



UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT
ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

Report to Congressional Committees



EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING

Practices to Help Manage and Assess the
Results of Federal Efforts

Accessible Version

EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING

Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts

Why This Matters

Federal decision makers need evidence about whether federal programs and activities are achieving intended results. Congressional and executive branch leaders can use evidence to better understand and address challenges, and set priorities to help improve implementation and performance.

However, GAO's past work has found that the federal government has made mixed progress in (1) developing relevant, high-quality evidence, (2) using it in decision-making, and (3) ensuring sufficient capacity to undertake those activities.

The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 includes a provision for GAO to identify actions to improve federal agency capacity to build and use evidence.

This product develops key practices and highlights related federal agency examples that GAO's past work has identified for implementing evidence-building and performance-management activities.

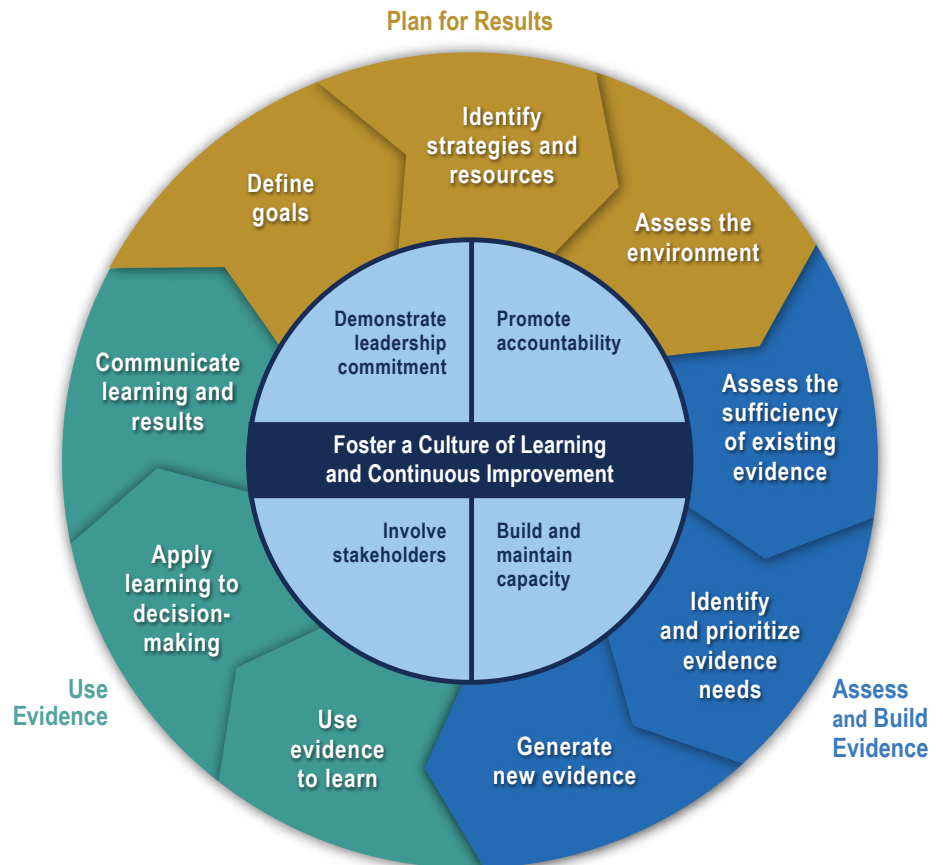
Key Takeaways

GAO developed 13 key practices that can help federal leaders and employees develop and use evidence to effectively manage and assess the results of federal efforts. The key practices are distilled from hundreds of actions identified in GAO's past work as effective for implementing federal evidence-building and performance-management activities.

Since 1990, a series of federal laws and executive actions have established requirements for agencies to build and use different types of evidence to understand and improve results. Evidence can include performance information, program evaluations, statistical data, and other research and analysis.

As illustrated below, the 13 key practices GAO developed can be viewed as four interrelated topic areas: (1) plan for results, (2) assess and build evidence, (3) use evidence, and (4) foster a culture of learning and continuous improvement.

Practices to Help Effectively Implement Federal Evidence-Building and Performance-Management Activities





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How to Use This Guide

This guide can help executive branch leaders and employees at any organizational level—such as an individual project or program, component agency or office, department, or cross-agency effort—build and use evidence to manage the organization’s performance. In addition, it can help inform Congress’s oversight of the Executive Branch’s evidence-building and performance-management activities, including implementation of relevant legal requirements.

This guide provides a primer on federal evidence-building and performance-management activities. It also provides further details about the 13 key practices, including key actions to implement the practices and related examples illustrating implementation by one or more agencies.

How GAO Did This Study

To develop the 13 key practices, GAO reviewed (1) federal laws and guidance related to evidence-building and performance-management activities and (2) its related past reports since 1996. In 1996, GAO developed a [guide](#) that identified key practices for federal organizational performance management. Since that time, GAO has issued approximately 200 reports that updated and expanded those 1996 practices, or identified new ones to reflect changes in federal laws and guidance and a broader range of evidence-building activities. GAO identified and distilled several hundred relevant actions into the 13 practices. GAO refined the practices and actions, as appropriate, based on input from cognizant officials at 24 major federal agencies and Office of Management and Budget staff.

To help illustrate each practice, GAO reviewed its recent reports—from fiscal years 2022 or 2023—to identify related recent examples. GAO selected illustrative examples where it found agencies had effectively implemented the practice. GAO also ensured that the selected examples covered (1) a range of agencies and different policy and management areas, and (2) different organizational levels, from individual programs to interagency efforts.

Additionally, GAO analyzed results from a [survey](#) it administered from July to December 2020 to assess the association between certain practices and increased use of evidence in decision making. The survey covered a stratified random sample of about 4,000 managers at 24 major federal agencies. The survey had a 56 percent response rate. Results can be generalized to the population of managers government-wide and at each agency.

In response to a draft of this report, the U.S. Agency for International Development provided written comments that highlighted results from GAO’s survey and the agency’s program evaluation practices. The Office of Management and Budget and remaining 23 agencies did not provide comments.

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Image Sources

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Abbreviations

CAP goal	cross-agency priority goal
CFO Act	Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990
DATA Act	Digital Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014
DOD	Department of Defense
EIA	U.S. Energy Information Administration
EPSCoR	Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research
Evidence Act	Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
FDA	Food and Drug Administration
FFATA	Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act
GPRA	Government Performance and Results Act of 1993
GPRAMA	GPRA Modernization Act of 2010
GS	general schedule
GSA	General Services Administration
NSF	National Science Foundation
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OPEN	Open, Public, Electronic and Necessary
PMA	President's Management Agenda
SBA	Small Business Administration
TAP	Transition Assistance Program
SES	Senior Executive Service
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
VA	Department of Veterans Affairs

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July 12, 2023

Congressional Committees

Federal decision makers need evidence about whether federal programs and activities are achieving intended results. Evidence can include performance information, program evaluations, statistical data, and other research and analysis. Congressional and executive branch leaders can use evidence to determine how federal programs and activities could best make progress toward national objectives, such as expanding the use of renewable energy, enhancing national security, or improving veterans' health care. Evidence can also help leaders better understand and address challenges, and set priorities to help improve implementation and performance.

Through a series of laws and related guidance since the 1990s, the federal government established and expanded its approach to building and using evidence to manage performance. Several laws in particular created interrelated frameworks for federal agency evidence-building and performance-management activities: the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA), as amended by the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA), and the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act).¹

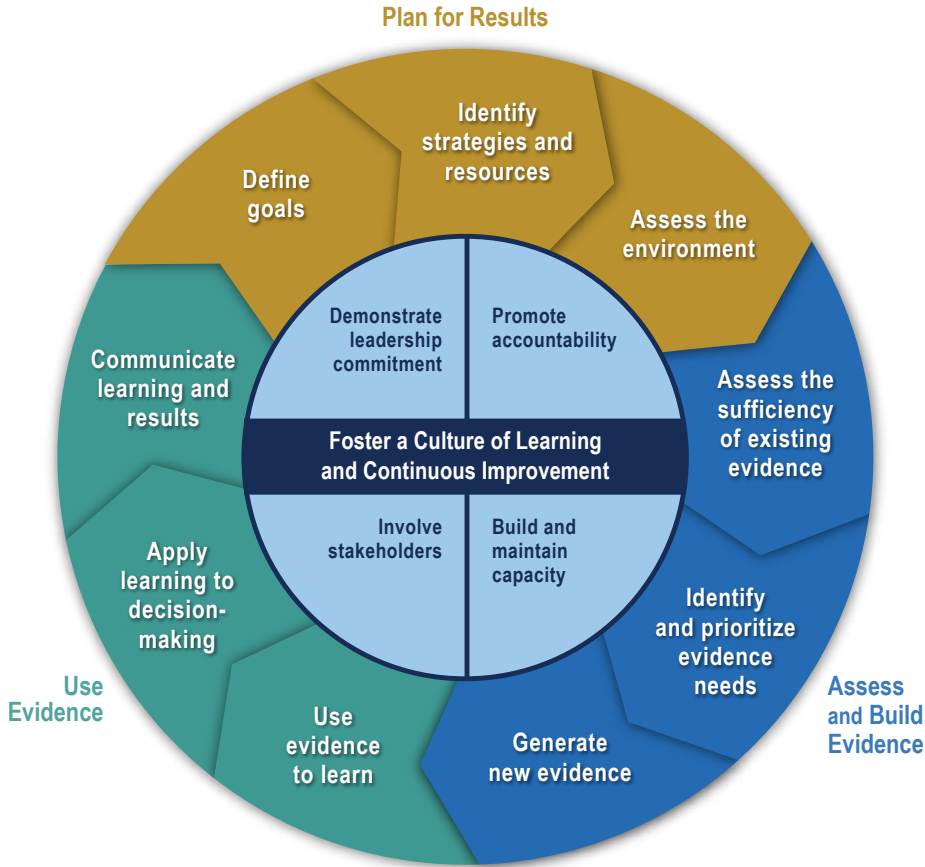
GPRA, GPRAMA, and the Evidence Act include provisions for us to review aspects of their implementation at different points in time. During the past 30 years, we have issued dozens of reports in response to those provisions. We have also conducted work at the request of various Members of Congress on federal evidence-building and performance-management topics. The Evidence Act includes a provision for us to identify actions that can help improve agency evidence-building capacity. This guide responds in part to that provision.²

¹Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285 (1993); Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866 (2011); Pub. L. No. 115-435, 132 Stat. 5554 (2019).

²This guide is part of a series of products responding to provisions in the Evidence Act. For additional information, see the Related GAO Products list at the end of our [December 2022](#) report on Evidence Act implementation.

We developed this guide to distill the actions identified by our past work into a series of key practices. We identified 13 key practices that can help executive branch leaders and employees at any organizational level—such as an individual project or program, component agency or office, department, or cross-agency effort—build and use evidence to manage the organization’s performance. In addition, the key practices can help inform Congress’s oversight of the Executive Branch’s evidence-building and performance-management activities, including implementation of relevant GPRAMA and Evidence Act requirements.

Figure 1: Practices to Help Effectively Implement Federal Evidence-Building and Performance-Management Activities



Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-23-105460

How We Developed This Guide

To develop the 13 key practices, we reviewed our past reports on evidence-building and performance-management activities since 1996. In 1996, we developed a [guide](#) for implementing GPRA, which identified key practices for federal organizational performance management.³ Since that time, we have issued approximately 200 reports that updated and expanded those 1996 practices, or identified new ones to reflect changes in federal laws and guidance and a broader range of evidence-building activities. Through this review, we identified several hundred relevant actions.

We distilled those actions into the 13 practices. We refined the practices and actions, as appropriate, based on input from (1) officials at 24 major federal agencies involved in implementing evidence-building and performance-management activities, and (2) Office of Management and Budget (OMB) staff responsible for providing government-wide direction and guidance. We also analyzed results from a survey of federal managers we conducted in 2020 to assess the association between certain practices and the increased use of evidence in decision making.⁴ In addition, we identified how implementing each practice could help agencies meet certain GPRAMA and Evidence Act requirements, as applicable.

To help illustrate each practice, we also reviewed our recent reports—from fiscal years 2022 or 2023—to identify recent related examples. We selected illustrative examples where we found agencies had effectively implemented the practice. We also ensured that the examples we selected covered (1) a range of agencies and different policy and management areas, and (2) different organizational levels, from individual programs to interagency efforts. See appendix I for additional information about our objectives, scope, and methodology for this report.

³These practices focus on activities to manage performance for organizations, not the performance of individual employees. See our [webpage on leading practices in human capital management](#) for our past work on [employee performance-management](#) systems and practices.

⁴We administered the web-based survey to a stratified random sample of 3,993 managers at 24 major federal agencies between July and December 2020. The overall weighted response rate was 56 percent of the eligible sample. The results are generalizable to the population of managers across the 24 agencies (which we refer to as government-wide) and at each agency. In November 2021, [we identified](#) connections between certain practices and the increased use of performance information. Appendix III of this guide describes analyses that identified connections between certain practices and the increased use of program evaluations. Our [supplemental material page](#) provides additional information about our 2020 survey of federal managers, including our past products analyzing results.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2021 to July 2023 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.

How to Use This Guide

Section I provides a primer on federal evidence-building and performance-management activities. Through a series of questions and answers, it provides information about those activities. It defines key terms and concepts and identifies selected relevant federal laws and guidance. It also summarizes our past findings about evidence-building and performance-management activities and provides links to related products.

Section II provides further details about 13 key practices that can help federal organizations effectively implement evidence-building and performance-management activities. These 13 practices are divided into four interrelated topic areas. For each area, we provide an introduction and identify related work.

For each practice within the area, we

- briefly describe the practice and identify key actions to implement the practice,
- highlight approaches that can help implement the practice,
- provide a related example illustrating implementation of the practice by one or more agencies,
- identify selected related legal requirements that could be met by following the practice, and
- list our related past work.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Office of Management and Budget and 24 major federal agencies covered by our work for review and comment.

The U.S. Agency for International Development provided written comments reprinted in appendix V. It noted how our survey results highlighted its current evaluation practices, and stated that it would continue to apply those practices in implementing its evaluation activities.

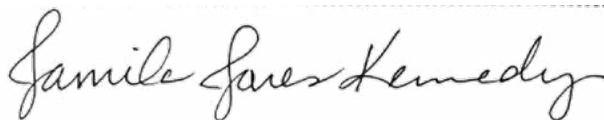
OMB, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Social Security Administration each provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

Seventeen other agencies informed us that they had no comments: the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Education, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, the Interior, Justice, Labor, State, Transportation, and Veterans Affairs; General Services Administration; National Aeronautics and Space Administration; National Science Foundation; Nuclear Regulatory Commission; Office of Personnel Management; and Small Business Administration. The remaining two agencies did not provide a response.

We are sending copies of this report to appropriate congressional committees, the Director of OMB, the heads of 24 major federal agencies, and other interested parties. This report will also be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>. If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact Dawn Locke at (202) 512-6806 or locked@gao.gov, or Jamila Kennedy at (202) 512-3637 or kennedyjj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of the report. Key contributors to this report are listed in appendix VI.



Dawn G. Locke, Director
Strategic Issues



Jamila Jones Kennedy, Director
Applied Research and Methods

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Section I: Information about Federal Evidence-Building and Performance-Management Activities

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What is evidence?

Federal laws and related guidance define evidence in different, but complementary, ways (see textbox).

Definitions of Evidence

The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act), Pub. L. No. 115-435, 132 Stat. 5529 (2019):

Under the Evidence Act, evidence is defined as “information produced as a result of statistical activities conducted for a statistical purpose.”

Statistical purpose refers to “the description, estimation, or analysis of the characteristics of groups, without identifying the individuals or organizations that comprise such groups and includes the development, implementation, or maintenance of methods, technical or administrative procedures, or information resources that support” those actions.

Office of Management and Budget (OMB):

OMB defines evidence as “the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid.”

OMB’s guidance also contains the Evidence Act definitions, but states that in the context of improving organizational and agency performance, “evidence” can be viewed more broadly, in line with OMB’s definition.

Source: 44 U.S.C. § 3561 and OMB Circular No. A-11 (2022) | GAO-23-105514

According to OMB [guidance \(Memorandum M-19-23\)](#), evidence can consist of quantitative or qualitative information and may be derived from a variety of sources. Those sources include foundational fact-finding (e.g., aggregate indicators, exploratory studies, descriptive statistics, and other research), performance measurement, policy analysis, and program evaluation.

