



September 2017

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Annual Agency-Wide Plans Could Enhance Leadership Support for Program Evaluations

Accessible Version

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-743](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

GPRAMA aims to ensure that agencies use performance information in decision making to achieve results and improve government performance. GPRAMA requires GAO to evaluate the act's implementation; this report is one in a series on its implementation. GAO examined the extent of agencies' use of program evaluations—a particular form of performance information—and factors that may hinder or facilitate their use in program management and policy making.

GAO surveyed a stratified random sample of 4,395 federal civilian managers and supervisors to obtain their perspectives on several results-oriented management topics, including the extent of and factors influencing evaluation use. GAO compared the results to those of a similar GAO survey of federal managers in 2013 and a GAO survey of Performance Improvement Officers in 2014. GAO also interviewed OMB staff and reviewed guidance on using evaluation in decision making.

What GAO Recommends

To help ensure that agencies obtain the evidence needed to address important questions to improve program implementation and performance, GAO recommends that the Director of OMB direct federal agencies to prepare an annual agency-wide evaluation plan that describes the congressional and other stakeholders that were consulted.

OMB staff stated that agencies should be encouraged, rather than directed, to create an annual evaluation plan. Because OMB has already been encouraging evaluation, GAO believes a more directive approach is needed.

View [GAO-17-743](#). For more information, contact Nancy Kingsbury at (202) 512-2700 or KingsburyN@gao.gov

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Annual Agency-Wide Plans Could Enhance Leadership Support for Program Evaluations

What GAO Found

In a 2017 government-wide survey, GAO found that most federal managers lack recent evaluations of their programs. Forty percent reported that an evaluation had been completed within the past 5 years of any program, operation, or project they were involved in. Another 39 percent of managers reported that they did not know if an evaluation had been completed, and 18 percent reported having none. Managers who reported having evaluations also reported that those evaluations contributed to a great or very great extent to improving program management or performance (54 percent) and to assessing program effectiveness or value (48 percent). These figures are not statistically different from the results of GAO's 2013 survey.

Of the 40 percent of managers who reported having evaluations, the factor most often rated as having hindered use to a great or very great extent, as in 2013, was lack of resources to implement the evaluation findings (29 percent). Managers reported limited knowledge of congressional support for using their results; 35 percent were not able to judge whether lack of support was a barrier.

Federal managers who reported having evaluations most frequently reported that agency leadership support for evaluation, staff involvement, and an evaluation's relevance to decision makers facilitated evaluation use. GAO previously reported that involving agency staff in planning and conducting evaluations helps to ensure they are relevant, credible, and used in decision making. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) encouraged agencies to use the annual strategic reviews the GPRAMA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) requires to assess evidence gaps and inform their strategic decisions and budget making.

GAO and OMB have noted the importance of developing an evaluation plan or agenda to ensure that an agency's scarce research and evaluation resources are targeted to its most important issues. While 28 percent of managers with evaluations rated consultation with stakeholders high for facilitating use, another 22 percent reported having no basis to judge. GAO previously noted limited knowledge of agency consultation with the Congress. While 23 percent of managers with evaluations reported congressional requests or mandates facilitated evaluation use, more (31 percent) reported having no basis to judge.

GAO concludes that

- Agencies' continued lack of evaluations may be the greatest barrier to their informing managers and policy makers and constitutes a lost opportunity to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of limited government resources.
- Although only some agencies have developed agency-wide evaluation plans, evaluators who have them found that obtaining stakeholder input helped ensure evaluation relevance and facilitate use of their results.
- Congressional consultation on agency evaluation plans could increase the studies' credibility with those whose support is needed to implement program reforms.
- An agency's annual strategic review provides a good opportunity to help target its evaluation agenda to its management, budget, and policy priorities.

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Abbreviations

AEA	American Evaluation Association
APG	agency priority goal
CFO Act	Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990
FATAA	Foreign Aid Transparency and Accountability Act of 2016
GPRAMA	GPRA Modernization Act of 2010
GPRA	Government Performance and Results Act of 1993
GS	general schedule

OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
PIO	Performance Improvement Officer
SES	Senior Executive Service

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September 29, 2017

Congressional Committees

The federal government faces significant financial and performance management challenges in its efforts to meet current and future needs while constraining spending. Performance measures and program evaluations can be key in program planning, management, and oversight by providing feedback on program design and execution. The reporting requirements of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA) were intended to provide both congressional and executive decision makers with objective information on the relative effectiveness and efficiency of federal programs and spending.¹

Although GPRA helped improve the availability of agency performance information, federal managers reported that the use of performance data for decision making was limited.² The GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) makes additional changes to agency planning and reporting requirements to ensure that executive branch agencies use performance information in decision making and holds them accountable for achieving results and improving government performance.³ The act also established agency leadership positions, including the role of Performance Improvement Officer (PIO) to promote the use of evidence to improve program performance.⁴ However, our 2013 survey found few significant changes in federal managers' reported use of performance information.⁵

In the same period, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) encouraged agencies to strengthen their program evaluations—systematic studies of program performance—and expand their use of evidence and evaluation in budget, management, and policy decisions

¹Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285 (Aug. 3, 1993).

²GAO, *Government Performance: Lessons Learned for the Next Administration on Using Performance Information to Improve Results*, [GAO-08-1026T](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 24, 2008).

³Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866 (Jan. 4, 2011).

⁴31 U.S.C. § 1124(a).

⁵GAO, *Managing for Results: Executive Branch Should More Fully Implement the GPRA Modernization Act to Address Pressing Governance Challenges*, [GAO-13-518](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013).

with the goal of improving government effectiveness. However, in our 2013 survey of federal managers government-wide, only an estimated 37 percent reported having access to recent evaluations of their programs.⁶

GPRAMA requires GAO to periodically review how its implementation is affecting agency performance management.⁷ This report is one of a series of reports responding to that mandate. Here, we explore how agency evaluation use has or has not changed since our prior surveys.

Our objectives here were to identify, since 2013, the extent to which

1. agency managers' reported access to and use of program evaluations have changed and
2. agency managers' views of the factors that facilitate or hinder the use of program evaluation have changed.

To address these objectives, we surveyed a stratified random sample of 4,395 persons from a population of approximately 153,779 civilian managers and supervisors working in the 24 executive branch agencies covered by the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990 (CFO Act agencies).⁸ The questionnaire was designed to obtain the observations and perceptions of respondents on various performance management issues. The web-based survey was administered from November 2016 through March 2017. About 67 percent of the eligible sample responded with usable questionnaires. The sample allowed us to generalize our results to the government-wide population of federal managers.

The government-wide percentage estimates based on our sample from 2017 presented in this report have 95 percent confidence intervals within plus or minus 4 percentage points of the estimate itself for the initial question about whether an evaluation had been completed, and within plus or minus 7 percentage points for subsequent questions about the use of those evaluations. (Appendix I has more information on the survey.)

⁶GAO, *Program Evaluation: Strategies to Facilitate Agencies' Use of Evaluation in Program Management and Policy Making*, [GAO-13-570](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013).

⁷GPRAMA § 15, 124 Stat. at 3883–3884

⁸31 U.S.C. § 901(b).

This report first analyzes responses to a subset of survey questions concerning managers' access to and use of evaluation and their views on the factors that influence evaluation use. It then compares these responses to similar questions in our 2013 survey of federal managers. We then compare the managers' responses in 2017 to questions raised in our 2014 survey of the PIOs of the 24 CFO Act agencies about their agencies' investments in evaluation capacity and their views on the usefulness of various resources and activities for building the capacity to conduct and use evaluation in decision making. We surveyed the PIOs because of the central role GPRAMA and OMB assigned these senior officials to promote agency performance assessment and improvement efforts and help agencies secure evaluations and other research, as needed. In the 2014 survey, the senior executive PIOs reported uneven levels of evaluation capacity across government and some efforts to increase their agencies' evaluation capacity.⁹

We further discuss the 2017 survey's results in a September 2017 report summarizing our body of work on the implementation of GPRAMA and in a supplement showing the responses to all survey items at the government-wide and individual agency levels.¹⁰ We also interviewed OMB staff about their efforts to encourage agencies to strengthen their conduct and use of evaluations in decision making, and we reviewed OMB's and others' guidance on using evaluation in decision making.

We conducted this performance audit from April 2016 to September 2017 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.

⁹GAO, *Program Evaluation: Some Agencies Reported that Networking, Hiring, and Involving Program Staff Help Build Capacity*, [GAO-15-25](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 13, 2014).

