



Highlights of [GAO-03-672SP](#)

Why GAO Convened This Forum

The nation confronts profound challenges resulting from a variety of factors, including changing security threats, dramatic shifts in demographic patterns, the multidimensional processes of globalization, and the accelerating pace of technological change. These are all coming together in an era of diminishing public resources.

The nation's leaders and concerned citizens require better knowledge of what is happening and where we are going to support improved public choices. The United States could potentially benefit from developing a set of key national indicators to help assess our nation's position and progress.

On February 27, 2003, GAO, in cooperation with the National Academies, hosted a forum on key national indicators. The purpose of the forum was to have a rich and meaningful dialogue on whether and how to develop a set of key national indicators for the United States.

The forum brought together a diverse group of national leaders to discuss the following:

- How are the world's leading democracies measuring national performance?
- What might the United States do to improve its approach and why?
- What are important areas to measure in assessing U.S. national performance?
- How might new U.S. approaches be led and implemented?

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-672SP.

To view the full report, click on the link above. For more information, contact Christopher Hoenig, Director, Strategic Issues, at (202) 512-6779 or hoenigc@gao.gov.

HIGHLIGHTS OF A GAO FORUM

Key National Indicators: Assessing the Nation's Position and Progress

What Participants Said

Developing Key National Indicators for the United States Is Important

While there are a variety of indicator efforts in the United States, there is no generally accepted, comprehensive indicator system for the nation as a whole. There was broad agreement that the issue of developing key national indicators is important for taking a more comprehensive view of the nation's position and progress, both on an absolute and relative basis. Several models were discussed that offer lessons for developing a national indicator system, including indicator systems on aging, children, economics, and health. The purpose of measurement, the process of deciding what to measure, and determining audiences are as critical as choosing what and how to measure.

A Broad Range of Information Areas Are Considered Significant

The range of information areas considered important was broad, covering the economy, society, and the environment. Participants agreed that a first step is to assemble "core" indicators from existing data. A straw proposal for such an indicator set—USA Series 0.5—was presented as a starting point for building what might eventually be a broadly supported USA Series 1.0 indicator set. Series 0.5 included 11 key information areas: community, crime, ecology, education, governance, health, the macroeconomy, security, social support, sustainability, and transparency. In reacting to Series 0.5, participants suggested numerous refinements and identified 4 additional information areas: communications, diversity, individual values, and socioeconomic mobility.

A Rich History of Indicator Systems Warrants Collective Research

There is a long history of efforts throughout the world by leading democracies to develop and sustain indicator systems. A distinction was made between comprehensive and specialized efforts that focus on a topic or issue. Research on what can be learned from past and present systems is essential to deriving useful implications for a possible United States system. A multitude of efforts are currently under way in other democracies (e.g., Australia and Canada) as well as in the United States at the national, regional, state, and local levels. Despite this activity, there appear to be few common sources of broad research to facilitate knowledge sharing on comprehensive indicator efforts.

A United States Initiative Must Build on Past Lessons and Current Efforts

Developing a U.S. indicator system requires applying lessons from past efforts and engaging with many existing ones. A United States system must be flexible and evolve to respond to societal change and incorporate diverse perspectives. An informal national coordinating committee of institutions in the public and private sectors was constituted to begin organizing a U.S. initiative. It serves as an initial means to facilitate dialogue, expand participation, plan work and secure financing. As of May 7, 2003, the committee included the American Association of Universities, The Conference Board, the Council for Excellence in Government, GAO, the International City/County Management Association, The National Academies, the National Association of Asian American Professionals, the Office of Management and Budget and the White House Council on Environmental Quality.