Our past work has similarly identified and defined different sources of evidence, consistent with those identified by OMB's guidance:

- **Performance information.** Quantitative or qualitative data used to track progress toward achieving agency goals or objectives, or to assess the overall performance of a program, operation, or project.
- **Program evaluations.** Individual, systematic studies using research methods to assess how well a program, operation, or project is achieving its objectives, and the reasons why it may, or may not, be performing as expected.
- **Data, research, and analysis.** Additional types of information that can inform program and agency decisions include:
 - **Administrative data.** Data collected by agencies, contractors, or grantees, among others, to carry out the basic operations and administration of a program.
 - **Statistical data.** Data collected for the purpose of describing or making estimates concerning society, the economy, or the environment, or relevant subgroups or components.
 - **Research and analysis.** Studies providing additional information and insights pertinent to a program, its objectives, the populations it serves, or challenges it faces.

See the glossary at the end of this guide for more detailed definitions.

Both our past work and OMB's guidance recommend that agencies build a portfolio of high-quality, credible sources of evidence—rather than a single source—to support decision-making. Further, according to OMB guidance, since different sources of evidence have varying degrees of credibility, the use of evidence in decision-making requires an understanding of what conclusions can—and cannot—be drawn from the information.

Why evidence matters. Evidence helps provide insights about federal agencies, programs, and activities. It can help federal leaders and staff, stakeholders, and the public better understand the issues the federal government seeks to address, and how well federal programs and activities are doing at addressing those issues.

Selected GAO products: [GAO-21-536](#), [GAO-20-119](#)

What is evidence building?

Evidence building can be viewed as a cycle of the following four activities:

- assessing existing evidence to determine its sufficiency and if additional evidence is needed to further understand results and inform decision-making;
- prioritizing among the identified needs which new evidence to generate, when, and how;
- generating new evidence, by collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing sources of data and research results; and
- using that evidence to support learning and decision-making processes.

These activities are interrelated, and evidence building does not always follow these four activities in a certain order. For example, after assessing existing evidence, agency officials could both use that evidence in decision-making processes and identify and prioritize needs for new evidence to generate.

Why evidence building matters. Evidence-building activities can help decision makers obtain the evidence they need to understand and assess results and identify actions to improve them. The benefit of building a portfolio of evidence is fully realized when it is used to identify and correct problems, improve program implementation, and make other important management and resource allocation decisions.

Selected GAO products: [GAO-21-536](#), [GAO-20-119](#)

What is organizational performance management?

Our past work has defined performance management as a three-step process by which organizations

- set goals to identify the results they seek to achieve,
- collect performance information (a type of evidence) to measure progress, and
- use that information to assess results and inform decisions to ensure further progress towards achieving those goals.

Why performance management matters. Taken as a whole, performance-management activities help an organization define what it is trying to achieve, determine how well it is performing, and identify what it could do to improve results. Performance information is generally collected on a regular basis (i.e., monthly, quarterly, annually). Therefore, it allows for regular monitoring and oversight—both within a federal agency and by outside parties, such as Congress, the public, and other stakeholders.

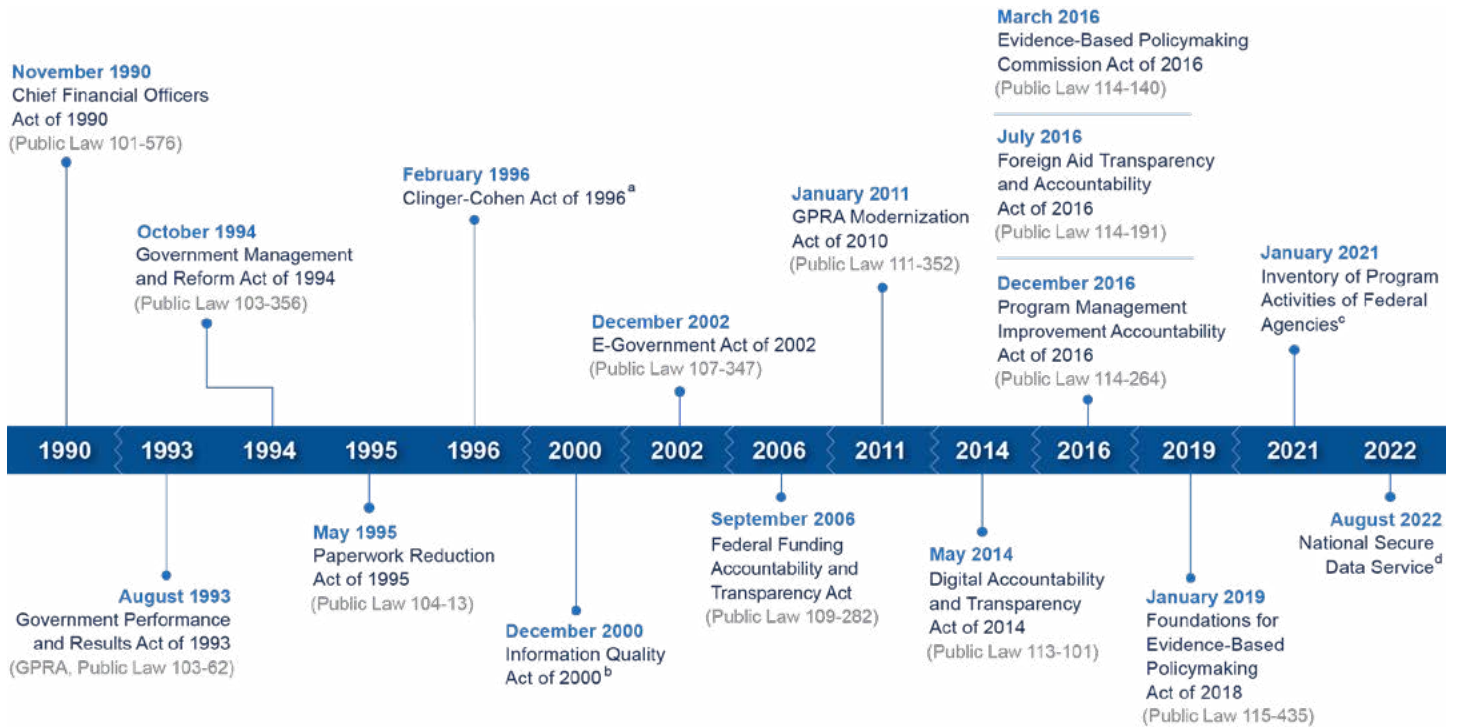
Selected GAO products: [GAO-05-927](#), [GAO/GGD-96-118](#)

What federal laws and guidance direct evidence-building and performance-management activities?

Various laws, policies, and guidance direct evidence-building and performance-management activities—across the federal government, at individual departments and agencies, and for individual offices, bureaus, programs, and other activities.

Beginning with the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990, Congress has passed and the President has signed a series of laws with government-wide or crosscutting requirements to manage performance by building and using different sources of evidence. The timeline below identifies and illustrates selected laws enacted between 1990 and 2022 (see fig. 2). Appendix II provides a brief summary of these selected laws.

Figure 2: Timeline of Selected Federal Laws Related to Evidence-Building and Performance-Management Activities



Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-23-105460

^aDivisions D and E of the National Defense Authorization Act of 1996 are known as the “Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996”. Pub L. No. 104-106, 110 Stat. 186 (1996) as amended by Pub. L. No. 104-208, § 808, 110 Stat. 3009, 3009-393 (1996).

^bSection 515 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2001, is known as the Information Quality Act. Pub. L. No. 106-554, § 515, 114 Stat. 2763, 2763A-153 (2000).

^cPub. L. No. 116-283, div. H, tit. XCVI, § 9601, 134 Stat. 3388, 4823 (2020).

^dPub. L. No. 117-167, § 10375, 136 Stat. 1366, 1 574 (2022).

In particular, a few government-wide laws established interrelated frameworks for managing performance by building and using evidence in decision-making across the federal government:

- The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA) created a federal performance planning and reporting framework. The GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA) amended and significantly expanded the framework to address a number of persistent federal performance challenges, including focusing attention on crosscutting issues and enhancing the use and usefulness of performance information.
- The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act), created a framework for federal agencies to take a more comprehensive and integrated approach to evidence building, and to enhance the federal government’s capacity to undertake those activities. Several of the Evidence Act’s evidence-building requirements are directly tied to performance planning requirements in GPRAMA.

OMB has developed government-wide policies and guidance related to implementing many of these laws, including GPRA/GPRAMA and the Evidence Act. For example, OMB annually updates guidance for “The Federal Performance Framework for Improving Program and Service Delivery” as Part 6 of its [Circular No. A-11](#). That framework covers requirements from GPRA/GPRAMA, the Evidence Act, and several other laws, as well as various policies and management initiatives. According to OMB, the framework is intended to take a more integrated and coordinated approach to improving federal agency performance and management.

In addition, OMB has released specific guidance in various memorandums. For example, three memorandums—one each in [2019 \(M-19-23\)](#), [2020 \(M-20-12\)](#), and [2021 \(M-21-27\)](#)—provided detailed guidance on different aspects of Evidence Act implementation.

Why these laws and guidance matter. Government-wide laws and guidance generally try to ensure activities are consistently implemented across the federal government. Our work has previously found that codifying federal management practices—like those for performance management and evidence building in GPRA, GPRAMA, and the Evidence Act—helps ensure they endure beyond a single Congress or Administration. Over time, those laws have helped shift the culture of federal agencies and led to improved management and results.

Selected GAO products: [GAO-23-105514](#), [GAO-21-104704](#), [GAO-04-38](#)

What has our work found about the state of federal evidence-building and performance-management activities?

Our most recent review of GPRAMA implementation in September 2021 found that OMB and agencies had made progress in addressing long-standing performance-management challenges. Those challenges involve addressing crosscutting issues, ensuring performance information is useful and used, aligning daily operations with results, and building a more transparent and open government.

Similarly, our work has also found that federal agencies have made some progress in effectively building and using evidence, but they continue to face long-standing challenges. For example, since 1997, we have conducted periodic surveys of federal managers on their views of the availability and use of evidence in their agencies and the related capacity—such as having staff with relevant skills, and tools—to collect, analyze and use evidence. **Our most recent survey**, conducted in 2020, showed mixed results across evidence-building topics:

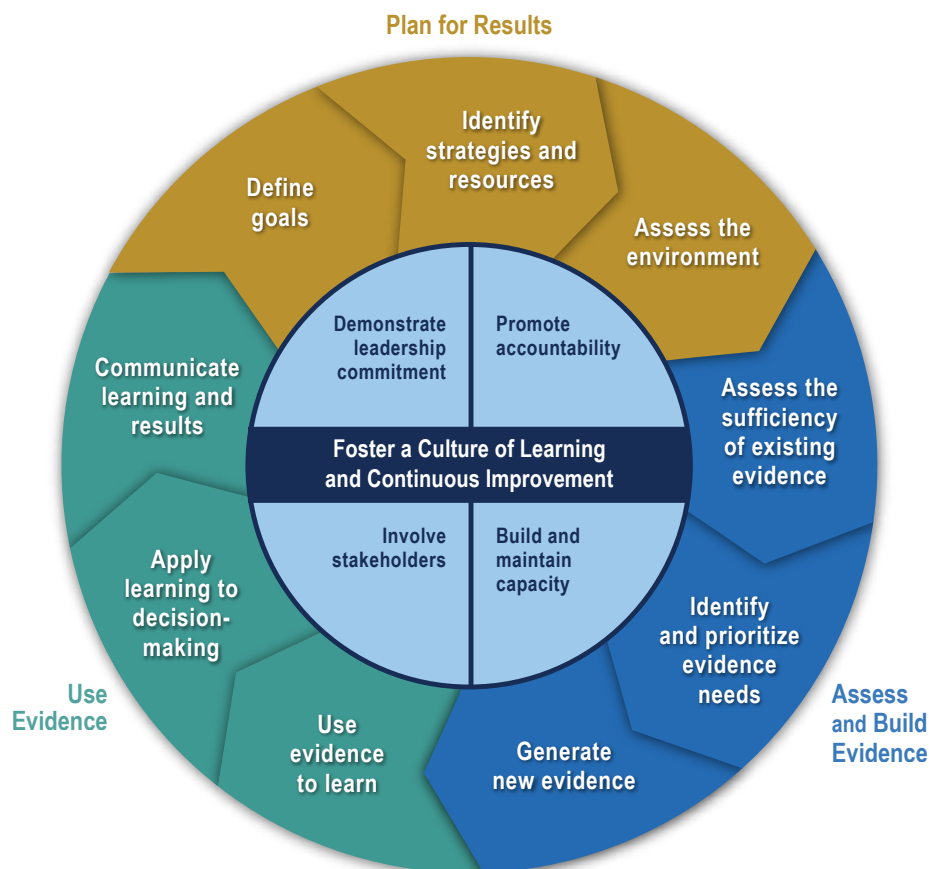
- **Availability.** Nearly all managers (an estimated 95 percent) reported having at least one type of evidence for their programs—performance information, program evaluations, or other data, research, and analysis.
- **Use in decision-making.** When managers had evidence, generally about half to two-thirds reported using it in different decision-making activities, such as when allocating resources.
 - For performance information (the one type of evidence on which we could make comparisons to past surveys), we found that its reported use increased in 2020, both across the federal government and at a majority of agencies.
 - For program evaluation, we found evaluation quality, human capital capacity for evaluation, and other facilitating factors were positively associated with greater reported use of program evaluation.
- **Capacity.** Across the federal government, about one-third to one-half of managers reported that different aspects of capacity (e.g., having staff with relevant skills) were present in their agencies. When we disaggregated results, we found that reported capacity varied widely across agencies and types of evidence.

Appendix III provides further details about our analyses of the 2020 survey's results related to program evaluation.

Why our findings matter. The long-term and consistent focus of our work allows us to identify challenges and improvements in federal evidence-building and performance-management activities over time. In addition, our work has identified promising practices and actions to mitigate and address long-standing challenges to help the Executive Branch and Congress further improve results.

Selected GAO products: [GAO-23-105514](#), [GAO-22-103910](#), [GAO-21-104704](#), [GAO-21-537SP](#), [GAO-21-536](#)

Section II: Practices to Help Effectively Implement Federal Evidence-Building and Performance-Management Activities



Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-23-105460

As shown above, we identified 13 key practices that any federal organization—an individual activity or program, component agency or office, department, or cross-agency effort—can take to help effectively build and use evidence to manage its performance. We do not intend for the practices to be comprehensive or a step-by-step guide to meet all relevant federal laws, policies, or guidance. However, we identify how the practices can help an agency meet selected requirements, when applicable, to complement existing guidance.

We organized the practices into four topic areas, based on their primary focus:

- plan for results,
- assess and build evidence,
- use evidence, and
- foster a culture of learning and continuous improvement.

While we present the topic areas and practices in a certain order, as the figure illustrates, they are interconnected. The first three topic areas listed above and their practices—illustrated as the outer ring of the figure—are part of an iterative cycle. Our past work has shown that implementing one of these practices can inform actions taken to implement others. The fourth topic area and its practices—all related to organizational culture—are central to effectively implementing the cycle.

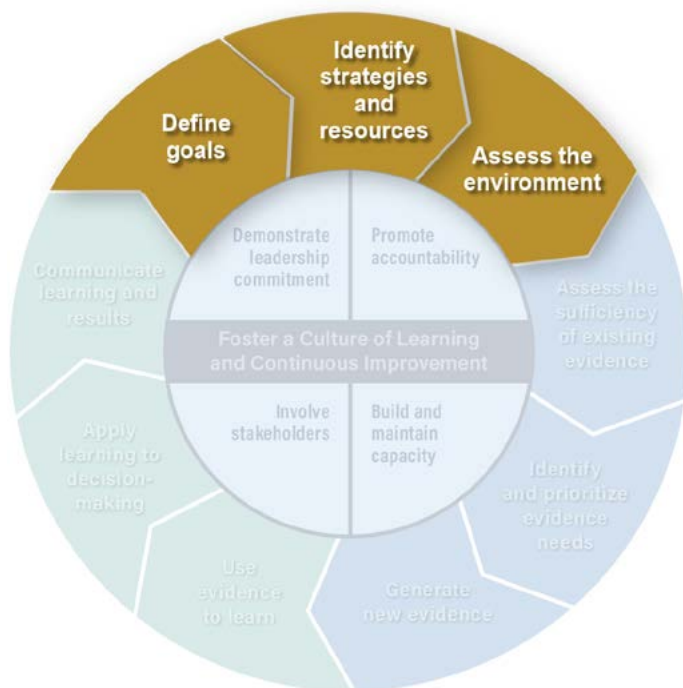
The following pages provide a one-page overview of each topic area, followed by a two-page overview of each practice. For each practice, we

- briefly describe the practice and identify key actions to implement the practice,
- highlight approaches that can help implement the practice,
- provide a related example illustrating implementation—by one or more agencies—of the practice broadly or the highlighted approaches,
- identify selected related legal requirements that could be met by following the practice, and
- list our related past work.