¹⁰GAO, *Managing for Results: Further Progress Made in Implementing the GPRAMA Modernization Act, but Additional Actions Needed to Address Pressing Governance Challenges*, [GAO-17-775](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 29, 2017); and *Supplemental Material for GAO-17-775: 2017 Survey of Federal Managers on Organizational Performance and Management Issues*, [GAO-17-776SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 29, 2017). Other reports pursuant to this mandate are listed at the end of this report.

Background

Program evaluations are systematic studies that use research methods to address specific questions about program performance.¹¹ Evaluation is closely related to performance measurement and reporting. Whereas performance measurement entails the ongoing monitoring and reporting of program progress toward preestablished goals, program evaluation typically assesses the achievement of a program's objectives and other aspects of performance in the context in which the program operates. In particular, evaluations can be designed to better isolate the causal impact of programs from other external economic or environmental conditions in order to assess a program's effectiveness. Thus, an evaluation study can provide a valuable supplement to ongoing performance reporting by measuring results that are too difficult or expensive to assess annually, explaining the reasons why performance goals were not met, or assessing whether one approach is more effective than another.

Evaluation can be key in program planning, management, and oversight by providing feedback on both program design and execution to program managers, legislative and executive branch policy officials, and the public. In our 2013 survey of a stratified random sample of federal managers, we found that most federal managers reported lacking recent evaluations of their programs. Although only about a third had recent evaluations of their programs or projects, the majority of those who had evaluations reported that they contributed to understanding program performance, assessing program effectiveness or value, making changes to improve program management or performance, and sharing what works with others.¹²

Those who had evaluations cited most often a lack of resources as a barrier to implementing evaluation findings. Agency evaluators noted that it takes a number of studies rather than just one study to influence change in programs or policies. Experienced evaluators identified three strategies to facilitate evaluation influence: leadership support of evaluation, building a strong body of evidence, and engaging stakeholders throughout the evaluation process.

¹¹GPRAMA defines program evaluation as an assessment, through objective measurement and systematic analysis, of the manner and extent to which federal programs achieve intended objectives. 31 U.S.C. § 1115(h)(12).

¹²[GAO-13-570](#).

Our previous literature review found that the key elements of national or organizational capacity to conduct and use evaluation in decision making include an enabling environment that has leadership support for using evidence in decision making; organizational resources to support the supply and use of credible evaluations; and the robust, transparent availability of evaluation results.¹³ Our 2014 survey of PIOs on the presence of these elements in their agencies found uneven levels of evaluation expertise, organizational support within and outside the organization, and use across the government. About half the 24 agencies reported committing resources to obtain credible evaluation by establishing a central office responsible for evaluation, yet those agencies with centralized leadership reported greater evaluation coverage and use of the results in decision making. Only six of these agencies reported having stable funding or agency-wide evaluation plans.

A Greater Role for Evidence in Federal Decision Making

GPRAMA established an expectation that evidence would have a greater role in agency decision making. The act changed agency performance management roles, planning and review processes, and reporting to ensure that agencies use performance information in decision making and are held accountable for achieving results and improving government performance. The act required the 24 CFO Act agencies and OMB to establish agency priority goals and government-wide cross-agency priority goals, review progress on the goals quarterly, and report publicly on their progress and strategies to improve performance on a government performance website.

In addition, GPRAMA, along with OMB guidance, established and defined performance management responsibilities for agency officials in key management roles. In particular, the PIO was given a central role in promoting the agencies' use of evaluation and other evidence to improve program performance. The act charged the Performance Improvement Council, which includes PIOs from all 24 CFO Act agencies, to facilitate agencies' exchange of successful practices and the development of tips and tools to strengthen agency performance management.

OMB's guidance implementing GPRAMA also directed agencies to conduct strategic reviews of annual progress toward each strategic

¹³[GAO-15-25](#).

objective in their strategic plans to inform agency strategic decision making, budget formulation, and preparation of annual performance plans and reports. Guided by the PIO, agencies are to consider a wide range of evidence (including research, evaluation, and performance indicators) in these reviews and identify areas where additional evaluations or analyses of performance data are needed.¹⁴

Further, GPRAMA is part of a government-wide focus on the crucial role of evidence for improving the effectiveness of federal programs. Since 2009, OMB has issued several memorandums urging efforts to strengthen the use of rigorous impact evaluation, designate a high-level official responsible for evaluation to develop and manage a research agenda, and demonstrate the use of evidence and evaluation in budget submissions, strategic plans, and performance plans. A 2013 OMB memorandum urged agencies to develop an evidence and innovation agenda to exploit existing administrative data to conduct low-cost experiments and implement outcome-focused grant designs and research clearinghouses to catalyze innovation and learning.¹⁵

OMB staff have also established several interagency workgroups to promote sharing evaluation expertise and have organized a series of workshops and interagency collaborations. For example, in 2016 we recommended that OMB establish a formal means for agencies to collaborate on tiered evidence grants, a new grant design in which funding is based on the level of evidence available on the effectiveness of the grantee's service delivery model.¹⁶ OMB's Evidence Team convened an interagency working group on tiered evidence grants that meets quarterly and established a website for the group to share resources. This team also co-chairs the Interagency Council on Evaluation Policy, a group of 10 agency evaluation offices that have collaborated on developing common policies and conducting workshops. The Trump Administration's

¹⁴For additional information on the GPRAMA requirements, see our webpage on leading practices for results-based management at www.gao.gov/key_issues/managing_for_results_in_government.

¹⁵OMB, *Increased Emphasis on Program Evaluations*, M-10-01 (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 27, 2009); *Use of Evidence and Evaluation in the 2014 Budget*, M-12-14 (Washington, D.C.: May 18, 2012); and *Next Steps in the Evidence and Innovation Agenda*, M-13-17 (Washington, D.C.: July 26, 2013).

¹⁶GAO, *Tiered Evidence Grants: Opportunities Exist to Share Lessons from Early Implementation and Inform Future Federal Efforts*, [GAO-16-818](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 21, 2016).

2018 Budget proposal endorses a continued commitment to agencies building a portfolio of evidence on what works and how to improve results, investing in evidence infrastructure and capacity, and acting on a strong body of evidence to obtain results.¹⁷

In 2016, the Congress enacted and the President signed two pieces of legislation encouraging federal agency evaluation. The Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission Act of 2016 created the Commission and charged it with conducting a comprehensive study of the data inventory, data infrastructure, database security, and statistical protocols related to federal policy making and the agencies responsible for maintaining that data.¹⁸ This study was to include a determination of the optimal arrangement for which administrative data on federal programs and tax expenditures, survey data, and related statistical data series may be integrated and made available to facilitate program evaluation, continuous improvement, policy-relevant research, and cost-benefit analyses, while considering the privacy of personally identifiable information. In its September 2017 report, the Commission made 22 recommendations to improve secure, private, and confidential access by researchers to government data; modernize data privacy protections; implement a National Secure Data Service to manage secure record linkage and data access for evidence building; and strengthen federal agency evidence-building capacity.¹⁹ In particular, the Commission recommended that each federal department should identify a Chief Evaluation Officer and develop a multi-year learning agenda of high priority research and policy questions to address.

The Foreign Aid Transparency and Accountability Act of 2016 (FATAA) requires the President to set guidelines for monitoring and evaluating federal foreign assistance by January 2018.²⁰ The guidelines are to provide direction to the several federal agencies that administer foreign assistance on how to, for example, establish annual monitoring and

¹⁷OMB, *Analytic Perspectives, Budget of the U.S. Government, Fiscal Year 2018* (Washington, D.C.: 2017).

¹⁸Pub. L. No. 114-140, 130 Stat. 317 (Mar. 30, 2016).

¹⁹Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, *The Promise of Evidence-Based Policymaking* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 7, 2017).

²⁰Pub. L. No. 114-191, 130 Stat. 667 (July 15, 2016).

evaluation plans, quality assurance procedures, and public dissemination of findings and lessons learned.

Although Most Federal Managers Lack Current Program Evaluations, They Find That Their Availability Helps Improve Programs

In 2017, we surveyed federal managers asking the same questions as those we asked in 2013 about managers' access to evaluation and their use in decision making. Our 2017 survey found no change government-wide in managers' access to evaluations since 2013. We estimate that 40 percent of federal managers reported having access to recent evaluations of their programs, while another 39 percent reported that they did not know if an evaluation had been conducted. About half the managers who had evaluations once again reported that they contributed to a great or very great extent to improving program management or performance and assessing program effectiveness (54 and 48 percent, respectively), while fewer reported that they contributed to allocating program resources or informing the public (35 and 22 percent, respectively).

