Key indicator systems integrate reliable statistical information on a jurisdiction’s economic, social, and environmental conditions.

Possible Topics for a Comprehensive Key Indicator System

The NAS and others who will oversee the development of a U.S. key indicator system can draw insights from the experiences GAO observed at the local, state, regional, and national levels in the U.S. and other countries. GAO found that the indicator systems reviewed were used for one or more overarching purposes, including increasing transparency and public awareness; fostering civic engagement and collaboration; and monitoring progress, aiding decision making, and promoting accountability. GAO also identified several key elements in developing and designing indicator systems, such as: (1) consulting experts and stakeholders about the purpose and design of the system, (2) using relevant indicators based on reliable data, and (3) providing disaggregated and comparative data where feasible. In addition, GAO found that sustaining indicator systems can present a constant challenge, depending on stable and diversified funding and the continued interest of key stakeholders. Thus, a participatory process for developing and revising the system is important.

Data produced by the federal statistical community and other sources could serve as the beginning foundation for a U.S. system. The federal government can also benefit from a system by using information on trends in societal conditions to inform strategic planning and decision making. Although a fully operational set of measures will take time to develop, require broad involvement of American society, and involve substantial resource commitments, the benefits can include: (1) more informed policy choices, (2) a better educated citizenry, and (3) greater civic engagement.