Plan for Results

The practices in this section can help a federal organization provide a clear picture of what it is trying to achieve, how it will achieve it, and any obstacles that may affect its ability to do so.

Various federal statutory requirements and guidance, along with our past work, highlight different approaches to comprehensively develop such plans. This includes long-term strategic planning and more frequent implementation planning (such as annual performance plans), which can be used at any organizational level, from an individual activity to an entire agency or cross-agency/government-wide effort. In addition, logic models can be a useful tool to succinctly convey this information for one or a series of related programs.



Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-23-105460

Selected GAO Work

Strategic Planning: [GAO-04-38](#), [GAO/GGD/97-180](#), [GAO/GGD-10.1.16](#)

Performance Planning: [GAO-04-38](#), [GAO/GGD/AIMD-99-215](#), [GAO/GGD/AIMD-99-69](#), [GAO/GGD/AIMD-98-228](#), [GAO/GGD/AIMD-10.1.18](#), [GAO/GGD-10.1.20](#)

Logic Modeling: [GAO-15-602](#), [GAO-12-208G](#)

Define Goals

Key Actions:

- Define goals for all activities
- Identify both long-term outcomes and near-term measurable results
- Align goals across organizational levels

Goals communicate the results that an organization seeks to achieve. They guide the organization's activities, and allow decision makers, staff, and stakeholders to assess performance by comparing planned and actual results.

Goals cover two different time frames:

- Long-term outcomes for the organization's activities (e.g., end homelessness). These desired outcomes are generally known as strategic goals and strategic objectives.
- Near-term results for the organization's activities. Generally referred to as performance goals, these goals have quantitative targets and timeframes against which performance can be measured (e.g., reduce the number of children experiencing homelessness by 20% in 2022).

To ensure progress can be assessed, each long-term outcome is broken down into one or more performance goals.

Given the large and complex nature of the federal government, related goals can exist at multiple organizational levels, from individual projects and programs to efforts that cross multiple departments and agencies. As such, clearly showing how those goals align with each other can help illustrate and assess the contributions of individual activities to broader outcomes.

Approaches that can help implement the practice: Common goal types

OMB's [guidance \(Circular No. A-11\)](#) has identified a common approach for federal agencies to implement a hierarchy of related long-term and near-term goals to meet GPRA/GPRAMA requirements.

- **Strategic goals** are outcome-oriented statements of aim or purpose. They articulate what the organization wants to achieve to advance its mission and address relevant problems, needs, challenges, and opportunities.
- **Strategic objectives** are the outcomes or impacts the organization is intending to achieve through its various activities. They are usually outcome-oriented to reflect core mission and service-related functions, as well as the breadth of the organization's efforts.
- **Performance goals** are target levels of performance to be accomplished within a timeframe. They are generally expressed as tangible, measurable objectives, or as quantitative standards, values, or rates.

Our past work has highlighted that this approach can be valuable at other organizational levels (i.e., not just for agencies' compliance with GPRA/GPRAMA).

Example: The Food and Drug Administration Defined Goals for Its Advanced Manufacturing Efforts

In March 2023, [we found](#) that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) within the Department of Health and Human Services had several efforts underway focused on increasing advanced manufacturing for drugs, as a way to enhance supply chain resiliency. Advanced manufacturing involves innovative technologies that improve product quality and process performance.

We also found that FDA had defined long-term outcome-oriented goals (strategic objectives) for its research efforts related to advanced manufacturing. For example, it identified a strategic objective that involved "advancing drug development science to support...workforce development in advanced manufacturing."

FDA also broke that desired outcome down into measurable performance goals, which it aligned with the strategic objective. For example, one performance goal was to "generate five technical reports and publications from advanced manufacturing research each year in order to...advanc[e] scientific knowledge."

These goals can help FDA determine whether and how its advanced manufacturing research efforts are contributing to addressing supply chain and drug quality issues.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105460

Selected Related Requirements

GPRAMA requires federal agencies to develop a variety of goals, including:

- Federal government priority goals (also known as cross-agency priority, or CAP, goals);
- General goals and objectives (also known as strategic goals and objectives);
- Performance goals; and
- Agency priority goals.

Selected GAO Work

GAO has identified helpful actions for developing and implementing various types of goals.

For additional information, see Appendix IV.

Identify Strategies and Resources

Key Actions:

- Identify strategies for each goal
- Coordinate with other organizations, programs, and activities contributing to the goal, when applicable
- Identify the resources needed to achieve each goal

After a federal organization has identified its goals, it identifies how it plans to achieve them. This involves identifying strategies along with related resources.

Strategies are planned actions to achieve each goal. Given the size and scope of the federal government, multiple agencies, programs, and activities may contribute to the same or similar outcomes (also known as fragmentation).

To help ensure efforts are complementary and mutually reinforcing, a federal organization identifies the various organizations, programs, and activities—both within and external to the agency—that contribute to each goal. To help manage fragmentation, those various organizations, programs, and activities coordinate their efforts.

Organizations also identify the resources required for each strategy to help achieve its related goal(s) (or conversely, the level of performance that can be achieved with the resources provided). In addition to funding, other resources contribute to the organization's success in achieving its goals, including its workforce and information technology.

Approaches that can help implement the practice: Leading practices for collaboration

Effective collaboration can help manage fragmentation, overlap, and duplication. However, our prior work has found that federal agencies can face a range of challenges and barriers when they try to work collaboratively. Our **past work** has also identified the following leading practices that can help agencies enhance and sustain their collaborative efforts:

- defining common outcomes;
- ensuring accountability;
- bridging organizational cultures;
- identifying and sustaining leadership;
- clarifying roles and responsibilities;
- including relevant participants;
- leveraging resources and information; and
- developing and updating written guidance and agreements.

Example: U.S. Department of Agriculture Coordinates Broadband Programs with Other Federal Agencies

In October 2022, **we reported** on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) ReConnect Program. The program, which began in 2018, is designed to provide funding for broadband deployment in rural communities and help close the gap in broadband availability between urban and rural areas. We identified other major federal programs, within USDA as well as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and Department of Commerce, that help bridge the gap too.

We found that USDA limited duplication between ReConnect and other broadband programs by coordinating with other agencies. For example, USDA and FCC developed rules to limit duplication between service areas receiving funding from USDA's ReConnect grants and FCC's Rural Digital Opportunity Fund. USDA officials provided FCC with data on the areas that had received ReConnect funding to help FCC prevent overlap with grant service areas for its Rural Digital Opportunity Fund. Officials from both agencies had recurring meetings to discuss potential unwarranted duplication in broadband deployment programs, including in ReConnect.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105460

Selected Related Requirements

GPRAMA requires federal agencies to identify in strategic plans and performance plans

- strategies and resources required to achieve goals;
- the organizations, program activities, regulations, policies, and other activities that contribute to each goal, within and external to the agency; and
- interagency collaboration (how the agency is working with other agencies to achieve goals).

Selected GAO Work

Strategies and resources: [GAO-13-174](#), [GAO-04-38](#), [GAO/IGD/AIMD-99-69](#)

Collaboration practices: [GAO-23-105520](#), [GAO-14-220](#), [GAO-12-1022](#), [GAO-06-15](#)

Identifying federal programs and activities/fragmentation, overlap, and duplication: [GAO-23-106272](#), [GAO-17-739](#), [GAO-15-83](#), [GAO-15-49SP](#), [GAO/AIMD-97-146](#)

Assess the Environment

Key Actions:

- Identify internal and external factors that could affect goal achievement
- Define strategies to address or mitigate the factors

Factors within and outside an organization can affect its ability to achieve its goals. External factors can include economic, social, and technological trends as well as statutory, regulatory, and other legal requirements. An organization's internal factors include its culture, its management practices, and its business processes.

Our past work has found that successful organizations monitor their internal and external environments continually and systematically. This provides them the ability to anticipate both future opportunities and challenges, and to plan accordingly. Part of that plan is to define strategies to address or mitigate the internal and external factors an organization identifies.

Approaches that can help implement the practice: Practices for addressing internal factors

As part of their environmental assessments, federal organizations may identify internal factors that would significantly affect their ability to achieve their goals, known as major management challenges. Major management challenges involve programs or management functions that have a greater vulnerability to waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement (such as issues identified by us as high risk or issues identified by an Inspector General). They can also include programs or operations in need of transformation.

GPRAMA requires agencies to identify and develop strategies to address their major management challenges. Our [past work](#) has identified approaches and examples of how agencies have addressed this GPRAMA requirement. In addition, we have identified [practices](#) and examples of agencies' actions to successfully address high-risk issues. Together, these practices and approaches can help federal organizations manage their internal factors—helping to address existing major management challenges and mitigate other internal factors from rising to that level.

Example: GAO Identified 12 Key External Factors Through Environmental Scanning and Analysis

In 2018, GAO established the Center for Strategic Foresight to, in part, monitor its internal and external environment and identify major emerging issues, challenges, and opportunities that help GAO fulfill its mission in serving Congress and the American people. In March 2022, [GAO identified 12 key trends](#)—external factors—the agency anticipates will affect the domestic and global context for years to come. Trends included challenges such as fiscal sustainability and debt; changes to how and where we work, and sustainable development.

To identify the 12 trends, GAO's subject matter experts conducted research across a range of domains. These observations pointed to the uncertainties and implications of various trends over the near term (five years) and longer term (10-15 years). Exploring these trends, key uncertainties, and their possible implications, can help GAO and other federal agencies be better prepared to respond to the national issues of greatest concern to the Congress and the American people in the years ahead.

GAO plans to continue producing work that elaborates on the trends through the span of its 2022-2027 Strategic Plan. The Center for Strategic Foresight plans to maintain focus on its ongoing environmental scanning systems and trend analysis capabilities, to help ensure that GAO remains agile and responsive to challenges, including those that could affect its management.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105460

Selected Related Requirements

GPRAMA requires federal agencies to identify

- key factors external to the agency and beyond its control that could significantly affect the achievement of its goals; and
- major management challenges the agency faces and planned actions to address them and track progress.

Selected GAO Work

Assessing the environment: [GAO/GGD-96-118](#)

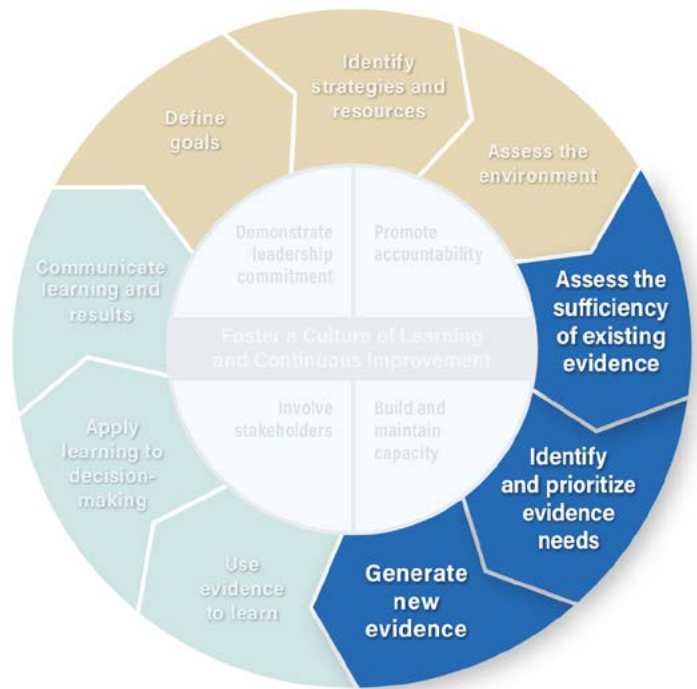
Addressing external factors: [GAO/GGD-97-180](#), [GAO/GGD-10.1.16](#)

Identifying and addressing major management challenges: [GAO-23-106354](#), [GAO-22-105184](#), [GAO-16-510](#), [GAO-03-225](#), [GAO/GGD/AIMD-99-69](#)

Assess and Build Evidence

Our past work and OMB guidance ([Memorandum M-19-23](#)) recommend that federal organizations build a portfolio of high-quality sources of evidence—rather than a single source—to support decision making. According to OMB guidance, since different sources of evidence have varying degrees of credibility, the use of evidence requires an understanding of what conclusions can—and cannot—be drawn from the information.

Building evidence involves a series of activities that can help decision makers obtain the evidence they need to address policy questions or identify the questions they should address. That evidence can help them assess, understand, and identify opportunities to improve the results of federal efforts. The practices in this section can help federal organizations in planning and implementing those evidence-building activities.



Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-23-105460

Selected GAO Work

- Evidence-building cycle: [GAO-20-119](#)

Assess the Extent to Which Existing Evidence Addresses Key Questions

Key Actions:

- Identify key questions to address
- Identify relevant internal and external sources of evidence
- Assess the coverage and quality of the evidence

To help ensure that evidence is useful and ultimately used, federal organizations engage with decision makers and stakeholders to understand their needs. Those needs can be expressed as key questions that, when addressed with relevant evidence, provide valuable insights about the federal organization, including its goals, strategies, and operating environment.

Before a federal organization builds new sources of evidence, it first identifies what evidence already exists to address those key questions. This allows the organization to assess the extent existing evidence meets organizational needs for learning and decision making.

It also helps the organization avoid expending resources unnecessarily where sufficient evidence already exists. [Our past work](#) has highlighted how various federal organizations have established routine processes to identify relevant evidence, both created internally as well as from external sources.

Once the organization has identified a portfolio of existing relevant evidence, it assesses whether that evidence has sufficient coverage and quality.

- **Coverage** involves having evidence that covers all aspects of the key questions, relevant goal(s), and contributing strategies.
- **Quality** affects the conclusions that can be drawn from the evidence, and ultimately, how useful it is to decision makers. Various attributes can affect quality, including whether the evidence is accurate, complete, consistent, credible, rigorous, and timely.

Approaches that can help implement the practice: Potential sources of relevant existing evidence

We have found that relevant evidence may already exist because multiple federal entities or other sectors may be involved in achieving the same or similar outcomes.

- Internal to the organization. **Our past work** has found that within a federal agency, multiple players can be involved in creating evidence. Agency-wide, this can include a statistical unit that collects statistical data or an office that conducts program evaluations. In addition, individual programs may develop their own evidence, such as administrative data and performance information.
- External to the organization. Other federal agencies, organizations, programs, and activities may have developed useful evidence. In addition, third-party service providers and organizations that undertake similar activities—such as contractors, grantees, nonprofits, other domestic and foreign governments—may have evidence that provides valuable insights. Similarly, academic and think tank researchers, along with oversight organizations (such as inspectors general and us) may have relevant work.

Example: Department of Veterans Affairs Assessed the Quality of Its Race and Ethnicity Data

In December 2022, **we found** that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) had assessed the quality of some of its data, and identified ways to improve the quality. Research from the Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion at VA found that accurate race and ethnicity data are essential to better understand disparities in health outcomes.

However, its research also found that race and ethnicity data for VA beneficiaries were incomplete, inaccurate, and inconsistent over time and across VA sites. VA determined that these issues affected one-third of living veterans and hindered its ability to conduct comprehensive analyses by race and ethnicity.

According to VA officials, based on the findings from this research, VA undertook efforts starting in December 2021 to further analyze these data. Through these analyses, VA identified approaches to improve the collection and quality of these data so that it could subsequently use them to improve the delivery of benefits, care, and services for veterans.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105460

Selected Related Requirements

- The Evidence Act requires agencies to submit a capacity assessment for statistics, evaluation, research, and other analysis every four years as part of their strategic plans. It requires agencies to provide an assessment of the coverage, quality, methods, effectiveness, and independence of their evidence-building efforts.
- GPRAMA includes provisions for agencies to describe in their performance plans and reports how they ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data used to measure progress towards their performance goals.