Managers Report Access to Evaluation Unchanged Since 2013

In 2017, an estimated 40 percent of federal managers reported that an evaluation had been completed within the past 5 years for any of the programs, operations, or projects they were involved in—statistically unchanged from the 2013 survey (37 percent). As in 2013, Senior Executive Service (SES) managers reported having evaluations statistically significantly more often than non-SES managers did (56 percent versus 39 percent in 2017; 54 percent versus 36 percent in 2013). This should be expected, since SES managers are likely to oversee a range of programs broader than that of non-SES managers, any one of whose programs might have been evaluated.

An estimated 18 percent of managers reported not having any evaluations, while twice as many managers (an estimated 39 percent) reported that they did not know if an evaluation had been conducted. We believe this may reflect midlevel managers' lack of familiarity with activities outside their programs. As in 2013, non-SES managers reported twice as often as SES managers that they did not know whether an

evaluation had been performed (40 percent versus 19 percent in 2017; 41 percent versus 24 percent in 2013). And in other questions in our survey about GPRAMA provisions, non-SES managers reported significantly more often than SES managers that they were not familiar with cross-agency priority goals (42 versus 22 percent), one or more of their agency's priority goals (21 versus 9 percent), or their agency's quarterly performance reviews (61 versus 44 percent). Because these goals and their related reviews apply only to a subset of an agency's goals, midlevel managers are less likely to be directly involved in them.

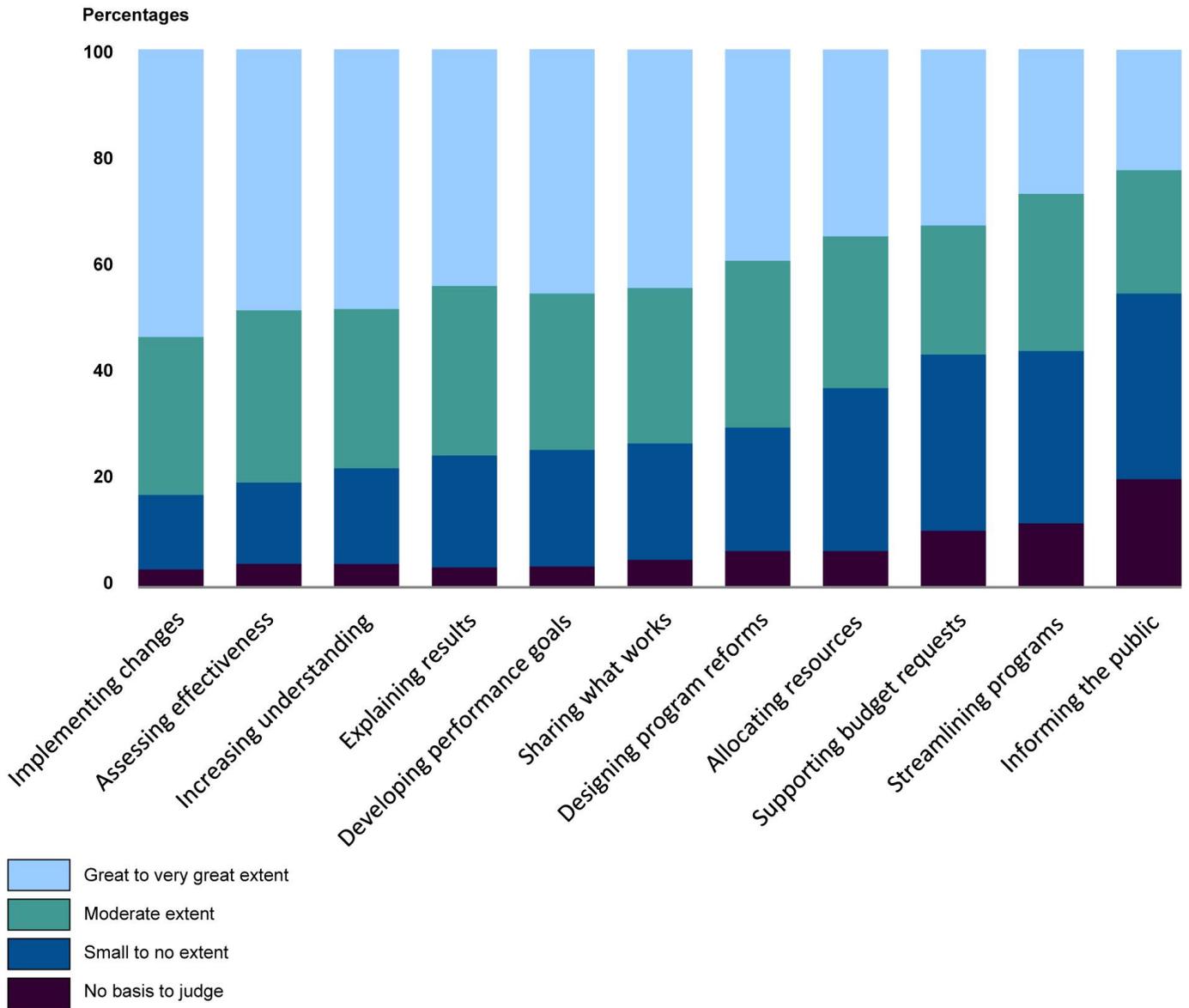
Of the estimated 40 percent of managers who reported having evaluations, most (86 percent) reported that the agency itself primarily conducted or contracted for these evaluations. Many of these managers also reported that studies were completed by their Inspector General (49 percent), GAO (38 percent), or others such as the National Academy of Sciences and independent boards (17 percent).²¹ Because of variation in the responsibilities of managers, we cannot deduce from these results how many programs have been evaluated. However, even if additional evaluations had been conducted by others within or outside the agency, if managers were unaware of them, their results would not have been available for use.

Most Managers Who Had Evaluations Continue to Report That They Helped Them Assess and Improve Programs

Because evaluations are designed to meet decision makers' information needs, our survey asked federal managers who had recent evaluations to what extent those evaluations contributed to 11 different activities. For the 40 percent of managers who reported having evaluations, the results are very similar to the results of our 2013 survey: federal managers with evaluations credited them with contributing to a great or very great extent to assessing program effectiveness or implementing changes to improve program management or performance (48 and 54 percent, respectively), with no statistically significant changes since 2013. Managers reported less frequently that evaluations contributed greatly to allocating program resources or informing the public (figure 1).

²¹These external organizations conduct audits, investigations, program evaluations, and other studies independently of the programing agency.

Figure 1: Managers' Views on the Contributions of Evaluations to Selected Program Activities



Source: GAO survey. | GAO-17-743.

Note: Percentages are based on the responses of managers who reported having had program evaluations completed within the past 5 years. The percentage estimates have margins of error at the 95 percent confidence level of ± 7 percentage points or less.

Improving Program Performance

Consistent with the 2013 survey results, many managers who reported having evaluations reported that they contributed to a great or very great extent to direct efforts to improve programs such as:

- implementing changes to improve program management or performance (an estimated 54 percent in 2017),
- developing or revising performance goals (45 percent),
- sharing what works or other lessons learned with others (44 percent), and
- designing or supporting program reforms (39 percent).

Evaluations vary in their scope and complexity and may address questions about program implementation as well as program effectiveness, so any resulting recommendations may point to simple corrections or broad re-thinking of a policy's relevance or effectiveness. In a previous study, evaluators told us that it usually takes a number of studies, rather than just one, to influence change in programs or policies. As one evaluator put it, "the process by which evaluation influences change is iterative, messy, and complex. Policy changes do not occur as a direct result of an answer to an evaluation question; rather, a body of evaluation results, research, and other evidence influences policy and practice over time." Moreover, designing and approving major program reforms typically involves a number of stakeholders outside the agency.

Sharing what works with others is often the most direct action federal managers can take in decentralized programs in which they do not have direct control of program activities conducted by others at the state and local levels. To address this, federal agencies use a variety of methods to disseminate evaluation findings to local decision makers, such as establishing searchable evaluation clearinghouses online or disseminating findings through electronic listservs, through webinars, or at research and evaluation conferences.

Fewer managers reported that evaluations contributed to streamlining programs to reduce duplicative activities to a great or very great extent (an estimated 27 percent). We have issued several reports outlining numerous areas of potential duplication, overlap, and fragmentation in

federal programs.²² In these reviews, we identified the need for improved coordination and collaboration as well as better evaluation of these programs' performance and results to help inform decisions about how to better manage these programs. Evaluation studies, if carefully designed, can address specific questions about the extent of fragmentation, overlap, and duplication as well as the individual and joint effectiveness of related programs. A broad review of evidence on related programs and the relationships among them can clarify the extent of and reveal opportunities for reducing or better managing fragmentation, overlap, and duplication.²³

Increasing Understanding of Program Performance

Managers who reported having access to evaluations reported that evaluations contributed to a great or very great extent to improving their understanding of program performance, such as by

- assessing program effectiveness, value, or worth (an estimated 48 percent);
- increasing understanding about the program or topic (48 percent); and
- supplementing or explaining performance results (44 percent).

