The Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) most recent data indicate that 95 percent of all Americans face an increased likelihood of developing cancer as a result of breathing air toxics—pollutants such as benzene and asbestos that may cause cancer or other serious health problems. Sources of air toxics include large industrial facilities, smaller facilities such as dry cleaners, and cars and trucks. The 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments required EPA to regulate 190 pollutants from these sources through a multifaceted regulatory program. While EPA issues federal standards, state and local agencies generally administer these standards, and some develop their own rules to complement the federal standards. In this context, GAO was asked to assess (1) EPA’s progress and challenges in implementing the air toxics program, (2) available information on the program’s costs and benefits, and (3) practices of state and local air toxics programs.

Available information on EPA’s efforts to control air toxics is not sufficiently comprehensive to measure the program’s total costs and benefits. Specifically, EPA has not comprehensively estimated the national economic costs of all air toxics standards and lacks the data necessary to assess the benefits of these standards, such as decreased incidence of cancer. Information on these impacts would help the agency assess the overall net benefits (total benefits minus total costs) of the air toxics program and compare these effects with those generated by higher-priority clean air programs, such as those intended to address smog. Data on other indicators of the program’s effectiveness, such as changes in emissions, concentrations of air toxics in the (ambient) outdoor air, and data on compliance with air toxics standards are also limited and inconclusive.

The state and local programs we reviewed use practices that could potentially help EPA enhance the effectiveness of its air toxics program. For example, several state programs have systematic approaches for identifying and prioritizing new pollutants that could inform EPA’s efforts to meet the act’s requirement to review and update the list of regulated pollutants.