Selected GAO Work

Identifying and assessing existing evidence: [GAO-20-119](#), [GAO-15-602](#)

Assessing the quality of types of evidence:

- Performance measures/data: [GAO-15-788](#), [GAO-03-143](#), [GAO-02-372](#), [GAO/GGD-00-140R](#), [GAO/GGD-00-52](#), [GAO/GGD-99-139](#)
- Program evaluation: [GAO-21-404SP](#), [GAO-12-208G](#), [GAO-10-30](#)
- Data: [GAO-20-283G](#)
- Research: [GAO-20-91](#), [GAO-18-97](#), [GAO-15-548](#)

Identify and Prioritize New Evidence Needs

Key Actions:

- Identify new evidence needs
- Prioritize how and when to fulfil those needs

A federal organization generally has limited resources to devote to building new sources of evidence. Therefore, it is important for the organization to leverage its assessment of existing evidence to inform decisions about what new evidence to build to fulfill any identified needs.

The assessment can help the organization identify new evidence needs in several ways. For example, it can help identify gaps in the existing evidence base to fill, or instances where an existing portfolio of evidence may need to be updated. In addition, there may be quality issues with existing evidence that could be addressed by building new evidence, which could provide greater assurance about the conclusions that can be drawn in the future.

Once it has identified its needs, the organization prioritizes what new evidence to develop and when. To ensure the new evidence supports organizational learning and decision-making, the prioritization process takes into consideration the needs expressed by decision makers and key stakeholders.

Approaches that can help implement the practice: Learning agendas

Learning agendas are a tool that can help federal organizations identify and prioritize new evidence needs. OMB [guidance \(Memorandum M-19-23\)](#) describes a learning agenda as a long-term plan that takes a systematic approach to identifying and addressing policy questions relevant to an agency's programs, policies, and regulations. Developed in consultation with stakeholders, the plan also describes the data, methods, and analytical approaches that will be used to develop evidence.

A learning agenda defines and prioritizes relevant questions and identifies strategies for building evidence to answer them. In developing a learning agenda, an agency should involve key leaders and stakeholders to help (1) meet their evidence needs for decision-making and (2) coordinate evidence-building activities across the agency.

OMB's guidance strongly encourages lower-level organizations within agencies to develop and implement their own learning agendas.

[Evaluation.gov](#) provides access to agencies' learning agendas, along with other federal evidence-building tools and resources.

Example: National Science Foundation Prioritized Building New Evidence about Its Research Competitiveness Program

The National Science Foundation (NSF) supports U.S. scientific advancement and economic growth by funding research and education across all fields of fundamental science and engineering. NSF's Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR) assists jurisdictions that (1) historically have received little federal research and development funding and (2) have demonstrated a commitment to developing their research institutions and improving science engineering research and education programs at their universities and colleges.

In August 2022, [we found](#) that NSF had undertaken several efforts to assess EPSCoR's contributions to increasing academic research competitiveness in participating jurisdictions. In addition, NSF prioritized plans to build new evidence about the program by including it as its own priority area within the agency's Learning Agenda for fiscal years 2022 to 2026, which was issued in March 2022.

NSF plans to conduct a study that will address how EPSCoR's funding strategies contribute to increasing academic research competitiveness and how the program could better achieve its mission. According to the Learning Agenda, this study will rely on a data monitoring system developed for EPSCoR and may involve a descriptive analysis of participating jurisdictions; a longitudinal analysis to establish associations between outcomes and program participation; and case studies of participating jurisdictions. NSF anticipates completing the study by fiscal year 2025.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105460

Selected Related Requirements

The Evidence Act requires agencies to develop

- evidence-building plans, also known as learning agendas, every four years as part of their strategic plans; and
- annual evaluation plans.

Selected GAO Work

Approaches to prioritize evidence: [GAO-20-119](#), [GAO-17-743](#), [GAO-11-176](#)

Generate New Evidence

Key Actions:

- Develop an evidence-building implementation plan
- Ensure new evidence will meet quality standards

Based on its priorities, the organization determines how it will build new evidence. Because such efforts can be time and resource intensive, the organization develops plans to ensure the new evidence meets the organization's needs.

Regardless of the type of evidence—such as collecting new statistical data or conducting an evaluation to assess the extent to which a program achieves outcomes—developing it requires thoughtful planning. An effective implementation plan can help ensure the organization's evidence-building effort is completed within appropriate timeframes and budget.

An effective plan can also help ensure that the new evidence meets relevant quality standards—including federal government-wide and organization-specific legal requirements, and related policies, guidance, and leading practices. Following quality standards can provide decision makers and stakeholders greater assurance that they can use the evidence for its intended purpose.

Approaches that can help implement the practice: Evaluation plans

An evaluation plan can be a valuable tool to help federal organizations effectively implement certain evidence-building activities.

Our past work has noted that it is important to develop an evaluation plan or agenda to ensure that an agency's research and evaluation resources are targeted to its most important issues and can shape budget and policy priorities and management practices.

The Evidence Act requires federal agencies to develop evaluation plans describing activities they plan to conduct as part of their agency evidence-building plans (also called learning agendas). These annual evaluation plans are to describe (1) key questions for each significant evaluation study; (2) key information collections or acquisitions that the agency plans to begin in the next fiscal year, and (3) any other information included in guidance issued by OMB.

Agencies' evaluation plans and policies are made available on [Evaluation.gov](https://www.evaluation.gov), along with other federal evidence-building tools and resources.

Example: Small Business Administration Is Building a Portfolio of Evidence for a New Program

The Shuttered Venue Operators Grant program was created to financially assist businesses in the performing arts and entertainment industries hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Between April 2021 and July 2022, the Small Business Administration (SBA) awarded \$14.6 billion in grants to help arts and entertainment businesses adversely affected by the pandemic. Grantees could use the awards to pay for operating expenses such as payroll, rent or mortgage, and utilities.

In October 2022, **we found** that SBA had taken steps to build a portfolio of evidence related to this program. SBA developed several measures to collect performance data, such as the percent increase in revenue of businesses assisted by the program.

In addition, SBA partnered with several organizations to leverage additional data to evaluate the outcomes of the program. For example, SBA entered into a joint statistical arrangement with the Census Bureau. The Bureau plans to create comparison groups to assess the impact of Shuttered Venue Operators Grants on employment, payroll, and revenue since 2020. The Bureau also plans to create statistics on the demographics of firm owners for grant recipients. According to SBA, the agency anticipates the results of the evaluation will be available in fiscal year 2024.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105460

Selected Related Requirements

- GPRAMA requires agencies to develop performance indicators (also called performance measures) for their performance goals.
- The Evidence Act requires agencies to develop
 - evaluation policies,
 - evaluation plans, and
 - evidence-building plans (also known as learning agendas).

Selected GAO Work

Designing and ensuring the quality of:

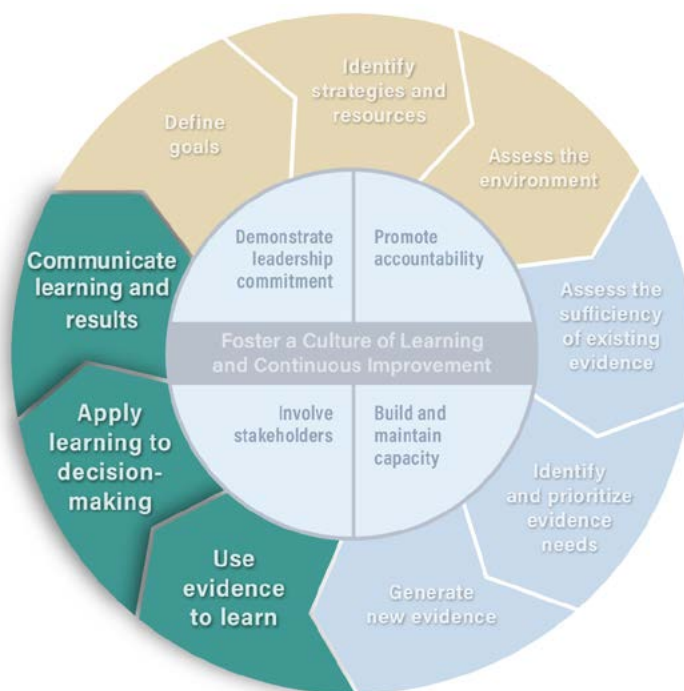
- Performance measures/data: [GAO-03-143](#)
- Program evaluation: [GAO-21-404SP](#), [GAO-12-208G](#), [GAO-10-30](#)
- Data: [GAO-20-283G](#)
- Research: [GAO-20-91](#), [GAO-18-97](#), [GAO-15-548](#)

Use Evidence

The benefit of building evidence is fully realized when it is used to learn and inform different types of decisions. Our past work has identified various decisions that evidence can inform.

Among other things, evidence can be used to:

- Identify priorities
- Set new/revise existing goals
- Develop strategies
- Allocate resources
- Identify problems to address
- Determine corrective actions to resolve problems
- Identify opportunities to reduce, eliminate, or better manage duplicative activities
- Coordinate efforts with other internal or external organizations
- Continue implementing strategies that are performing as expected
- Identify effective approaches and lessons learned
- Adopt new approaches or change existing processes



Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-23-105460

This section identifies practices identified by our past work that can help federal organizations—along with decision makers and key stakeholders within and outside the organization—make evidence-informed decisions.

Selected GAO Work

[GAO-22-103910](#), [GAO-21-536](#), [GAO-15-602](#),
[GAO-13-228](#), [GAO-05-927](#), [GAO/GGD-96-118](#)

Use Evidence to Learn

Key Actions:

- Assess progress towards goals
- Develop an understanding of why results were achieved

Evidence helps a federal organization learn in a variety of ways. This can include better understanding the environment in which it operates and identifying potential new issues to address.

In the context of managing organizational performance, evidence informs learning in two key ways:

1. Evidence helps an organization assess progress towards its goals. For example, quantitative performance data that the organization regularly collects and reviews can help determine whether performance goals were met (although not usually why). Those data, along with other evidence—such as evaluations that assess implementation, outcomes and impact—can help the organization assess progress towards its strategic goals and objectives.
2. Evidence helps an organization understand its results. Different types of evidence—contribution analysis, program evaluations, or other research and analysis—can help an organization better understand what led to the results it achieved or why desired results were not achieved. In addition, collecting, disaggregating, and analyzing administrative data can help an organization determine whether results varied based on different factors, such as age, race, ethnicity, geographic location, or income level.

Approaches that can help implement the practice: Performance reviews

Performance reviews are meetings or processes in which senior leadership and responsible parties review relevant performance information and other evidence to assess progress towards goals. This approach can help determine when existing strategies are performing as planned, and therefore continued implementation may lead to further progress. It can also help identify important opportunities to drive improvements where performance is lagging.

We have previously identified practices to effectively implement two different types of performance reviews. These two types differ by the focus of the goals involved and frequency:

- **Data-driven reviews** generally occur regularly (e.g., monthly or quarterly) and use performance data to assess progress toward near-term performance goals.
- **Strategic reviews** use a portfolio of evidence to annually assess progress toward longer-term, outcome goals (e.g., strategic objectives).

Example: Interagency Partners Assessed Progress and Identified Causes for Unmet Goals for Transitioning Servicemembers

The Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is a mandatory program for separating servicemembers that provides career readiness services and information on veterans' benefits, among other things. TAP is primarily administered by the Department of Defense (DOD). DOD collaborates with six other federal agencies in implementing the program: the Departments of Homeland Security, Education, Labor, and Veterans Affairs, as well as the Office of Personnel Management and the Small Business Administration.

In December 2022, **we reviewed** implementation of "TAP counseling pathways"—key program elements that were changed by a 2018 law. We found that DOD and its TAP interagency partners had established a performance goal and measure that covered all key components, subsequent to the 2018 changes. The annual target is to achieve 85 percent compliance. To be considered TAP compliant for this performance measure, a service branch must ensure that servicemembers meet eight criteria, including completing initial counseling and attending courses on civilian employment and veteran benefits.

After using performance data to assess progress toward its goals, DOD TAP policy officials told us that the performance goal for active-duty servicemembers had not been met for servicemembers who left the military between January 1 and March 31, 2022. TAP policy officials said the main factor negatively affecting compliance was tier 3 servicemembers—those determined to need the maximum transition support—not attending 2-day required courses on topics like employment, education, and vocational training.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105460

Selected Related Requirements

- GPRAMA requirements for performance reporting and quarterly priority progress reviews (also called data-driven reviews)

Selected GAO Work

Performance reporting: [GAO-04-38](#), [GAO/GGD-00-35](#), [GAO/GGD-96-118](#), [GAO/GGD-96-66R](#)

Performance reviews: [GAO-17-740R](#), [GAO-15-602](#), [GAO-15-579](#), [GAO-14-526](#), [GAO-13-228](#)

Using program evaluation results: [GAO-13-570](#), [GAO/GGD-00-204](#)

Apply Learning to Decision Making

Key Actions:

- Use evidence to inform management decisions
- Identify any additional evidence needs to further inform decisions

Based on what an organization learned from its evidence, it leverages that knowledge to inform management decision-making processes. As noted earlier, evidence and learning can inform a range of decisions, such as changes to existing strategies to achieve better results or reallocation of resources. These types of decisions help ensure that the organization's activities are targeted at further addressing any identified problems and achieving desired results.

In addition, in using its evidence in decision making, the organization may identify additional needs for new evidence. For example, new evidence may be needed to better understand problems that were identified, assess progress towards any new or revised goals, or monitor the performance of any new or changed strategies or processes. These new evidence needs can subsequently be included in the organization's evidence prioritization and generation processes, such as the iterative development of a learning agenda.

Approaches that can help implement the practice: Factors that can enhance the use of evidence

Our past work has identified certain factors that can enhance the use of different types of evidence by federal organizations. Since we first identified these factors, our subsequent work has reaffirmed the connections between those factors being present and increased use of that evidence in decision making.

Performance information:

- Demonstrating management commitment
- Aligning goals, objectives, and measures
- Improving the usefulness of performance information
- Developing capacity to use performance information
- Communicating performance information frequently and effectively

Program evaluation:

- Evaluation quality, which includes addressing issues important to key stakeholders, and meeting technical rigor requirements.
- Human capital capacity for evaluation, with staff having skills to conduct evaluations, understand evaluation methods and results, and implement evaluation recommendations.
- Other facilitating factors, including congressional and agency leadership commitment, and the existence of an evaluation plan and policy.

See Appendix III for more on the program evaluation factors.

Example: The Coast Guard Used Various Data to Make Decisions about Its Commercial Fishing Vessel Safety Program

Commercial fishing is one of the most dangerous occupations in the U.S. and consistently has one of the highest death rates of any industry, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The U.S. Coast Guard, a multi-mission maritime military service within the Department of Homeland Security, serves as the principal federal agency responsible for marine safety.

In November 2022, [we found](#) that the Coast Guard regularly collected and analyzed a variety of data on commercial fishing vessel safety program activities and vessel casualties to monitor and inform program efforts. Program officials told us they used the data they collected to determine whether current program activity levels were consistent with historical levels and to identify safety-related trends and patterns. For example, officials developed an internal weekly report that included data on program efforts, such as dockside exams and at-sea boardings, for the current year and previous 2 years.

Program officials also told us their data collection and analysis activities informed program efforts and program plans for upcoming years. For example, the program's internal weekly reports listed the top three deficiencies identified during dockside exams. Program officials said they communicated these deficiencies to field officials to help focus their exam efforts and interactions with fishers. They also explained that their analysis of data on commercial fishing vessel losses resulted in the development of national guidance on improving vessel stability in January 2021.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105460

Selected Related Requirements

- GPRAMA requirements for performance reporting and quarterly priority progress reviews (also called data-driven reviews)

Selected GAO Work

Use of performance information: [GAO-22-103910](#), [GAO-05-927](#), [GAO/GGD-96-118](#)

Use of program evaluation results: [GAO-17-743](#), [GAO-13-570](#)

Communicate Learning and Results

Key Actions:

- Communicate relevant information internally and externally
- Tailor the information to meet stakeholders' needs

By frequently and effectively communicating its learning and results, a federal organization helps its stakeholders understand how well it is performing and decisions it made to further improve results. Ultimately, this can help build buy-in and assistance in carrying out those decisions.

- Internally, this information is communicated to leaders and staff involved in implementing and overseeing relevant activities and goals.
- Externally, the organization communicates it to key stakeholders (e.g., Congress; other federal organizations; state, tribal, and local governments; and the public) who may need the information for oversight or to help the organization implement its decisions.