The primary purpose of program and policy evaluations is to provide systematic evidence on how well a program is working, whether it is operating as intended or achieving its intended results. They can be especially useful for helping improve program performance when they help identify for whom or under what conditions a program or approach is effective or ineffective or the reasons for change (or lack of change) in program performance. We have also reported that evaluations can help measure more complex or costly forms of performance than can be obtained routinely, such as by following up on high school students' success in college.²⁴

²²For example, GAO, *2017 Annual Report: Additional Opportunities to Reduce Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication and Achieve Other Financial Benefits*. [GAO-17-491SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 26, 2017).

²³GAO, *Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication: An Evaluation and Management Guide*, [GAO-15-49SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 14, 2015).

²⁴GAO, *Program Evaluation: Studies Helped Agencies Measure or Explain Program Performance*, [GAO/GGD-00-204](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 29, 2000).

Allocating Program Resources

Similar to the 2013 survey results, fewer managers found that evaluations contributed to a great or very great extent to allocating resources within the program (35 percent), or supporting program budget requests (33 percent), than to improving program management or understanding (54 and 48 percent, respectively). This result is not surprising because many factors and priorities influence the budget process and need to be considered when deciding how to allocate limited resources among competing needs. Evaluators told us that high-stakes decisions such as funding are taken rarely on the basis of a single study but, rather, on the basis of a body of evidence.

Our 2014 survey of the PIOs at the 24 CFO Act agencies provided a mixed picture of evaluation use in allocating resources. Almost half (10) reported that their agencies had increased their use of evaluation in supporting budget requests and allocating resources within programs since 2010; while 5 PIOs either provided no opinion or reported little or no agency use of evaluation evidence to support budget or policy changes as part of their agency's annual budget process.

Informing the Public

Similar to the 2013 survey results, less than half the federal managers who reported having evaluations also reported that evaluations contributed to informing the public about how programs are performing to a great or very great extent (an estimated 22 percent). In fact, similar to 2013, 20 percent of these managers reported no basis to judge whether these evaluations informed the public. As we noted in our 2013 report, federal managers' use of evaluation appears to be oriented more internally than externally, and they may think that they are not in a position to know whether the public reads their reports. This does not mean that agencies do not make their evaluation reports public. In our 2014 survey of the 24 PIOs, half reported that their agencies posted evaluation reports in a searchable database on their websites, and a third reported disseminating evaluation reports by electronic mailing lists.

Lack of Resources Hinders Evaluation Use, but Leadership Support and Evaluation Relevance Facilitate It

Simply having program evaluations does not ensure that managers will use their results in management or policy making. As we noted above, our reviews of the research and policy literature have found that organizational and national capacity to conduct and use evaluation in decision making relies on leadership support for using evidence in decision making, organizational resources, and the availability of evaluation results.

In addition, the nature of study results can influence evaluation use; mixed or inconclusive results may not suggest a clear path of action. To help understand the relative importance of these factors for evaluation use, our survey asked federal managers who had recent evaluations of any of their programs, operations, or projects to what extent specific factors regarding leadership support, policy context, staff capabilities, or evaluation characteristics hindered or facilitated using evaluations in their agencies.

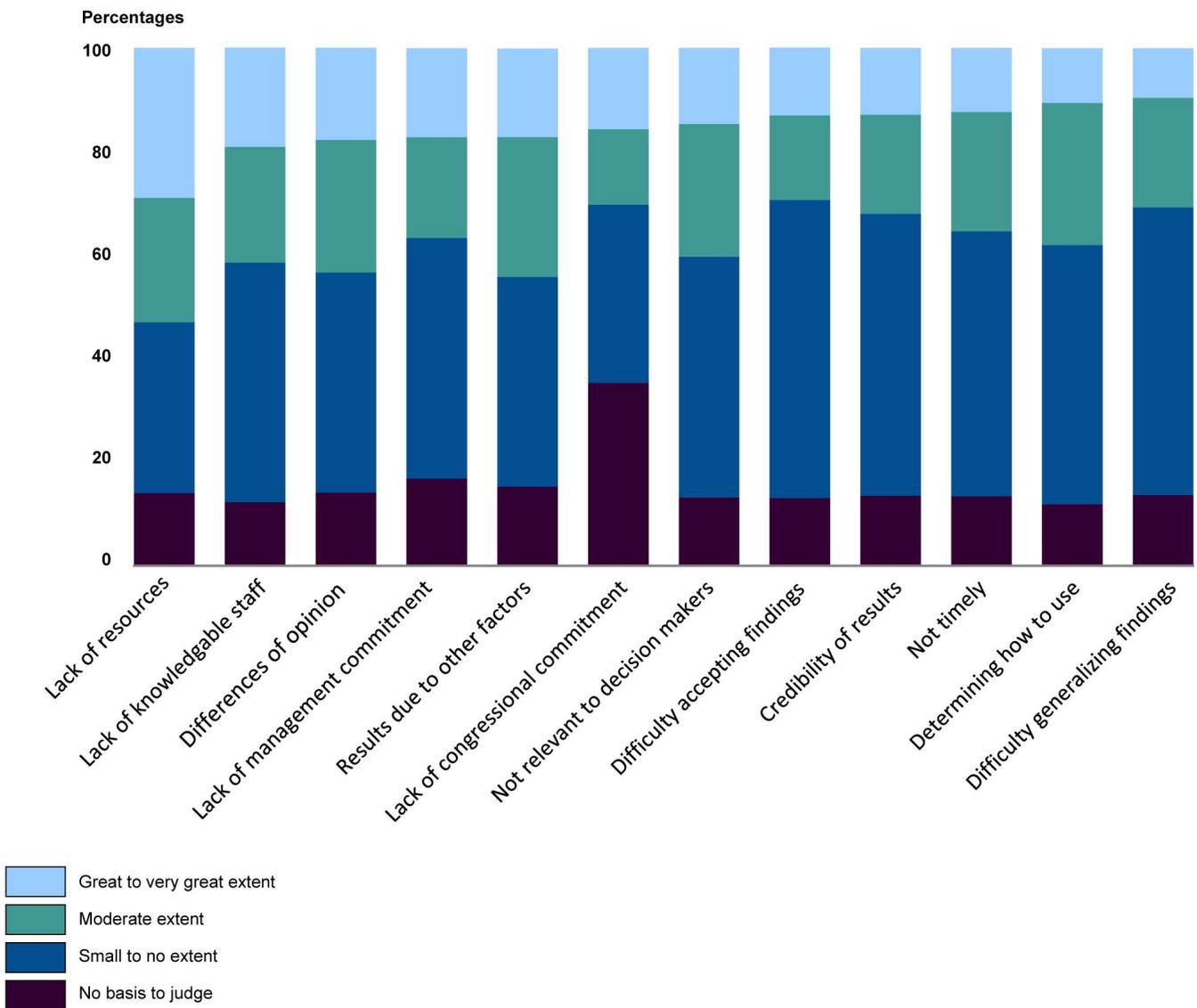
Managers' views of which factors facilitate or hinder evaluation use have changed little since our 2013 survey. Managers who reported having evaluations once again most often reported that lack of resources to implement results was a barrier to evaluation use (an estimated 29 percent). They most often identified leadership support for evaluation (38 percent), and the evaluation's relevance to decision makers (36 percent) as facilitators of evaluation use. While 19 percent perceived lack of staff knowledgeable in evaluation as a barrier, 35 percent reported that staff involvement facilitated use. As in our 2013 survey, many agency managers (35 percent) reported they had no basis to judge the influence of the presence or absence of congressional support for evaluation. In our 2014 survey, the PIOs generally identified the same factors facilitating evaluation use.

Lack of Resources Was Reported as a Hindrance More Often than Agency Capacity or Study Limitations

Managers who reported having access to recent evaluations of their programs rated lack of resources to implement evaluation findings more

often than any other potential barrier (see figure 2). They also reported modest concerns related to program context and agency capacity or support for evaluation as barriers to evaluation use more often than potential problems with study quality.

Figure 2: Managers' Views on the Extent to Which Selected Factors Hindered Evaluation Use



Source: GAO survey. | GAO-17-743.

Note: Percentages are based on the responses of managers who reported having had program evaluations completed within the past 5 years. The percentage estimates have margins of error at the 95 percent confidence level of ± 7 percentage points or less.

