

Why GAO Did This Study

Congress and OMB have taken steps intended to strengthen federal evidence-building activities. In September 2017, a federal commission found that agencies had uneven capacity to support, or did not fully coordinate, a full range of evidence-building activities.

GAO was asked to examine the coordination of federal evidence-building activities. This report (1) describes selected agencies' actions that align with direction from Congress and OMB to strengthen evidence-building activities and (2) examines the extent to which selected agencies' processes for coordinating those activities reflect leading practices for collaboration.

To address these objectives, GAO reviewed documents and interviewed officials about federal evidence-building activities at five selected agencies. GAO selected these agencies based on the greater number of experiences they had in comparison to other agencies incorporating these activities into the design and implementation of certain programs. GAO assessed their coordination of these activities against four leading practices for collaboration identified in GAO's past work.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making a total of seven recommendations to DOL, CNCS, and HHS to better reflect leading collaboration practices in their evidence prioritization processes. DOL concurred, CNCS neither agreed nor disagreed, and HHS did not concur with the recommendations. CNCS and HHS stated, but did not provide information to support, that each had already taken relevant actions. GAO continues to believe the recommendations are valid, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-20-119](#). For more information, contact Michelle Sager at (202) 512-6806 or sagem@gao.gov.

EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING

Selected Agencies Coordinate Activities, but Could Enhance Collaboration

What GAO Found

Federal decision makers need evidence about whether federal programs and activities achieve intended results as they set priorities and consider how to make progress toward national objectives. The five agencies GAO reviewed took actions that align with direction from Congress and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to strengthen their evidence-building activities. The five agencies are: the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Labor (DOL); the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS); and the U.S. Agency for International Development. For example, based on a statutory requirement, a majority of grant funding for HHS's Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program is to be used for home visiting models with sufficient evidence of their effectiveness. Consistent with this requirement, HHS annually assesses evidence, such as the results of program evaluations, to identify effective home visiting models that grantees can implement.

Evidence-building can involve assessing existing evidence, identifying any new evidence needs, and prioritizing when to fulfill those needs. These efforts are fragmented within each of the five agencies—that is, each has multiple organizational units with responsibilities for evidence-building. For example, DOL has established separate units responsible for different sources of evidence—evaluations, performance information, and statistics. Effective collaboration can help agencies manage this fragmentation, and lead to improved results.

GAO found that to assess existing evidence, each agency established a coordinated, agency-wide process that reflects leading practices for collaboration. Those leading practices are: (1) defining a *leadership* model; (2) involving relevant *participants*; (3) clarifying roles and *responsibilities*; and (4) documenting that information in written *guidance*. However, agencies' processes for determining which new evidence to generate, when, and how (i.e., prioritizing new evidence) did not always reflect the leading practices (see figure).

Agencies' processes to prioritize evidence mostly reflect leading practices for collaboration

Agency	GAO-identified leading practices for collaboration			
	Leadership	Participants	Responsibilities	Guidance
Corporation for National and Community Service	●	◐	◐	◐
Department of Education	●	●	●	●
Department of Health and Human Services	●	◐	●	◐
Department of Labor	●	◐	●	◐
U.S. Agency for International Development	●	●	●	●

● Reflects leading practice ◐ Partially reflects leading practice

Source: GAO analysis of agency information. | GAO-20-119

Improving collaboration for their prioritization processes could help CNCS, DOL, and HHS more effectively target limited resources for evidence-building.