The organization tailors its communications to meet the needs of various stakeholders. This tailoring includes determining the frequency, method, and presentation of the information.

Approaches that can help implement the practice: Methods to communicate federal evidence

The federal government communicates and makes its evidence available in different ways, including:

- **Evidence clearinghouses.** Various federal agencies operate evidence clearinghouses—repositories that synthesize evaluation findings in ways that make research more useful to decision makers, researchers, and service organizations. For example, they can help service organizations identify evidence-based strategies to potentially adopt or adapt. That is, existing evidence shows that the strategies can be effective at achieving desired results.
- **Open data.** Federal agencies create and collect considerable amounts of information in support of fulfilling their missions. Applicable law and guidance direct agencies to make certain data open, that is, public access to federal data that are free to use, modify, and share. For example, the Open, Public, Electronic and Necessary (OPEN) Government Data Act required the development and maintenance of a Federal Data Catalogue, a consolidated and searchable resource of federal open data, publicly available at [Data.gov](https://data.gov). In addition, OMB guidance ([M-13-13](#)) directed agencies to manage information to promote openness and interoperability.
- **Performance.gov.** This government-wide performance website communicates government-wide and agency performance information. Among other things, the website includes progress updated on select goals and provides access to agency strategic plans, annual performance plans, and annual performance reports.

Example: Department of Education Took Steps to Improve Access to Evidence about Career and Technical Education Programs

The Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences manages the What Works Clearinghouse, a central source of scientific evidence on education that reviews research, determines which studies meet specified eligibility and design standards, and summarizes the findings on different strategies and interventions. The Clearinghouse focuses on research about interventions that could improve educationally relevant outcomes, including those for students and educators.

In March 2022, [we reported](#) on actions Education officials told us they took to enhance accessibility to evidence about career and technical education programs as it becomes available. For example, descriptions of, and links to, the Clearinghouse's major products—practice guides, intervention reports, and reviews of studies—were more prominently displayed on the website. Education officials also added a link on the Clearinghouse home page to resources for educators, which included a series of webinars related to the 2021 published guide on designing and delivering career pathways at community colleges.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105460

Selected Related Requirements

- GPRAMA requirements for performance reporting and a government-wide performance website
- Open data requirements in the OPEN Government Data Act, Title II of the Evidence Act

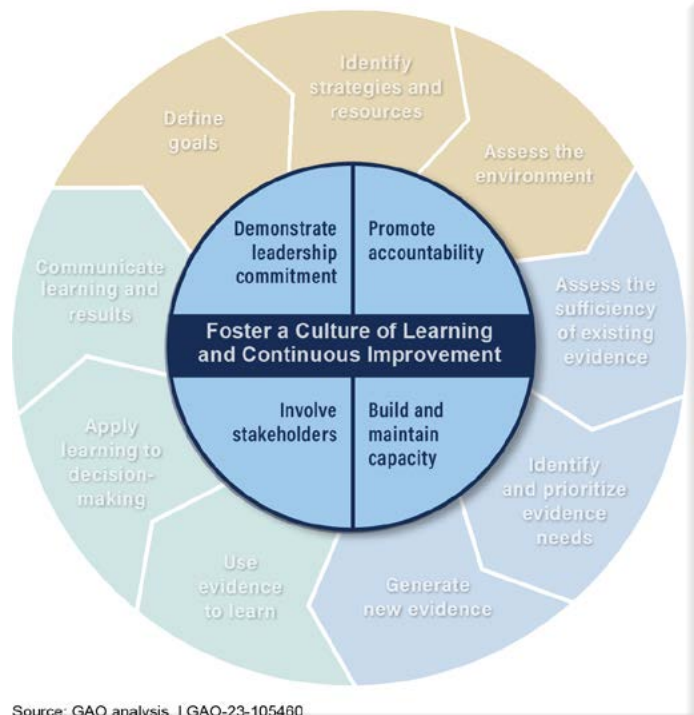
Selected GAO Work

Evidence clearinghouses: [GAO-20-119](#), [GAO-16-818](#)
Open data: [GAO-22-104574](#), [GAO-21-29](#), [GAO-19-72](#)
Performance website and reporting: [GAO-16-693](#), [GAO-13-517](#), [GAO-04-38](#), [GAO/GGD-00-35](#), [GAO/GGD-96-118](#), [GAO/GGD-96-66R](#)

Foster a Culture of Learning and Continuous Improvement

A federal organization's culture is key to its success in building and using evidence to manage and improve its performance. Without a culture that values learning to continuously improve itself, the activities and processes identified in the prior sets of practices may not exist, or they may be seen as compliance exercises. This may hinder the organization's ability to achieve its intended results.

The practices in this section highlight key aspects of organizational culture identified in our past work. Together, these practices and the resulting culture help provide the necessary foundation for the organization to plan for results, assess and build evidence, and use that evidence to learn and improve.



Selected GAO Work

- Evidence and Results-Oriented Cultures: [GAO-21-152](#), [GAO-05-927](#), [GAO-03-488](#), [GAO-03-454](#)

Demonstrate Leadership Commitment

Key Actions:

- Involve senior leaders
- Coordinate and integrate activities

Our past work has stated that the demonstrated commitment of senior leaders is perhaps the single most important element of successfully managing and improving the performance of federal organizations.

This commitment is most prominently shown through the direct involvement of the organization's senior leaders in performance management and evidence-building activities. Our past work has found that this direct involvement is critical to increased use of evidence in decision making by others throughout the organization. Leadership involvement fosters buy-in among the individuals involved in these activities. It also helps ensure that those involved take performance management and evidence-building activities seriously and can make decisions and commitments with the knowledge and backing of leadership.

Given their organization-wide purview, leaders also play a key role in coordinating and integrating evidence-building and performance-management activities. As noted earlier, efforts can be fragmented across the federal government and within individual federal organizations, with multiple organizations and programs contributing to the achievement of a goal or conducting evidence-building activities. Within an organization, leaders can ensure that the right players are involved in, and coordinate, evidence-building activities to help ensure evidence is effectively developed and used.

Approaches that can help implement the practice: Federal officer positions and related councils

Through various laws, different officer positions have been created at federal agencies. These include those with leadership responsibilities related to improving agency management and performance and implementing evidence-building activities.

For example, the Chief Operating Officer—the deputy secretary or equivalent at an agency—has overall responsibility for improving agency management and performance.

In addition, various agency officers have responsibilities to generate, protect, disseminate, and use different types of evidence—and enhance related capacity—within their agencies. These include the Chief Data Officer, Evaluation Officer, Performance Improvement Officer, and Statistical Official.

Interagency councils comprised of these officers fulfill similar responsibilities at the government-wide level and facilitate collaboration and information sharing with each other and across agencies. For example, the Performance Improvement Council has a responsibility to facilitate the exchange among agencies of practices that have led to performance improvements.

Example: The Department of Defense (DOD) Increased Leadership Commitment to Its Business Transformation Efforts

DOD spends billions of dollars each year to maintain key business operations intended to support the warfighters—such as systems and processes to manage contracts and its supply chain. DOD’s approach to transforming these business operations is linked to its ability to perform its overall mission. We designated DOD’s overall approach to managing business transformation as a high-risk area in 2005 because DOD had not taken the necessary steps to achieve and sustain business reform on a broad, strategic, department-wide, and integrated basis.

In April 2023, **we found** that DOD had taken actions that showed increased leadership commitment to, and involvement in its business transformation efforts. Under its management model in April 2023, DOD relied on the authority of the Deputy Secretary of Defense as Chief Operating Officer to lead and manage reform efforts. The Deputy Secretary led efforts to strengthen the department’s governance structure related to reform and performance improvement. For example, she issued guidance in September 2021 and January 2022 on the role of the Director of Administration and Management, who serves as DOD’s Performance Improvement Officer. The Deputy Secretary also established a new Performance Improvement Framework, and directed the Director of Administration and Management to lead implementation of the Framework.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105460

Selected Related Requirements

- GPRAMA requirements for Chief Operating Officers and Performance Improvement Officers and Council
- Evidence Act requirements for Chief Data Officers and Council; Evaluation Officers; Statistical Official and Interagency Council on Statistical Policy

Selected GAO Work

Leadership involvement: [GAO-22-105184](#), [GAO-15-602](#), [GAO-14-220](#), [GAO-13-228](#), [GAO-05-927](#), [GAO/GGD-96-118](#)

Officer positions and councils: [GAO-23-105514](#), [GAO-13-356](#), [GAO-08-34](#)

Promote Accountability

Key Actions:

- Assign responsibility
- Hold individuals accountable for learning and results

Our past work has found that another key factor in creating successful organizational cultures is to constructively involve and engage managers and employees in performance management and evidence-building activities.

To do so, a federal organization assigns responsibilities for those activities. For example, to ensure that progress is made towards organizational goals, the organization connects those goals to the day-to-day activities of its managers and employees. Our past work has highlighted how this alignment—showing how an individual’s performance goals support organizational goals—helps identify who is responsible for achieving relevant organizational results.

This alignment, or “line of sight,” also helps organizational leaders hold responsible parties accountable for various actions, including:

- credibly assessing progress in achieving a goal using evidence;
- understanding why those results were achieved, and if insufficient, having a plan for improvement;
- in instances where evidence is insufficient, improving the availability and quality of the evidence so that it can be used effectively for decision making; and
- identifying and replicating effective practices to improve performance.

Approaches that can help implement the practice: Goal leader positions

Designating goal leaders is one approach to assign responsibility and hold individuals accountable. A goal leader is an individual responsible for developing strategies to achieve certain federal goals, managing implementation, and regularly reviewing performance. Goal leaders are to be designated for federal government priority goals (also known as cross-agency priority goals), agency strategic objectives, and agency performance goals (including agency priority goals).

Example: Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Identified Responsible Parties for Implementing the President’s Management Agenda (PMA)

In April 2023, [we found](#) that OMB had released the content and governance structure for the current administration’s PMA between November 2021 and March 2023. A PMA identifies an administration’s key management reform priorities and initiatives across the federal government. It also communicates and organizes goals, objectives, and implementation strategies.

For example, Strengthening and Empowering the Federal Workforce is one of three PMA priority areas. The Director of the Office of Personnel Management and Deputy Secretaries of the Departments of Defense and Labor serve as priority area leads. Priority area leads are responsible for approving multi-year action plans for strategies and related cross-agency priority (CAP) goals, monitoring progress, and providing updates to the President’s Management Council.

The PMA advances priority areas through specific strategies, and seven of these strategies are designated as CAP goals. One strategy within the workforce priority area is to “attract and hire the most qualified employees, who reflect the diversity of our country, in the right roles across the federal government.” The Director of the Office of Human Resources and Acting Chief Human Capital Officer at the Department of the Treasury and the Chief Human Capital Officer at the Department of Veterans Affairs serve as the leads for that strategy. Strategy leads oversee the development and execution of the strategies, coordinate strategy teams responsible for day-to-day functions, and participate in PMA engagement and communications activities.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105460

Selected Related Requirements

- GPRAMA requirements for goal leaders

Selected GAO Work

Goal leaders: [GAO-23-106354](#), [GAO-21-104704](#), [GAO-15-602](#), [GAO-14-639](#), [GAO-14-526](#), [GAO-13-356](#), [GAO-13-174](#)

Line of sight: [GAO-03-488](#)

Accountability for results: [GAO-13-228](#), [GAO/GGD-97-36](#), [GAO/GGD-96-118](#)

Involve Stakeholders

Key Actions:

- Engage stakeholders early and often
- Tailor engagement based on needs and purpose

The involvement of a range of stakeholders is often vital to the success of federal efforts. It helps an organization determine priorities and target resources, and align its goals and strategies with that of others involved in achieving the same or similar outcomes. It can also help create a basic understanding among all relevant parties of the competing demands an organization faces, along with the constraints on its resources.

- Within a federal organization, stakeholders can include relevant individuals from other programs that contribute to the same or similar goals, those involved in various evidence-building activities, and staff from different mission support and functional management activities (such as general counsel and acquisition/procurement, financial, human capital, and information technology management offices).
- Externally, stakeholders can include Congress; other federal organizations; foreign, state, local, and tribal governments; nonprofit and private sector organizations; interest groups; researchers; and the public, among many others.

Our past work has found that stakeholder engagement can come in many forms, but to be successful it should happen early and often. This engagement is not a one-time event; rather, it is built into the organization's processes. That includes processes to set goals, identify evidence needs and related key questions, identify existing evidence, review results, and make decisions.

At a minimum, stakeholder engagement happens at key junctures, but in some cases it happens on a regular basis.

In addition, to ensure the engagement is effective, the organization tailors its approach and the information it shares to meet the needs of the individual stakeholder (or different groups of stakeholders). To do so, the organization conducts outreach to develop an understanding of how different stakeholders would like to be involved and at what level of detail.

Approaches that can help implement the practice: Practices to engage Congressional stakeholders

Engaging with Congress is of particular importance given its power to create and fund federal organizations, programs, and activities. This engagement provides an important opportunity for Congress and the executive branch to work together to ensure that goals are specific and results-oriented, and strategies and resource expectations are appropriate and reasonable. It also provides a venue for Congress to learn about existing evidence and express its evidence needs.

Our past work has identified approaches for ensuring that consultations with Members of Congress and their staffs are successful. For example:

- Create shared expectations by (1) tailoring consultations and the information provided to meet participants' needs and (2) promoting a mutual understanding of priorities.
- Engage the right people at the right time by (1) being open to an iterative process, (2) beginning consultations at the staff level, and (3) involving Members of Congress and agency leaders as appropriate over time.
- Coordinate consultations across parties, committees, and chambers to the extent practicable.

Example: Department of Energy Engaged Stakeholders to Identify and Address Evidence Needs

In December 2022, **we found** that the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) within the Department of Energy had taken actions to identify and address stakeholders' evidence needs.

EIA used diverse communication methods to solicit and collect feedback from stakeholders to improve access to its data. For example, Energy officials told us they used comments that data users submitted through its websites, as well as surveys, to create a website called the U.S. Energy Atlas.

The website, which launched in January 2021, makes data available in a range of formats, and allows users to sort and visualize the data in different ways. In May 2022, EIA made additional tools available on its website to improve the accessibility and usability of its data. Those tools incorporated features that users had requested.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105460

Selected Related Requirements

- GPRAMA requirements for
 - agencies to consult with Congress and other stakeholders when developing or updating strategic plans and priority goals; and
 - the Office of Management and Budget to consult with Congress when developing or making adjustments to federal government priority goals
- Evidence Act requirement for agencies to consult with stakeholders when developing their evidence-building plans (also known as learning agendas)

Selected GAO Work

Consulting with stakeholders: [GAO-12-621SP](#), [GAO-03-454](#), [GAO/GGD-10.1.16](#), [GAO/GGD-96-118](#)

Involving stakeholders in performance reviews: [GAO-15-602](#), [GAO-13-228](#)

Build and Maintain Capacity

Key Actions:

- Assess sufficiency of existing evidence-building capacity
- Identify actions to maintain or enhance capacity

Our past work has found that having sufficient capacity is critical to federal organizations' efforts to generate and use a full range of evidence to improve performance. One key aspect of capacity is ensuring staff have relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities to undertake various performance-management and evidence-building activities. In addition, staff need access to the appropriate tools to collect, analyze, and use evidence.

To determine sufficiency, the organization first takes steps to understand its existing capacity. It can use a variety of methods to assess its capacity, such as developing an inventory of employee knowledge, skills, and abilities related to relevant activities, along with the various tools it has available. The organization then identifies any gaps between its current capacity and what it needs to carry out its current performance-management and evidence-building activities, as well as those it has planned for the future.

Based on its assessment, the organization subsequently identifies actions needed to maintain or enhance its capacity. This could include hiring new staff with needed knowledge, or training existing staff to strengthen their skills and abilities. In addition, this could entail other resource investments, such as procuring new data systems and software.

Approaches that can help implement the practice: Capacity assessments

The Evidence Act requires agencies to publish an assessment of the coverage, quality, methods, effectiveness, and independence of their statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis efforts. Agencies are to publish these “capacity assessments” in conjunction with their strategic plans.

Among other things, these capacity assessments are to describe the extent to which

- the agency’s evidence-building efforts (evaluations, research, and analysis efforts) support needs within the agency;
- evaluation and research capacity is present within the agency to plan and implement evaluations and disseminate results; and
- the agency can further develop the capacity of its staff to use evaluation, research, analyses, and data in day-to-day operations.