For the estimated 40 percent of managers who reported having evaluations, the factor that they most often reported hindering the use of program evaluations to a great or very great extent was a lack of resources to implement evaluation findings (29 percent), which was also the most commonly reported factor in 2013 (33 percent, difference not statistically significant). This is not surprising given today's constrained federal budget resources. In a climate of budget reductions, agencies are hard-pressed to argue for expanding or creating new programs. But agencies may also lack resources to undertake corrective action within existing programs, such as providing additional staff training or increasing oversight or enforcement efforts.

Barriers Related to Program or Policy Context

Few federal managers who reported having evaluations cited factors related to agency and policy context as barriers that hinder the use of evaluations to a great or very great extent, such as:

- difficulty resolving differences of opinion among internal or external stakeholders (an estimated 18 percent),
- difficulty distinguishing between the results produced by the program and results caused by other factors (17 percent), and
- concern that the evaluation did not address issues of relevance to decision makers (15 percent).

The wide range of stakeholders for federal programs can include the Congress, executive branch officials, nonfederal program partners (state and local agencies and community-based organizations), program beneficiaries, regulated entities, and the policy research community. Their perspectives on evaluation results may differ because of differences in their policy opinions or the complexity of evaluation findings. For programs with broad goals, stakeholders may differ in their perception of a program's purpose and how program "success" should be defined. Disagreements about what to do next can occur when evaluation findings are not wholly positive or negative.

Some federal managers who reported having evaluations also reported that difficulty distinguishing between results produced by the program and results caused by other factors was a great or very great barrier to evaluation use (18 percent). Across the federal government, programs

aim to achieve outcomes that they do not control, that are influenced by other programs or external social, economic, or environmental factors, complicating the task of assessing program effectiveness. Typically, this challenge is met by conducting a net impact evaluation that compares what occurred with an estimate of what would have occurred in the absence of the program.²⁵ However, these studies can be difficult to conduct, may have unexpected or contradictory findings, and need to be considered in the context of the larger body of evidence.

Some managers (an estimated 15 percent) rated concern about the relevance of an evaluation's issues to decision makers as hindering use to a great or very great extent, but three times as many managers (47 percent) reported that this was a small or insignificant barrier. Our previous literature review found that collaboration with program stakeholders in evaluation planning is a widely recognized element of evaluation capacity.²⁶ We also described in a previous report how experienced agency evaluation offices reach out to key program stakeholders to identify important policy and program management questions, vet initial ideas with the evaluations' intended users, and then scrutinize the proposed portfolio of studies for relevance and feasibility within available resources. The resulting evaluation agenda aims to provide timely, credible answers to important policy and program management questions.²⁷ This can help ensure that their evaluations will be used effectively in management and legislative oversight.

More recently, OMB, in the President's proposed budget for fiscal year 2018, encouraged agencies to expand on this practice by adopting a "learning agenda" in which they collaboratively identify the critical questions that, when answered, will help their programs be more effective. A learning agenda would then identify the most appropriate tools and methods (for example, research, evaluation, analytics, or performance measures) to answer each question. OMB noted that the selected questions should reflect the priorities and needs of a wide array of stakeholders involved in program and policy decision making: Administration and agency officials, program offices and program

²⁵For more information see GAO, *Designing Evaluations: 2012 Revision*, [GAO-12-208G](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 2012).

²⁶[GAO-15-25](#).

²⁷[GAO-11-176](#).

partners, researchers, and the Congress.²⁸ As we noted above, in 2017, the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking also recommended that departments create learning agendas.

Lack of Agency Capacity or Support for Evaluation

Two infrequently reported barriers related to agency evaluation resources at both the staff and executive levels, at about the same levels as in 2013, are:

- lack of staff knowledgeable about interpreting or analyzing program evaluation results (an estimated 19 percent rated great or very great extent), and
- lack of ongoing top executive commitment or support for using program evaluation to make program or funding decisions (17 percent).

In contrast, almost half of agency managers who reported having evaluations reported that these two issues hindered evaluation use to a small extent or not at all (an estimated 46 to 47 percent, respectively). The research literature has clearly established leadership support for using evidence in decision making as important for evaluation use.²⁹ However, it is likely that most managers who have evaluations also have at least some leadership support for evaluation. Our 2014 survey of 24 PIOs found that the 9 agencies who reported having independent, centralized evaluation authority reported greater evaluation use in management and policy making.

Program evaluations—especially net impact evaluations that attempt to isolate a program’s effects from the effects of other factors—typically employ more complex analytic techniques than performance monitoring, so their results may be unfamiliar to staff without training in research and statistics. Evaluation expertise is needed to plan, conduct, or procure evaluation studies, but program staff also need sufficient knowledge to understand and translate evaluation results into steps toward program improvement. Our 2014 survey of 24 PIOs found that about half the agencies reported increases in hiring staff with research and evaluation

²⁸OMB, *Analytic Perspectives, Budget of the U.S. Government, Fiscal Year 2018* (Washington, D.C.: 2017).

²⁹[GAO-15-25](#).

expertise and in training staff in research and analysis skills since 2011, but 7 acknowledged additional training was needed to a great or very great extent in data management and statistical analysis, performance measurement and monitoring, and translating evaluation results into actionable recommendations.

Potential Barriers Associated with Study Limitations

In both the 2013 and 2017 surveys, the agency managers with evaluations agreed that factors related to study limitations were not serious barriers; approximately half reported that they hindered evaluation use to a small extent or not at all:

- difficulty determining how to use evaluation findings to improve the program (an estimated 50 percent rated a small extent or not at all),
- difficulty obtaining study results in time to be useful (51 percent),
- concern about the credibility (validity or reliability) of study results (55 percent),
- difficulty generalizing the results to other persons or localities (56 percent), and
- difficulty accepting findings that do not conform to expectations (58 percent).

We have reported that an effective evaluation design aims to provide credible, timely answers to the intended users' questions.³⁰ Even with the best planning, however, an evaluation might not meet decision makers' needs. First, the pace of policy making is much quicker than the time it takes to conduct an evaluation. Second, there is no guarantee that study results will point to a clear path of action. We previously reported that, to manage these uncertainties, experienced evaluators recommended building a strong body of evidence and engaging stakeholders throughout the process.³¹

A body of evidence—including various forms of evidence—is considered more valuable than a single study because having multiple studies with similar results strengthens confidence in the conclusions, and a body of

³⁰[GAO-12-208G](#).

³¹[GAO-13-570](#).

information can yield answers to a variety of different questions, whenever stakeholders pose them. Comparing results obtained under different conditions can help explain what might be driving seemingly contradictory results. Evaluators pointed out that they rarely based decisions on a single study.

Individual evaluation studies typically do not simply identify whether a program works but, rather, they assess the effects of an individual program or intervention on specific domains for the specific populations or conditions studied. Developing a body of evidence is also a strategy for ensuring that information is available for input to fast-breaking policy discussions.

Engaging stakeholders throughout the evaluation process permits targeting the evaluation's questions and timing to decision makers' needs, gaining their buy-in to the study's credibility and relevance, and providing stakeholders with interim results or lessons learned about program changes that they can implement right away.

Managers' Limited Knowledge of Congressional Support for Evaluation

Few agency managers who reported having evaluations viewed lack of ongoing congressional commitment or support for using program evaluation to make program or funding decisions as a barrier to use to a great or very great extent (an estimated 16 percent). However, twice as many managers (35 percent) reported they had no basis for determining whether congressional commitment was a barrier. We found this same phenomenon in 2013 as well (18 percent and 39 percent, respectively), most likely reflecting midlevel managers' lack of direct contact with congressional members and staff. This is also consistent with responses to a parallel question included in our survey of federal managers about congressional commitment or support for using performance information to make program or funding decisions. About a third of the full sample of federal managers reported that they had no basis to judge whether lack of congressional support for using performance information hindered its use.

Congressional committees have a number of opportunities to communicate their support for evaluation, such as: consulting with agencies as they revise their strategic plans and agency priority goals (APG); requesting agency evaluations to address specific questions about policy or program implementation or results; conducting oversight hearings on agency performance; and reviewing agency evaluation plans

to ensure that they address issues of congressional interest. While the Congress holds numerous oversight hearings and requests studies from GAO, it is not clear whether it regularly requests agencies to conduct evaluations. In our 2014 survey, fewer than half the PIOs (10) reported having congressional mandates to evaluate specific programs.

