to apply that refund to my 2020 tax liability. They have kept my money for over a year but want me to send them more money for 2020. It's unsettling.”

Another wrote: “Our return was digitally filed in late February. Last year our return was flagged for potential identity fraud, so this year we included a personal PIN. We still haven't received our refund and are trying to figure out if it is just a delay or whether it's likely our return was flagged again.”

“I had H&R Block prepare my taxes,” another desperate reader wrote. “The return was electronically filed on March 18 with direct deposit information. I received the state refund within 10 days, but have yet to receive the Federal. When I go to ‘Where's My Refund,’ I am told it is being processed. How much longer do I wait before I contact the IRS, if that is even an option?”

Many just wanted to know whether it was something they did.

It's not you. It's the backlog and staffing shortage at the IRS and broken copiers and printers at the agency's processing centers. In some cases, printers are just out of ink or the waste cartridge container is full.

Long before the [2021 tax season started](#), we knew there would be problems, because the pandemic shut down IRS offices. Then the agency had to send out [tens of millions of stimulus payments](#).

So, it came as no surprise when an [interim report](#) about the 2021 filing season from the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration (TIGTA) office found that more than

8.3 million individual tax returns and transactions remained to be processed at the end of 2020, representing more than a 1,200 percent increase from a normal filing season.

Including current-year returns, as of April 30, the IRS said it had 17.1 million unprocessed individual returns in the pipeline.

Add the staffing shortage, and that's why your refund may not have arrived yet, even if you filed electronically and indicated you wanted your money sent straight to your bank account, which in a typical year would take about three weeks.

As of March 5, the IRS had 4,434 processing positions that were vacant or filled by employees who were not working for various reasons, according to TIGTA.

"The IRS continues to be faced with significant challenges in hiring staff as well as in managing its workload as the number of employees reporting for work fluctuates from day to day as a result of the ongoing pandemic," TIGTA acknowledged in its report.

Much of the workforce at the agency is teleworking. However, some tasks can't be done remotely. Employees have to be on-site to receive, sort and distribute mail and to process paper returns. Many returns require manually inputting information into the IRS systems or correcting errors. And although processing centers are open, they can't operate at full capacity, because of social distancing requirements.

[*Don't file a paper 2020 federal tax return if you don't have to, IRS watchdog warns*](#)

The TIGTA report also highlighted a complaint from IRS staffers alleging that a lack of functioning printers and copiers has contributed to the backlog. As of March 30, IRS management estimated that 42 percent of the machines used for processing functions were unusable. Others were broken but still functioning.

Some of the machines were just out of ink. The service contract for the devices ended in September, and the replacement contractor "may not have been coming into the sites to replace the old printers due to COVID-19 concerns," according to the TIGTA report.

The lack of working copiers has made it difficult to prepare training packages for new hires, according to TIGTA.

"Many of these new hires are not provided a computer, and hard copies of the training material are the main training resource available," the report noted.

TIGTA said it discussed the issue with IRS management in March, and the agency said it has started replacing the broken machines.

There you have it, folks — some of the main reasons your returns are still being processed and your refunds have been delayed.

There's not much you can do to speed up the process. Definitely don't file a second return, which can cause an even longer delay. Don't [bother calling the](#) IRS about the timing of your refund.

Unless the IRS is requesting documents or more information, there's nothing you can do but wait and keep checking the ["Where's My Refund"](#) tool at [irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov).

If you haven't filed yet, do your best to check and then double-check the accuracy of your return, reducing the chance it'll end up in processing purgatory.