Agencies’ capacity assessments are made available on [Evaluation.gov](https://www.evaluation.gov), along with other federal evidence-building plans, tools, and resources.

Example: General Services Administration (GSA) Took Steps to Enhance Its Employees’ Data Skills

In December 2022, [we found](#) that GSA had assessed the data skills of its staff in 2020 and 2021. Its assessment identified gaps, such as the staff’s ability to perform statistical analyses.

To address these gaps, GSA officials told us they then worked with an online training provider through February 2022 to develop different tracks of training courses for GSA employees to follow depending on their roles, responsibilities, and needs. This approach was intended to help participants learn about tools and methods that were most relevant for them.

Following this training, GSA asked participants to complete a project where they applied what they learned, using their new skills to improve how data are managed and used by their program or office.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-105460

Selected Related Requirements

- GPRAMA requirements related to performance management skills and competencies
- Evidence Act requirement for capacity assessments

Selected GAO Work

- Federal evidence-building capacity: [GAO-21-536](#), [GAO-20-119](#)
- Performance management capacity: [GAO-22-103910](#), [GAO-13-356](#), [GAO-13-228](#), [GAO-05-927](#)
- Program evaluation capacity: [GAO-15-25](#), [GAO-03-454](#)

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 includes provisions for us to review different aspects of its implementation.⁵ This report develops key practices and highlights related examples that our past work has identified for implementing federal evidence-building and performance-management activities.

To identify key federal evidence-building and performance-management practices, we reviewed more than 200 reports we published between 1996 and 2023. In 1996, we developed a **guide** for implementing the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, which identified key practices for federal performance management. We conducted a content analysis of the reports we issued subsequent to that guide to determine whether report objectives, findings, or recommendations discussed federal efforts or leading practices to develop and use evidence.

We iteratively identified patterns to develop a set of steps agencies could take to direct federal evidence-building and organizational performance-management activities. Reports were coded by an analyst and independently reviewed and verified by another analyst to group patterns by theme. Collectively, four analysts agreed on the final coding of each report and synthesized the actions into four topic areas and 13 key practices.

We analyzed results from a survey of federal managers we conducted in 2020 to assess the association between certain practices and the increased use of evidence in decision making—described more fully below. In addition, we refined the practices and actions, as appropriate, based on input from (1) officials at 24 major federal agencies involved in implementing evidence-building and performance-management activities, and (2) Office of Management and Budget staff responsible for providing government-wide direction and guidance.⁶

As part of our content analysis, we identified key actions to implement each practice, along with selected approaches that could help federal organizations meet those practices and actions. We also identified recent examples from our work—from fiscal years 2022 or 2023—illustrating how evidence-building and performance-management practices have been applied by a diverse set of agencies. In addition, we reviewed relevant federal laws and OMB guidance since 1990, when the Chief Financial Officers Act was enacted, and identified selected legal requirements that federal agencies could meet by implementing the key practices.

⁵Pub. L. No. 115-435, §§ 101(d), 202(f)(1), 202(g), 132 Stat. at 5533-43, *codified* at 5 U.S.C. § 306 note, 44 U.S.C. § 3520A(e).

⁶The 24 agencies are those identified in the Chief Financial Officers (CFO) Act of 1990, as amended, which are generally the largest federal agencies. 31 U.S.C. § 901(b). The 24 CFO Act agencies are the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, the Interior, Justice, Labor, State, Transportation, the Treasury, and Veterans Affairs, as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development, Environmental Protection Agency, General Services Administration, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, National Science Foundation, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Office of Personnel Management, Small Business Administration, and Social Security Administration.

Survey Development and Administration

We previously surveyed federal managers to ask for their views on a range of topics, including (1) the availability and use of evidence, and (2) practices that can promote the use of this information.⁷

From July 2020 through early December 2020, we administered our online survey to a stratified random sample of 3,993 individuals from a population of 150,447 civilian managers at 24 major federal agencies. We defined managers as the following career civil service employees: management levels covered by general schedule (GS) or equivalent schedules at levels comparable to GS-13 through GS-15 and career Senior Executive Service (SES) or equivalent. We obtained the sample from the Office of Personnel Management's Enterprise Human Resources Integration database as of March 2019, which was the most recent data available at the time, and the Department of State's database on Foreign Service Officers. We determined that the data elements used to draw our sample were sufficiently reliable for that purpose.⁸

We received usable questionnaires from 60 percent of sampled managers. We adjusted sampling weights to account for non-response bias and the design of our sample, as well as to ensure that estimates were generalizable. As a result, the overall weighted response rate was 56 percent.⁹

⁷In November 2021, [we reaffirmed](#) connections between certain practices and increased use of performance information in decision-making activities.

⁸See the Objectives, Scope, and Methodology section of [GAO-21-537SP](#) for additional information about our survey development, administration, and results, including the steps we took to determine the reliability and accuracy of these data.

⁹We apply weights to survey responses to account for the design of our sample and ensure that estimates are generalizable to the population of federal managers. The weighted response rate is estimated using survey weights that account for our sample design and the response differences across agencies and demographic factors. The difference between the unweighted and weighted government-wide response rate in 2020 is due to higher response rates at small- to mid-sized agencies, and lower response rates at certain mid- to large-sized agencies. As a result, the weighted government-wide response rate was lower than the unweighted rate. However, the unweighted and weighted proportions of managers familiar with evaluation (N=1486) were both 0.62, indicating that sampling differences across this subset of managers were minimal.

Leading Program Evaluation Practices

The 2020 survey included updated questions related to agencies' ability to plan, conduct, and use program evaluations. Specifically, these questions focused on the presence of four leading program evaluation practices: evaluation use, evaluation quality, human capital capacity for evaluation, and other facilitating factors for evaluation. We performed our analyses on the subset of managers (62 percent) who reported any familiarity with program evaluation at their respective agencies (n=1486).¹⁰

To summarize and describe the statistical results, we developed composite index scales for the four leading program evaluation practices for each agency and a government-wide average. Each index scale averages managers' responses to the survey questions related to the respective practice and ranges from 1 (corresponding to an average value of "to no extent") to 5 (corresponding to an average value of "to a very great extent").¹¹ Our government-wide index score for each of the practices accounts for the survey design across agencies, and provides an indicator of the government-wide average level.¹²

In addition, we estimated the proportions of managers who reported the presence of evaluation practices at their respective agencies "to a great extent" and "to a very great extent". We developed these estimates for each survey question used to approximate one of the leading practices.

Finally, we performed a multivariate statistical regression that allowed us to assess the association between the use of evaluation index and the composite indices for the other three leading evaluation practices - evaluation quality, human capital capacity for evaluation, and other facilitating factors. Each coefficient reflects the change in the evaluation use index associated with a one-unit increase in each of the three composite indices. The model controls for Senior Executive Status, agency, education, gender, race, and age. The regression results hold even after controlling for the inter-correlation among individual sub-questions. See Appendix III for results and additional information.

¹⁰Missing responses for each of the questions did not exceed 6 percent. To fill in missing responses, we performed multiple imputation using a fully conditional specification that assumes a joint distribution for all variables.

¹¹For each of the four evaluation practices, our index score is an average of responses to the following number of survey questions: six questions that approximate use of evaluation in decision-making, six questions that approximate quality of evaluations, five questions that approximate human capital capacity for evaluation, and nine questions that approximate other facilitating factors for evaluation.

¹²We used Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal consistency of the scale. The Cronbach's alpha for each index exceeded 0.9, which meets generally accepted standards for scale reliability.

The results of our analysis should be interpreted carefully. The analysis identifies associations but does not imply a causal relationship between any of the leading practices and evaluation use. In addition, we did not identify the reasons underlying differences in evaluation use across agencies and any other contextual factors that may explain such differences. However, the analysis provides support for a framework of practices that promote evaluation use.

Appendix II: Selected Federal Laws Related to Evidence-Building and Performance-Management Activities

Beginning with the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990, the federal government has passed and enacted a series of laws with government-wide or crosscutting requirements to manage performance by building and using different sources of evidence. Table 1 identifies and briefly describes selected laws with relevant government-wide (or multi-agency) evidence-building or performance-management provisions.

Table 1: Selected Statutes to Strengthen Federal Evidence-Building and Performance-Management Activities

Date Enacted	Statute	Description/Summary
November 1990	Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990 (CFO Act), Pub. L. No. 101-576, 104 Stat. 2838 (1990).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enacted to (1) bring more effective general and financial management practice to the federal government by establishing new relevant offices; (2) improve systems of accounting, financial management, and internal controls to assure the issuance of reliable financial information and to deter fraud, waste, and abuse of government resources; and (3) provide for the production of complete, reliable, timely, and consistent financial information for use by the executive branch and the Congress in the financial, management, and evaluation of federal programs • Established chief financial officer (CFO) positions in 24 major agencies • Provided for long-range planning and began the process of auditing federal agency financial statements • Requires agency CFOs to integrate agency accounting and financial management systems that provides for systematic performance measurement and cost information
August 1993	Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA), Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285 (1993).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enacted to (1) improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability of federal programs by having agencies focus their management practices on program results, service quality, and customer satisfaction; (2) help federal managers improve service delivery by ensuring that they plan for meeting program objectives and providing them with information about program results and service quality; (3) improve congressional decision making by providing more objective information on achieving statutory objectives and on the relative effectiveness and efficiency of federal programs and spending; and (4) improve internal management of the federal government • Requires executive agency heads to submit to the Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and Congress a strategic plan for performance goals of their agency's program activities (plans should cover at least a five-year period and be updated at least every three years) • Requires each agency to prepare annual performance plans, to be included in the President's Budget, covering each program activity and report annually on program performance

October 1994	Government Management and Reform Act of 1994, Pub. L. No. 103-356, 108 Stat. 3410 (1994).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To improve the efficiency of executive branch performance in implementing financial management reporting requirements, the statute allowed OMB to adjust the frequency and due dates of or consolidate specified reports
May 1995	Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, Pub. L. No. 104-13, 109 Stat. 163 (1995).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enacted to, among others, (1) ensure the greatest possible public benefit from and maximize the utility of information created, collected, maintained, used, shared and disseminated by or for the federal government; (2) improve the quality and use of federal information to strengthen decision making, accountability, and openness in government and society; and (3) provide for the dissemination of public information on a timely basis on equitable terms, and in a manner that promotes the utility of the information to the public and makes effective use of information technology • Directed OMB to oversee the use of information resources to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of governmental operations to serve agency missions, including burden reduction and service delivery to the public. This includes, among others, providing direction and overseeing agency dissemination of and public access to information • Requires each federal agency to, among other things, establish a process to evaluate proposed collections of information; manage information resources to reduce information collection burdens on the public; and ensure the public has timely and equitable access to information products and services
February 1996	Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996, Pub L. No. 104-106, 110 Stat. 186 (1996) as amended by Pub. L. No. 104-208, § 808, 110 Stat. 3009, 3009-393 (1996).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established Chief Information Officer positions in federal agencies to ensure agency compliance with—and prompt, efficient, and effective implementation of—information policies and information resources management responsibilities, including the reduction of information collection burdens on the public • Required federal agencies to establish goals for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of agency operations and, as appropriate, the delivery of services to the public through the effective use of information technology
December 2000	Information Quality Act of 2000, Pub. L. No. 106-554, § 515, 114 Stat. 2763, 2763A-153 (2000).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Required the Director of OMB to issue guidelines that provide policy and procedural guidance to federal agencies for ensuring and maximizing the quality, objectivity, utility, and integrity of information (including statistical data) disseminated by agencies in fulfillment of provisions in the Paperwork Reduction Act

December 2002	E-Government Act of 2002, Pub. L. No. 107-347, 116 Stat. 2899 (2002).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enacted to, among other things, improve the ability of the government to achieve agency missions and program performance goals and promote better informed decision making by policy makers • Established an Office of Electronic Government within OMB to, among other things, assist in establishing policies which set the framework for information technology standards for the federal government
Confidential Information Protection and Statistical Efficiency Act of 2002		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enacted to, among other things, ensure individuals or organizations who supply information under a pledge of confidentiality to agencies for statistical purposes will neither have that information disclosed in identifiable form to those that are unauthorized nor have that information used for any purpose other than a statistical purpose • Enacted to, among other things, authorize the sharing of business data among the Bureau of the Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics for exclusively statistical purposes
September 2006	Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act (FFATA), Pub. L. No. 109-282, 120 Stat. 1186 (2006).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Required OMB to establish a free, publicly accessible website containing data on federal awards (e.g., contracts, loans, and grants) – www.USAspending.gov
January 2011	GPRAMA Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRAMA), Pub. L. No. 111-352, 124 Stat. 3866 (2011).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires OMB and agencies to establish various government-wide and agency-specific performance goals including cross-agency priority goals, strategic objectives, and agency priority goals • Requires agencies to regularly assess their progress in achieving goals and objectives through performance reviews • Established positions for Chief Operating Officers, Performance Improvement Officers, and goal leaders in addition to the Performance Improvement Council
May 2014	Digital Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014 (DATA Act), Pub. L. No. 113-101, 128 Stat. 1146 (2014).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enacted to, among others, (1) expand FFATA by disclosing direct federal agency expenditures and linking federal contract, loans, and grant spending information to programs of federal agencies to enable taxpayers and policy makers to track federal spending more effectively; and (2) provide policymakers and the public a means of more effectively tracking federal spending and improve the quality of data agencies submit to www.USAspending.gov by holding them accountable for the completeness and accuracy of the data they submit • Required OMB, in consultation with agencies, to establish government-wide financial data standards for any federal funds made available to or expended by federal agencies and entities receiving federal funds. The standards were required to produce consistent and comparable data, including across program activities

March 2016	Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission Act of 2016, Pub. L. 114-140, 130 Stat. 317 (2016).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking to conduct a comprehensive study on the data inventory, data infrastructure, database security, and statistical protocols related to federal policymaking and the agencies responsible for maintaining that data to, among others, (1) determine how to integrate and make available administrative, survey, and statistical data for analysis and research while protecting confidentiality and (2) make recommendations on how best to incorporate outcomes measurement, institutionalize randomized controlled trials, and rigorous impact analysis into program design
July 2016	Foreign Aid Transparency and Accountability Act of 2016, Pub. L. No. 114-191, 130 Stat. 666 (2016).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Directed the President to release guidelines for establishing measurable goals, performance metrics, and monitoring and evaluation plans for U.S. foreign assistance
December 2016	Program Management Improvement Accountability Act of 2016, Pub. L. No. 114-264, 130 Stat. 1371 (2016).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established the position of Program Management Improvement Officers and the Program Management Policy Council Requires OMB to, among other things, (1) adopt government-wide standards, policies, and guidelines for program and project management for executive agencies; (2) conduct portfolio reviews of agency programs, not less than annually, to assess the quality and effectiveness of program management; and (3) conduct portfolio reviews of programs on our High-Risk List Required the Office of Personnel Management, in consultation with OMB, to (1) identify key skills and competencies needed for a program and project manager in an agency; (2) establish a new job series, or update and improve an existing job series, for program and project management within an agency; and (3) establish a new career path for program and project managers within an agency
January 2019	Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018, Pub. L. No. 115-435, 132 Stat. 5529 (2019).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Created a framework for federal agencies to take a more comprehensive and integrated approach to evidence building <p>Title I: Federal Evidence-Building Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires federal agencies to conduct capacity assessments to further evidence-building activities Requires the 24 CFO Act agencies to (1) designate Evaluation Officers and statistical officials and (2) develop evidence-building plans (learning agendas), Annual Evaluation Plans, and agency evaluation policies

Title II: OPEN Government Data Act

- Requires that federal agencies make their data assets available in an open format and their public data assets available as an open government data asset
- Requires the General Services Administration to maintain a Federal Data Catalogue (www.Data.gov) dedicated to sharing agency data assets with the public
- Requires that agencies develop and maintain comprehensive data inventories and engage the public in using open data
- Establishes Chief Data Officers within agencies to, among other things, manage data assets of the agency, including the standardization of data format, sharing of data assets, and publication of data assets
- Establishes a Chief Data Officer Council to, among other things, develop government-wide best practices for the use, protection, dissemination, and generation of data and for promoting and encouraging data sharing agreements between agencies

Title III: Confidential Information Protection and Statistical Efficiency Act of 2018

- Requires agencies to make data assets available, upon request, to statistical agencies and units for the purpose of developing evidence

January 2021	Inventory of Program Activities of Federal Agencies, Pub. L. No. 116-283, div. H, tit. XCVI, § 9601, 134 Stat. 3388, 4823 (2020).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Requires OMB to develop a single website to provide an inventory that identifies each program and includes, among others, a description of the purposes of the program and the contribution of the program to the mission and goals of the agency
August 2022	National Secure Data Service, Pub. L. No. 117-167, § 10375, 136 Stat. 1366, 1574 (2022).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Requires the National Science Foundation to create a National Secure Data Service demonstration project to develop, refine, and test models for a government-wide infrastructure for linking and accessing statistical activities conducted for statistical purposes• Requires the demonstration project to be aligned with principles, best practices, and priority actions recommended by the Advisory Committee on Data for Evidence Building• Requires that the National Science Foundation engage with state and federal agencies to collect, acquire, analyze, report, and disseminate statistical data to support government-wide evidence-building activities

Source: GAO analysis. | GAO-23-105460

Appendix III: Survey Results Related to Federal Use of Program Evaluations in Decision Making

Our 2020 federal managers survey results show that managers familiar with evaluation from agencies that follow selected leading practices tend to use evaluation in their decision-making.¹³ Sixty-two percent of federal managers who responded to the survey reported that they were familiar with program evaluations done at their agencies.¹⁴ About half (52 percent) of those reported having access to evaluations to manage their programs to a great or very great extent. Our regression results suggest evaluation quality, human capital capacity for evaluation, and other facilitating factors are positively associated with evaluation use.