Despite GPRAMA's requirement that agencies consult with the Congress in developing their strategic plans and priority goals, we found their communication to be one-directional, resembling reporting more than dialogue. In our 2013 interviews with evaluators, one evaluator explained that, for the most part, they conduct formal briefings for the Congress in a tense, high-stakes environment; they lack the opportunity for informal discussion of their results. In 2013 we recommended that OMB ensure that agencies adhere to OMB's guidance for website updates to provide a description of how congressional consultations were incorporated in each APG.³²

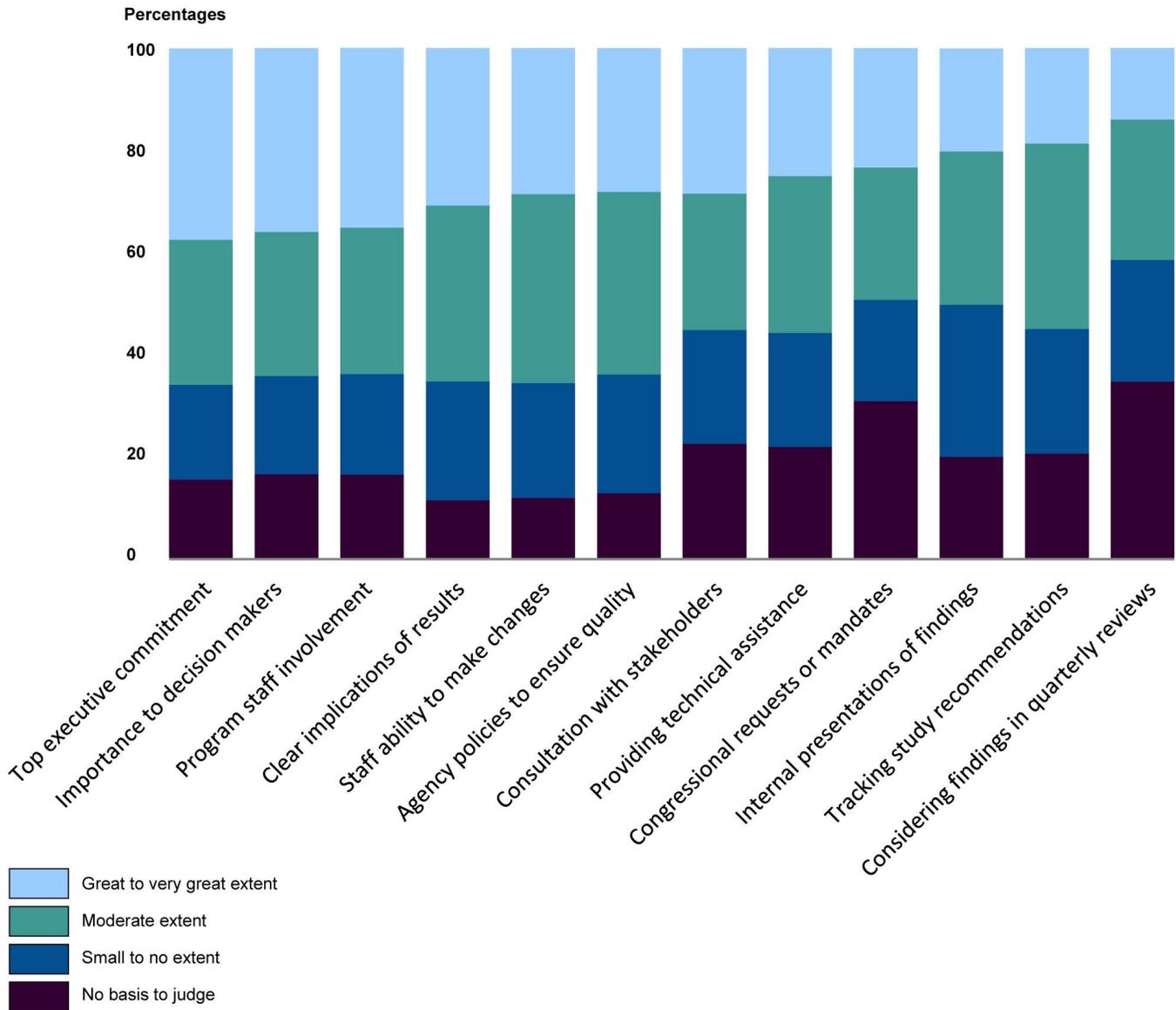
Our analysis of the sections on the 2016—2017 APGs on Performance.gov in October 2016 generally found that agencies either did not include information about congressional input or had not updated Performance.gov to reflect the most recent round of stakeholder engagement. As of June 2017, Performance.gov has been archived as agencies develop updated goals and objectives for release in February 2018 with the President's next Budget submission to the Congress.

Leadership Support for Evaluation and Policy Relevance of Evaluation Facilitate Use

To learn what factors facilitate evaluations' use in decision making, we added a new question to our survey of federal managers with evaluations on the extent to which 12 factors facilitate their use (see figure 3). We selected these factors to parallel factors found in our 2013 survey to hinder use as well as others that were found to facilitate use in our previous interviews with evaluators and in our 2014 survey of the PIOs.

³²GAO, *Managing for Results: Agencies Should More Fully Develop Priority Goals under the GPRA Modernization Act*, [GAO-13-174](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 19, 2013).

Figure 3: Managers' Views on the Extent to Which Selected Factors Facilitated Evaluation Use



Source: GAO survey. | GAO-17-743.

Note: Percentages are based on the response of managers who reported having had program evaluations completed within the past 5 years. The percentage estimates have margins of error at the 95 percent confidence level of ± 7 percentage points or less.

In 2017, federal managers who reported having evaluations most frequently reported that agency leadership support for evaluation, staff involvement, and evaluation relevance to decision makers facilitated evaluation use. Although neither the survey respondents nor the survey questions are directly comparable, the PIOs we surveyed in 2014 reported similar factors as facilitating evaluation use.

These groups differed in their views on the importance of quarterly performance reviews, possibly reflecting their different responsibilities and levels of involvement. Both the federal managers and the senior agency officials reported limited knowledge of congressional requests for or interest in evaluation.

Top Executive Commitment and Policy Relevance

Consistent with the literature on factors supporting evaluation use, about one-third of agency managers who reported having evaluations rated top executive commitment or support for using program evaluation to make program or funding decisions the most often of the factors presented (an estimated 38 percent to a great or very great extent). About twice as many managers reported this factor as facilitating evaluation use as those who rated its absence as hindering evaluation use to a great or very great extent (17 percent). This may be because, as we noted above, these respondents have evaluations and thus probably already have some leadership support for evaluation; lack of leadership support was not much of a problem for them.

While our 2014 survey did not ask the PIOs to what extent top leadership support for using evaluations in decision making facilitated its use, many reported that their agencies' senior leadership demonstrated commitment to using evidence (of various types) in management and policy making through guidance (17 of 22) or internal agency memorandums (12 of 22). Some PIOs also rated holding goal leaders accountable for progress on APGs—another form of leadership support—very useful for improving their agencies' capacity to use evaluations in decision making (8 of 23 PIOs).

GAO and others have commented that for evaluation results to be acted on, not only must decision makers generally support using evidence to inform decisions but also the studies themselves must be seen as relevant and credible. About one-third of agency managers with evaluations in 2017 rated importance of an evaluation's issues to agency decision makers as facilitating use to a great or very great extent (an

estimated 36 percent). This is about twice as many as the managers who said the absence of relevance hindered evaluation use to a great or very great extent (15 percent). We interpret this to mean that the managers perceived their evaluations as generally addressing relevant issues and that the evaluations' relevance contributed to their use in agency decision making.

Despite managers' high regard for top management's support for evaluation, it is notable that few managers reported that consideration of evaluation findings in agency quarterly performance reviews facilitated their use in decision making. GPRAMA introduced these reviews to encourage the use of performance information in agency decision making by requiring agencies to review progress on their APGs quarterly and to report publicly on their progress and strategies to improve performance, as needed. Although about a quarter of the PIOs reported in 2014 (6 of 23) that these reviews were very useful in improving agencies' capacity to use evaluations, the managers surveyed in 2017 were not as sanguine. About a third of the managers with evaluations reported that they had no basis to judge whether these reviews facilitated use (35 percent), and few (14 percent) rated them as facilitating use to a great or very great extent. It may be that few middle managers participated in these reviews; they are only required for APGs, a small subset of an agency's performance goals (generally 2—8 goals at each agency). Sixty-one percent of the total sample of managers reported that they were not at all familiar with these reviews.

Alternatively, evaluations might contribute more effectively to the annual strategic reviews, which aim for a comprehensive assessment of progress on the results the agency aims to achieve. OMB's guidance for these reviews directs agencies to consider a broad array of evidence and external influences on their objectives, identify any gaps in their evidence and areas where additional evaluations or other analyses are needed, and thus focus their limited evaluation resources to inform the strategic decisions facing the agency. Our 2017 survey did not ask federal managers about these strategic reviews; thus, we do not know whether midlevel managers were aware of or involved in these reviews.