Majority of Federal Managers Reported the Presence of Select Leading Program Evaluation Practices

Overall, over 50 percent of federal managers familiar with evaluations at their agency reported using a variety of evaluation practices to a great or very great extent. These practices were grouped into four major categories – evaluation use, evaluation quality, human capital capacity for evaluation, and other facilitating factors. Table 2 shows the four select practices and the related survey questions that correspond to each practice.

Table 2: Select Leading Evaluation Practices

Evaluation use	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Implementing changes to improve program performance• Adopting new program approaches, operations, or processes• Sharing effective program approaches or lessons learned• Allocating resources within the program• Explaining or providing context for performance results• Informing the public about the program’s performance, as appropriate
Evaluation quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluations addressed issues important to key stakeholders• Evaluations were completed without undue influence• Evaluation results had clear implications for program improvement• Evaluations were technically rigorous• Evaluation results were delivered in time to be useful• Evaluation recommendations were feasible to implement with existing resources

¹³To address our research objective, we collected and analyzed federal managers’ responses to relevant questions from our 2020 Federal Managers survey. The survey asked managers for their views on the use of evaluation in decision-making activities and related leading practices that can promote the use of evaluation.

¹⁴All reported results that follow are for the subset of managers who reported they are familiar with program evaluations at their agency.

Human capital capacity for evaluation

- Program staff have the skills to conduct program evaluations
- Program staff have the skills necessary to understand program evaluation
- Program staff have the skills to implement evaluation recommendations
- Program staff receive training in program evaluation
- Program staff have access to evaluation experts to support evaluation

Other facilitating factors

- Agency top leadership was committed to using evaluations
 - Congress supported the use of evaluations
 - Evaluations of my program were guided by an agency evaluation plan
 - Evaluations were guided by agency evaluation policies
 - Evaluations involved consultation with key program staff
 - Evaluations involved consultation with key external stakeholders
 - Disagreements among stakeholders were easy to resolve
 - Evaluation results were made easily accessible and available to the public
 - The program systematically tracked the implementation of evaluation recommendations
-

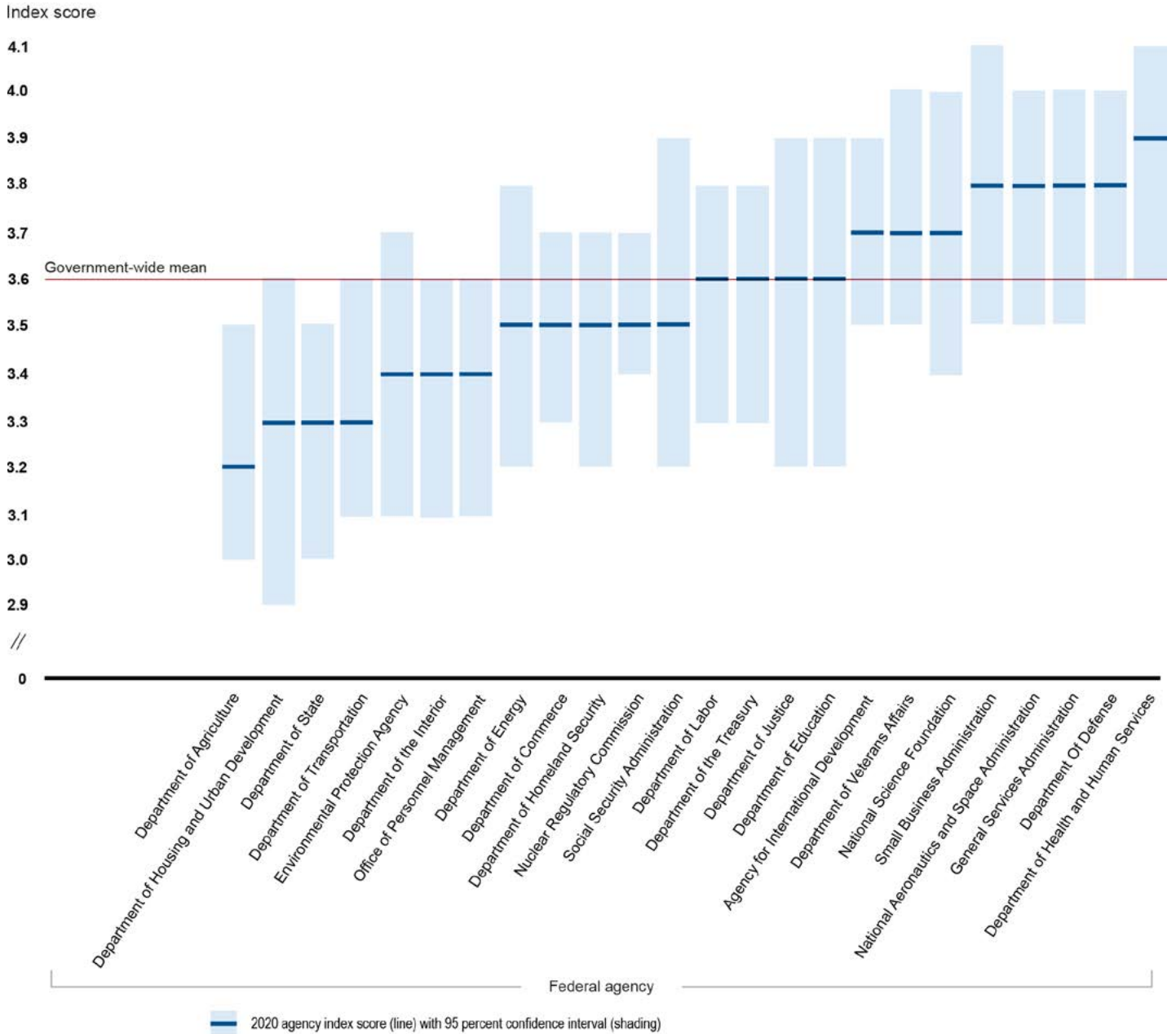
Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Evaluation Use

Across the federal government, managers familiar with evaluation at their agency reported using evaluation results in different decision-making activities from a moderate extent (index score of 3.0) to a great extent (index score of 4.0).¹⁵ The government average was consistent across most individual agencies (3.6 out of 5). See figure 3.

¹⁵There were 6 survey questions related to evaluation use. See Table 2.

Figure 3: 2020 Federal Agencies' Reported Evaluation Use Scores Compared to the Government-wide Average



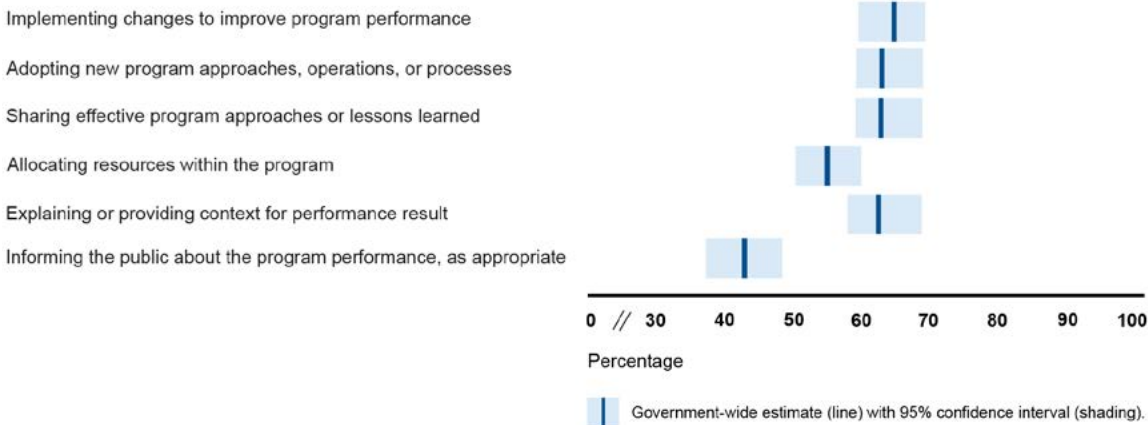
Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Note: Our index score is an average of responses to 6 related survey questions that approximates the reported use of evaluation in decision making. The index runs from 1 to 5, where 1 reflects managers reported they and others use performance information to “no extent,” and 5 reflects to a “very great extent.”

The majority of federal managers familiar with evaluation at their agency reported great or very great use for five of the six evaluation uses, as shown in figure 4. Forty-three percent reported great or very great use on the sixth aspect of evaluation use, to inform the public about program performance.

Figure 4: Estimated Percentage of Federal Managers Reporting Presence of Selected Aspects of Evaluation Use

Estimated Percentages Reporting to a “Great” or “Very Great” Extent



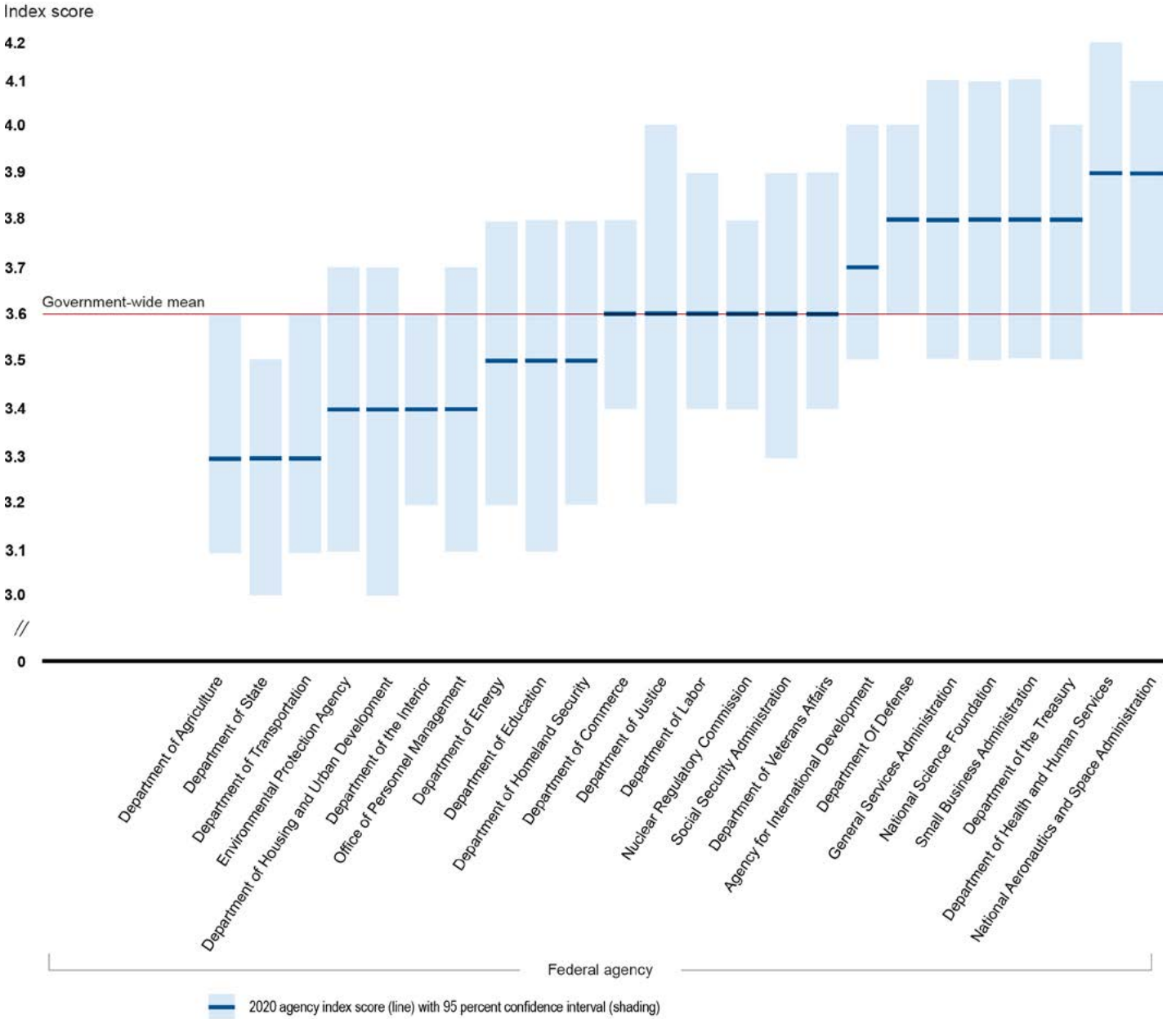
Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Evaluation Quality

Across the federal government, managers familiar with evaluation at their agency reported that attributes of evaluation quality were reflected in their agencies’ evaluation practices from a moderate (index score of 3.0) to great extent (index score of 4.0).¹⁶ The government average (3.6 out of 5) was consistent across most individual agencies (see fig. 5).

¹⁶There were 6 survey questions related to attributes of evaluation quality. See Table 2.

Figure 5: 2020 Federal Agencies' Reported Evaluation Quality Scores Compared to the Government-wide Average



Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Note: Our index score is an average of responses to 6 related survey questions that approximates the reported evaluation quality. The index runs from 1 to 5, where 1 reflects managers reported they and others agree with the presence of this practice to “no extent,” and 5 reflects to a “very great extent.”

About half of federal managers familiar with evaluation at their agency reported that their agency’s evaluations met each of the evaluation quality attributes we asked about (see fig. 6).