Staff Involvement

Experienced evaluators have told us that engaging staff throughout the evaluation process can gain their buy-in on the relevance and credibility of evaluation findings. In addition, providing program staff with interim results or lessons learned from early program implementation can ensure

timely data for program decisions. In 2017, one-third of agency managers with evaluations rated program staff involvement in planning or conducting evaluation studies as greatly or very greatly facilitating use (an estimated 35 percent). This is consistent with our 2014 survey, in which about half the PIOs also rated staff involvement in planning and conducting evaluation studies as very useful for improving agency capacity to use evaluations in decision making (11 of 23).

Evaluations may use complex analytic techniques with which program staff are unfamiliar, thus inhibiting staff's involvement and their ability to interpret the findings. However, only an estimated 19 percent of managers rated lack of staff who are knowledgeable about interpreting or analyzing program evaluation results as greatly or very greatly hindering use. A quarter of managers (25 percent) reported that one possible response—providing program staff and grantees with technical assistance on evaluation and its use—facilitated evaluation use to a great or very great extent. In 2014, about half the surveyed PIOs agreed; 11 of 23 rated this strategy as very useful for improving agency capacity to use evaluations.

Ability to Make Recommended Changes

Other factors that managers in the 2017 survey rated often as facilitating use were parallel to factors that they rated often as barriers. About a quarter of managers (an estimated 29 percent) reported that agency staff ability to make recommended program changes facilitated use to a great to very great extent. This factor is parallel to the most frequently rated factor to hinder use—lack of resources to implement the evaluation findings—that a similar number identified (29 percent great to very great extent). As we noted above, midlevel managers may not have the authority or resources to implement a study's recommendations.

In addition, the positive characteristics of a study may influence its use. About a third of agency managers who reported having evaluations reported that clear implications of results for improving program design or management (31 percent) facilitated use to a great to very great extent. The absence of such clarity is one of the factors that an evaluator previously told us could lead to disagreements, and such disagreements may lead to inaction. Mixed results or the absence of a clear explanation for disappointing program results can impede consensus on an evaluation's lessons for program improvement. A strong evaluation design can help prevent message muddling by testing alternative explanations, but it cannot ensure that an evaluation will provide clear

implications because the results of an evaluation, like a research study, are inherently uncertain.

Agency Evaluation Policies

Written evaluation policies and standards help provide benchmarks for ensuring the quality of an organization's processes and products. The American Evaluation Association (AEA) publishes a guide for developing and implementing U.S. government evaluation programs that recommends that agencies, among other things, develop written evaluation policies and quality standards, consult with program stakeholders, and prepare annual and long-term evaluation plans to support future decision making.³³ In our 2014 survey of PIOs, about a quarter of the 24 PIOs surveyed reported that their agencies had written agency-wide policies or guidance for key issues contained in that guide:

- selecting and prioritizing evaluation topics,
- consulting program staff and subject matter experts,
- ensuring internal and external evaluator independence and objectivity,
- selecting evaluation approaches and methods,
- ensuring completeness and transparency of evaluation reports,
- timely public dissemination of evaluation findings and recommendations, or
- tracking implementation of evaluation findings.

A few more PIOs (10 of 24) reported having agency-wide policies on ensuring the quality of data collection and analysis.

In our 2017 survey, we estimate that 28 percent of managers who reported having evaluations reported that agency policies and procedures to ensure evaluation quality facilitated use to a great or very great extent. Our survey did not ask which types of policies they had, so we do not know whether they included all of the topics listed above.

Only a small number of managers—13 percent—reported having no basis to judge their policies' influence, suggesting that most agencies have

³³AEA, *An Evaluation Roadmap for a More Effective Government* (Oct. 2013), <http://www.eval.org>.

evaluation policies, although those policies may not apply agency-wide. The reported positive influence of such policies on evaluation quality is also consistent with the fact that about half the managers with evaluations reported that various factors regarding study limitations did not significantly hinder evaluation use in decision making, as discussed above.

Experienced evaluators consult with stakeholders in developing their evaluation or learning agenda to help ensure their evaluations' credibility and relevance to current management and policy issues. In the 2017 survey, managers with evaluations rated consultation with stakeholders on the agency's evaluation agenda high for facilitating evaluation use (28 percent to a great or very great extent), although 22 percent responded they had no basis to judge. In our 2014 survey of PIOs, only 7 reported having an agency-wide evaluation agenda.

Limited Congressional Requests for Evaluation

The Congress is a prominent member of federal program stakeholders but congressional interest in and requests for evaluation were not widely reported by the PIOs we surveyed in 2014. Congressional mandates are requirements in statute for an agency (including GAO) to conduct a study, usually specifying the topic and a reporting date. GAO is often requested to report on the progress and success of new programs or program provisions. In our 2014 survey, fewer than half the PIOs (10 of 23) reported that they had any congressional mandate to evaluate a specific program in their agency.

Consistent with this low reporting of congressional requests for evaluation, about one-third of managers who reported having evaluations in our 2017 survey reported that they had no basis to judge whether congressional requests or mandates facilitated evaluation use (31 percent). However, 23 percent reported that such requests facilitated use to a great or very great extent. Thus, while congressional evaluation requests are not widely reported among PIOs, they appear to be influential among some federal managers.

Conclusions

For several years, OMB has encouraged agencies to use program evaluations and other forms of evidence to learn what works and what does not, and how to improve results. Yet, agencies appear not to have

expanded their capacity to conduct or use evaluation in decision making since 2013. Because the majority of agency managers who reported having evaluations also reported that they contributed to improving program performance (54 percent), this lack of evaluation capacity constitutes a lost opportunity to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of limited government resources.

The survey results reinforce lessons from our previous reports: involving agency staff and executives in planning and conducting evaluations helps ensure that those evaluations are relevant, credible, and used in agency decision making. Agency managers who reported having evaluations also reported top executive support for using evaluations to make decisions, the importance of the evaluation's issues to decision makers, and involving agency staff in planning or conducting evaluation studies, most often among factors facilitating evaluation use.

GAO, as well as OMB, AEA, and the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, has noted that it is important to develop an evaluation plan or agenda to ensure that even an agency's scarce research and evaluation resources are targeted to its most important issues and can shape budget and policy priorities and management practices. Although only some agencies have developed agency-wide evaluation agendas, evaluators who have them have found that consulting with stakeholders on their evaluation agendas helps ensure evaluation credibility and relevance, and facilitates the use of evaluation results.

Congressional support—through either authorization or appropriation of funds—is often needed for agencies to implement desired program reforms. Although 28 percent of federal managers with evaluations reported that consulting with external stakeholders on their evaluation agendas greatly contributes to their use, we saw limited knowledge of congressional consultation. Congressional consultation on agency evaluation plans could increase the studies' credibility and relevance for those audiences.

Although evaluations were generally not reported as contributing greatly to quarterly performance reviews of progress on agency priority goals, they might contribute more effectively to an agency's annual strategic review. OMB's guidance envisions strategic reviews as a more comprehensive assessment of a broad range of evidence on and factors influencing progress on an agency's desired results. Agencies are also directed to identify any gaps in their evidence and take steps to address them in these reviews; thus, the strategic review could produce an

evaluation agenda that is targeted to the agency's management, budget, and policy priorities.

Recommendation

To help ensure that federal agencies obtain the evidence needed to address the most important questions to improve program implementation and performance, we recommend that the Director of the Office of Management and Budget direct each of the 24 Chief Financial Officer Act agencies to prepare an annual agency-wide evaluation plan that describes the

- key questions for each significant evaluation study that the agency plans to begin in the next fiscal year, and
- congressional committees; federal, state and local program partners; researchers; and other stakeholders that were consulted in preparing their plan. (Recommendation 1)

Agency Comments

We requested comments on a draft of this report from the Director of the Office of Management and Budget. In an email response, an OMB staff member commented that it would be more appropriate and effective to encourage agencies to create an annual evaluation plan, rather than require or direct them to do so. Because OMB has encouraged agencies to conduct and use evaluations in decision making for several years with mixed success, we believe that a more directive approach is needed.

We are sending copies of this report to the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and to appropriate congressional committees. This report is also available at no cost on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-2700 or kingsburyn@gao.gov. Contact points for our Office of Congressional Relations and Office of Public Affairs may be found on the last page of the report. Staff who made key contributions to the report are listed in appendix II.



Nancy Kingsbury, Ph.D.
Managing Director
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The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly
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Subcommittee on Government Operations
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Appendix I: Methodology for Federal Managers Survey

We administered a web-based questionnaire on organizational performance and management issues to a stratified random sample of 4,395 from a population of approximately 153,779 mid-level and upper-level civilian managers and supervisors working in the 24 executive branch agencies covered by the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990 (CFO Act), as amended. The sample was drawn from the Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) Enterprise Human Resources Integration database as of September 2015, using file designators for performance of managerial and supervisory functions.

The sample was stratified by agency and by whether the manager or supervisor was a member of the Senior Executive Service (SES). The management levels covered general schedule (GS) or equivalent schedules in other pay plans at levels comparable to GS-13 through GS-15 and career SES or equivalent. In reporting the questionnaire data, we use "government-wide" or "across the federal government" to refer to these 24 CFO Act executive branch agencies, and "federal managers" and "managers" to refer to both managers and supervisors.

We designed the questionnaire to obtain the observations and perceptions of respondents on various aspects of such results-oriented management topics as the presence and use of performance information, agency climate, and program evaluation use. In addition, to address the implementation of GPRAMA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA), the questionnaire included a section requesting respondents' views on its various provisions including cross-agency priority goals, agency priority goals, and quarterly performance reviews.

This survey is similar to surveys we have conducted five times previously at the 24 CFO Act agencies—in 1997, 2000, 2003, 2007, and 2013.¹ The questions on GPRAMA provisions and program evaluation use were new in 2013. The 2017 questionnaire includes new questions on the use of

¹For information on the design and administration of the 2013 survey, see GAO, *Managing for Results: Executive Branch Should More Fully Implement the GPRAMA Modernization Act to Address Pressing Governance Challenges*, [GAO-13-518](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013).

performance information and factors that facilitate the use of program evaluation. Several components of the new evaluation question were drawn from our 2014 survey of Performance Improvement Officers (PIOs) on their agencies' evaluation capacity resources and activities, discussed below, and interviews with agency officials.² Before administering the survey, GAO subject matter experts, survey specialists, and a research methodologist reviewed new questions. We also conducted pretests of the new questions with federal managers in several of the 24 CFO Act agencies and based revisions on the feedback we received.

The objectives of this report address whether agency managers reported change in their access to and use of program evaluations since 2013 and their views about factors that facilitate or hinder the use of program evaluation. Therefore, this report analyzes results on a subset of survey questions concerning those topics. It then compares these results, when appropriate, to results previously obtained in the 2013 survey of federal managers, as well as the results of our 2014 PIO survey.

For the 2014 PIO survey, we administered a web-based questionnaire to the PIOs or their deputies at the 24 CFO Act agencies about agencies' evaluation resources, policies, and activities and the activities and resources they found useful in building their evaluation capacity. GAO subject matter experts, a survey specialist, and research methodologist also reviewed this survey's questions. In addition we pretested the questionnaire in person with PIOs at three federal agencies.

Because this was not a sample survey, it has no sampling errors but may be subject to nonsampling errors that stem from differences in how a question is interpreted. The survey of PIOs is not directly comparable to the survey of federal managers because the questions about factors influencing evaluation use are not exactly the same, and the PIOs, as senior officials typically reporting to the agency Chief Operating Officer, have very different responsibilities from the population of midlevel and upper-level managers and supervisors responding to the Federal Managers Survey.³

²GAO, *Program Evaluation: Some Agencies Reported that Networking, Hiring, and Involving Program Staff Help Build Capacity*, [GAO-15-25](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 13, 2014).

³Additional details on the 2014 survey methodology are in [GAO-15-25](#).

Most of the items on the 2017 Federal Managers Survey were closed-ended, meaning that depending on the particular item, respondents could choose one or more response categories or rate the strength of their perception on a 5-point “extent” scale ranging from “to no extent” at the low end of the scale to “to a very great extent” at the high end. On most items, respondents also had an option of choosing the response category “no basis to judge/not applicable.” A few items gave respondents “yes,” “no,” or “do not know” options.

To administer the survey, we sent an e-mail to managers in the sample that notified them of the survey’s availability on the GAO website and included instructions on how to access and complete the survey. Managers in the sample who did not respond to the initial notice received multiple e-mail reminders and follow-up phone calls asking them to participate in the survey. We administered the survey to all 24 CFO Act agencies from November 2016 through March 2017. For additional details on the survey methodology, see our report summarizing our body of work on GPRAMA’s implementation.⁴

From the 4,395 managers selected for the 2017 survey, we found that 388 of the sampled managers had left the agency, were on detail, or had some other reason that excluded them from the population of interest. We received usable questionnaires from 2,726 sample respondents. The response rate across the 24 CFO Act agencies ranged from 36 percent to 82 percent, with a weighted response rate of 67 percent for the entire sample. An estimated 40 percent of respondents reported that an evaluation had been completed within the past 5 years for any of the programs, operations, or projects with which they had been involved.

The overall survey results can be generalized government-wide to the population of managers as described above at each of the 24 CFO Act agencies. The responses of each eligible sample member who provided a useable questionnaire were weighted in the analysis to account statistically for all members of the population. All results are subject to some uncertainty or sampling error as well as nonsampling error. The government-wide percentage estimates based on our sample from 2017 presented in this report have 95 percent confidence intervals within plus or minus 4 percentage points of the estimate itself for the initial question

⁴GAO, *Managing for Results: Further Progress Made in Implementing the GPRMA Modernization Act, but Additional Actions Needed to Address Pressing Governance Challenges*, [GAO-17-775](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 29, 2017).

about whether an evaluation had been completed and within plus or minus 7 percentage points for subsequent questions posed to those who reported having evaluations. Online supplemental materials show all the questions asked on the survey along with the percentage estimates and associated 95 percent confidence intervals for each question for each agency and government-wide.⁵

⁵GAO, *Supplemental Material for GAO-17-775: 2017 Survey of Federal Managers on Organizational Performance and Management Issues*, [GAO-17-776SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 29, 2017).

Appendix II: GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Nancy Kingsbury, (202) 512-2700 or kingsburyn@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Stephanie Shipman (Assistant Director), Valerie Caracelli (Analyst in Charge), Pille Anvelt, Timothy Guinane, Jill Lacey, Benjamin Licht, Krista Loose, Anna Maria Ortiz, Penny Pickett, and Steven Putansu made key contributions to this report.

Appendix III: Accessible Data

Data Tables

Data Table for Figure 1: Managers' Views on the Contributions of Evaluations to Selected Program Activities

	Implementing changes	Assessing effectiveness	Increasing understanding	Explaining results	Developing performance goals	Sharing what works	Designing program reforms	Allocating resources	Supporting budget requests	Streamlining programs	Informing the public
No basis to judge	3.3	4.3	4.3	3.7	3.9	5.1	6.7	6.7	10.5	11.9	20.1
Small to no extent	13.8	15.1	17.8	20.8	21.6	21.7	23.0	30.3	32.8	32.1	34.5
Moderate extent	29.4	32.0	29.7	31.5	29.1	28.9	31.0	28.2	24.0	29.2	22.9
Great to very great extent	53.5	48.5	48.2	44.0	45.4	44.3	39.3	34.7	32.7	26.9	22.4

Data Table for Figure 2: Managers' Views on the Extent to Which Selected Factors Hindered Evaluation Use

	Lack of resources	Lack of knowledgeable staff	Differences of opinion	Lack of management commitment	Results due to other factors	Lack of congressional commitment	Not relevant to decision makers	Difficulty accepting findings	Credibility of results	Not timely	Determining how to use	Difficulty generalizing findings
No basis to judge	13.9	12.1	13.9	16.7	15.1	35.2	13.0	12.9	13.3	13.2	11.7	13.5
Small to no extent	33.0	46.4	42.6	46.6	40.6	34.5	46.6	57.7	54.6	51.2	50.2	55.7
Moderate extent	24.1	22.4	25.7	19.5	27.1	14.6	25.7	16.4	19.2	23.1	27.5	21.2
Great to very great extent	29.0	19.2	17.8	17.2	17.1	15.7	14.7	13.1	12.9	12.4	10.6	9.6

Data Table for Figure 3: Managers' Views on the Extent to Which Selected Factors Facilitated Evaluation Use

	Top executive commitment	Importance to decision makers	Program staff involvement	Clear implications of results	Staff ability to make changes	Agency policies to ensure quality	Consultation with stakeholders	Providing technical assistance	Congressional requests or mandates	Internal presentations of findings	Tracking study recommendations	Considering findings in quarterly reviews
No basis to judge	15.5	16.5	16.5	11.4	11.9	12.8	22.5	21.9	30.8	20.0	20.6	34.7
Small to no extent	18.6	19.3	19.7	23.3	22.5	23.3	22.3	22.3	19.8	29.8	24.4	23.8
Moderate extent	28.4	28.2	28.7	34.5	37.0	35.8	26.7	30.7	25.9	30.0	36.3	27.5
Great to very great extent	37.5	36.0	35.2	30.8	28.6	28.1	28.5	25.1	23.4	20.2	18.7	14.0

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