Figure 6: Estimated Percentage of Federal Managers Reporting Presence of Selected Aspects of Evaluation Quality

Estimated Percentages Reporting to a “Great” or “Very Great” Extent



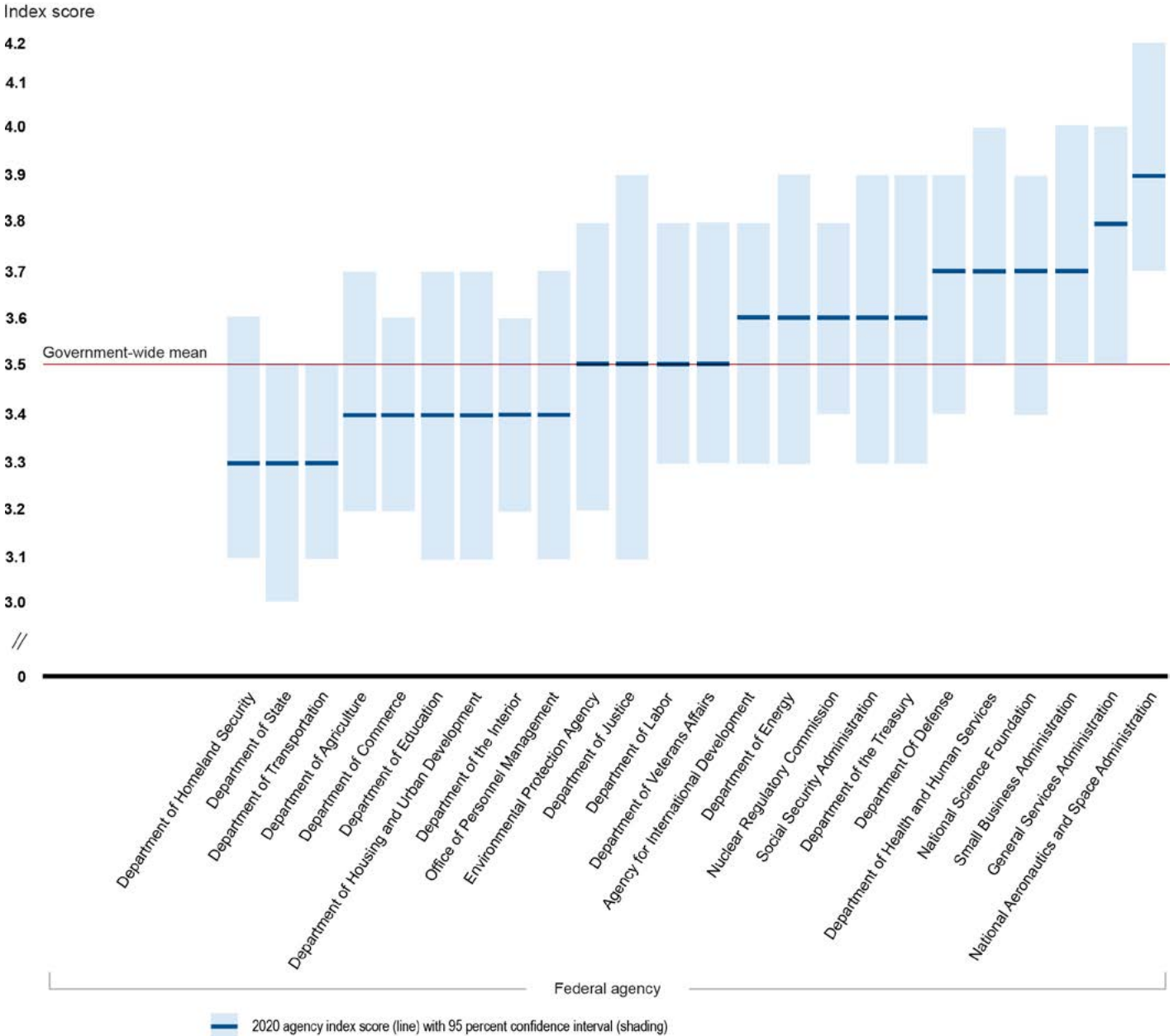
Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Human Capital Capacity for Evaluation

Federal managers familiar with evaluations at their agency reported that selected elements of human capital capacity for evaluation were present from a moderate (index of 3.0) to great (index score of 4.0) extent.¹⁷ The government-wide average (3.5 out of 5) was consistent for most individual agencies (see fig. 7).

¹⁷There were 5 survey questions related to elements of human capital capacity for evaluation. See Table 2.

Figure 7: 2020 Federal Agencies' Reported Human Capital Capacity for Evaluation Scores Compared to the Government-wide Average



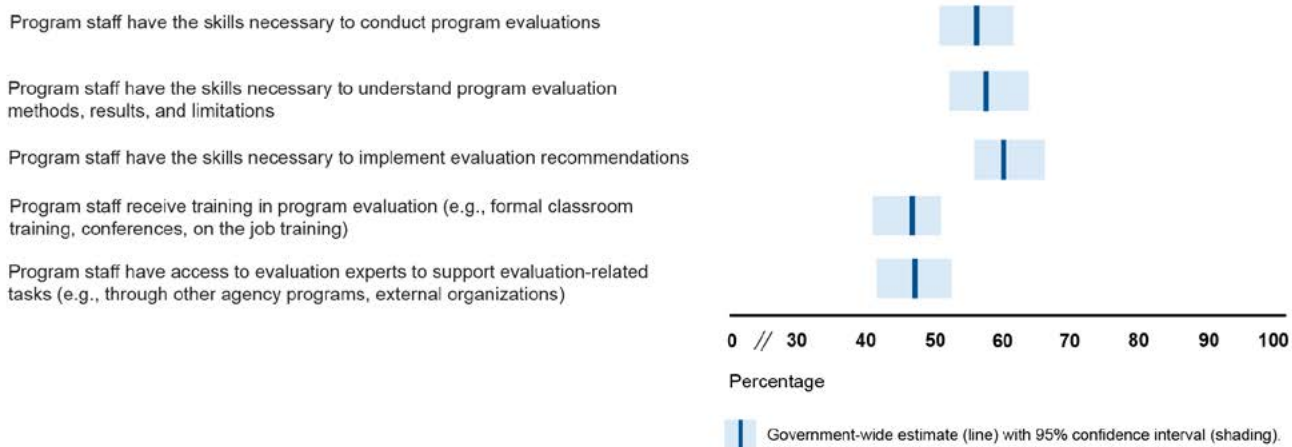
Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Note: Our index score is an average of responses to 5 related survey questions that approximates the reported human capital capacity for evaluation. The index runs from 1 to 5, where 1 reflects managers reported they and others have human capital capacity for evaluation to “no extent,” and 5 reflects to a “very great extent.”

The majority of federal managers familiar with evaluation at their agency reported having the skills needed for program evaluation, but less than half reported receiving training or having access to evaluation experts (see fig. 8).

Figure 8: Estimated Percentage of Federal Managers Reporting Presence of Selected Aspects of Human Capital Capacity for Evaluation

Estimated Percentages Reporting to a “Great” or “Very Great” Extent



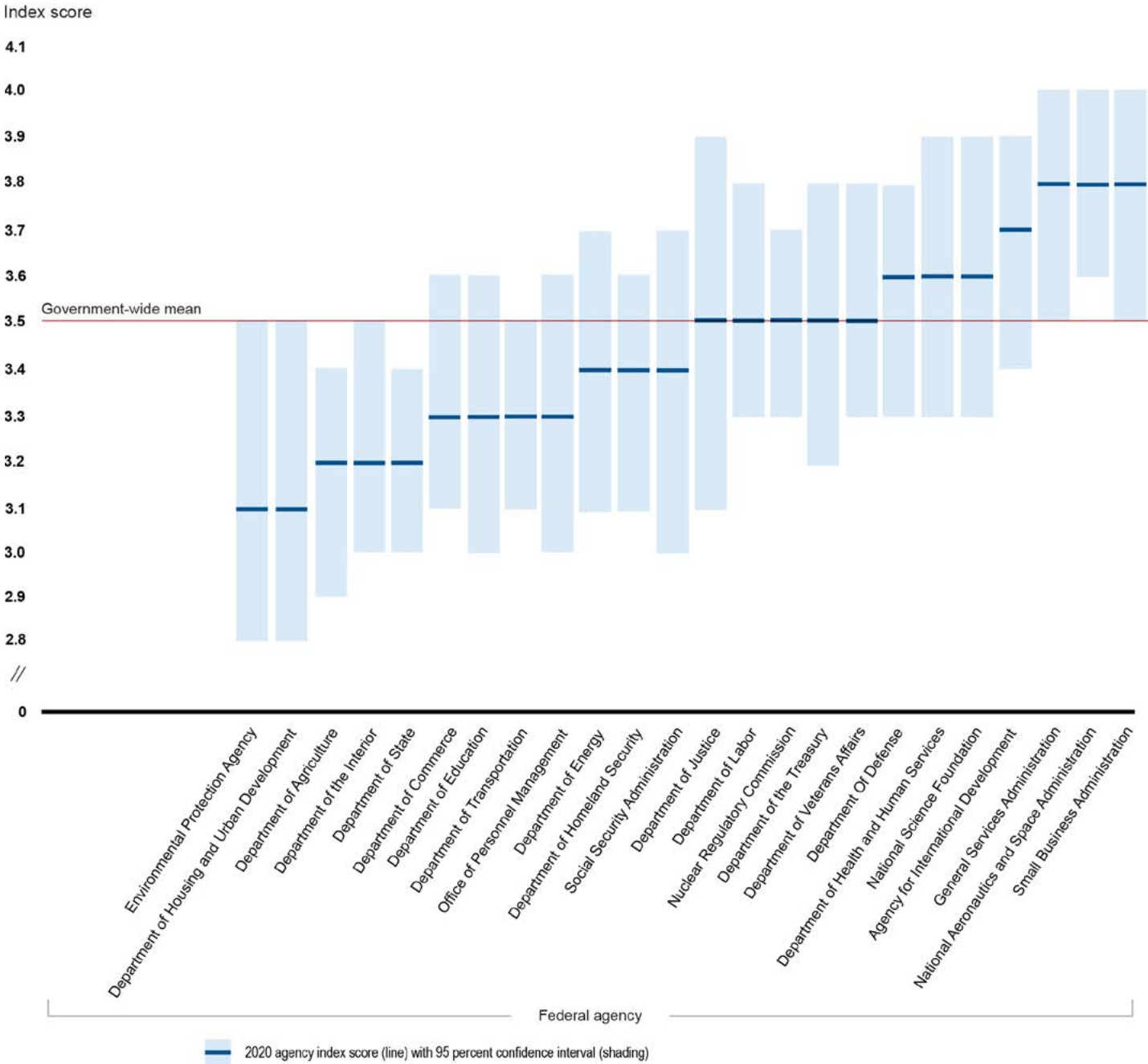
Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Other Facilitating Factors

Federal managers familiar with evaluations at their agency indicated the presence of other facilitating factors from a moderate (index score of 3.0) to great (index score of 4.0) extent.¹⁸ The government-wide average (3.5 out of 5) was consistent for most individual agencies (see fig. 9).

¹⁸There were 9 survey questions related to the presence of other facilitating factors for evaluation. See Table 2.

Figure 9: 2020 Federal Agencies' Reported Scores on Presence of Other Facilitating Factors Perceived to Foster Evaluation Use Compared to the Government-wide Average



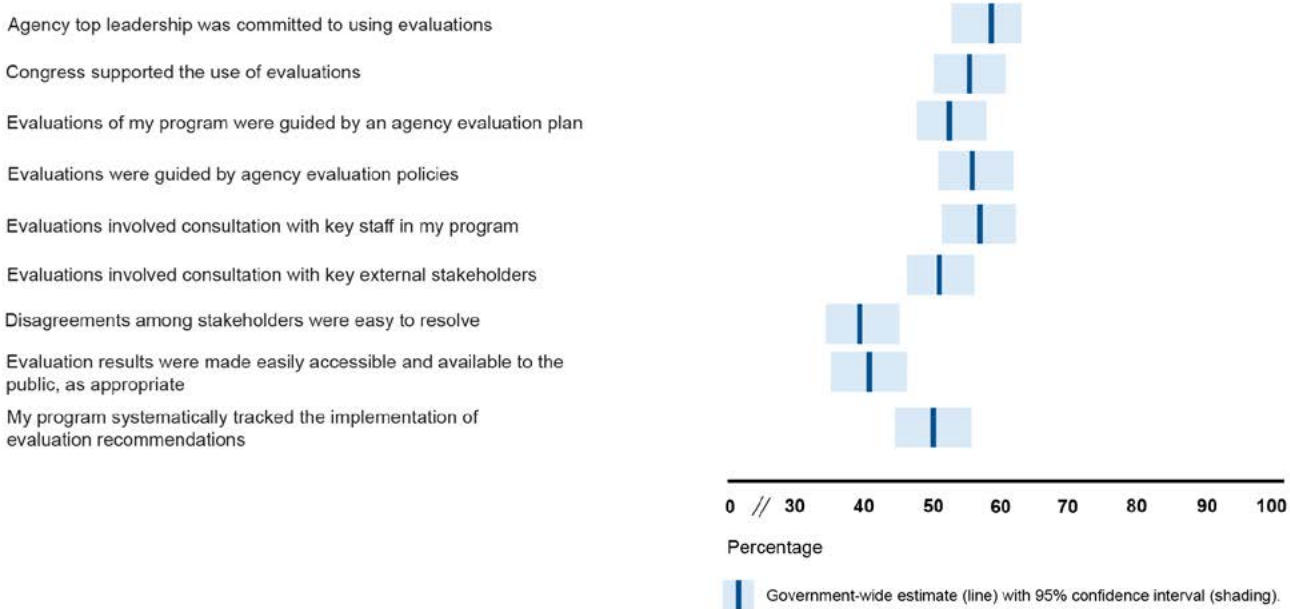
Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Note: Our index score is an average of responses to 9 related survey questions that approximates the reported presence of select facilitating factors for evaluation. The index runs from 1 to 5, where 1 reflects managers reported the presence of this factor to “no extent,” and 5 reflects to a “very great extent.”

Of nine evaluation facilitating factors we asked about, a majority of federal managers who are familiar with evaluations at their agency reported great or very great use for each of seven, as shown in figure 10. About 40 percent reported great or very great use on the other two questions.

Figure 10: Estimated Percentage of Federal Managers Reporting Presence of Other Facilitating Factors Perceived to Foster Evaluation Use

Estimated Percentages Reporting to a “Great” or “Very Great” Extent



Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Evaluation Quality, Human Capital Capacity for Evaluation, and Other Facilitating Factors are Positively Associated with Increased Evaluation Use

Evaluation quality, human capital capacity for evaluation, and other facilitating factors are positively associated with an index that approximates use of evaluation with a single score (see table 3).¹⁹ These findings suggest that the leading practices we identified can promote federal agencies’ use of evaluation in decision making. Each coefficient from a multivariate regression analysis reflects the increase in the use index associated with a one-unit.

¹⁹The index is an average of results from 6 related survey questions on manager use of evaluation. Scores range from 1, which reflects managers reported the use of performance information from “no extent,” to 5, a “very great extent.”

increase in the value of a composite score for each of the practices.²⁰ While the practices have a statistically significant positive association with evaluation use, the strongest association is with evaluation quality (estimated coefficient of 0.51).²¹ Similarly, each increase in terms of the extent to which individuals reported other facilitating factors, such as management and stakeholder commitment to evaluation was associated with a 0.23 increase in their score on the use index. Finally, human capital capacity for evaluation, was also associated with higher evaluation use.²² See Table 3.

Table 3: Evaluation Quality, Human Capital Capacity for Evaluation, and Other Facilitating Factors Associated with Evaluation Use

Leading Practice/Variable	Coefficient	Standard error	95 percent confidence interval		p-value
Evaluation quality	0.51	0.06	0.04	0.62	< 0.0001
Human capital capacity for evaluation	0.17	0.05	0.07	0.26	< 0.0001
Other facilitating factors	0.23	0.05	0.12	0.34	< 0.0001

Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Note: The table reports multivariate regression model results (dependent variable: use of evaluation index). The model controls for SES status, agency, education, gender, race, age, and evaluation role or involvement.

Federal managers need to carefully consider what practices to include when developing evaluation policies that facilitate evaluation use. For example, although the results demonstrate that evaluation use is positively associated with quality overall, the correlations between the various types of evaluation use and the individual elements of quality may vary. Therefore, a federal manager may be able to achieve quality by selecting from a variety of activities that can promote the use of evaluations.

²⁰Questions on evaluation quality, human capital capacity for evaluation, and other facilitating factors in the model run from 1 (reflecting a response of “no extent”) to 5 (“very great extent”). The model controls for Senior Executive Status, agency, education, gender, race, and age. The model includes an independent composite for five types of evaluation involvement such as a manager who has served in an evaluation role as an evaluator or member of team that conducts evaluations, with a score of 0 indicating no role and a score of 5 indicating the respondent had served in all of the roles listed. On average managers reported involvement in slightly over two (2.4 out of 5) evaluation-related roles, and about 81 percent of managers reported serving in at least one evaluation role. The regression results hold even after controlling for the inter-correlation among individual sub-questions.

²¹R-squared is a measure of how well the variation in the independent variables included in the model explains the variability in the dependent variable, and runs from 0 to 1. The overall regression model had an R-squared of 0.75.

²²The regression model also includes an independent composite variable for each type of evaluation involvement, with a score of 0 indicating no role and a score of 5 indicating the respondent had served in all of the following potential roles: (1) leader or member of an agency team that identified or prioritized research questions for potential evaluation(s), (2) evaluator who has managed third parties responsible for conducting evaluation(s), (3) member of the program staff that provided program information or context to evaluators, (4) evaluator or member of a team that conducted evaluation(s), or (5) manager who has used the results of the evaluation(s) to make performance improvement decisions.

Appendix IV: Additional Actions Related to Goals

OMB and agencies are to establish various government-wide and agency-specific performance goals, in line with GPRAMA requirements or OMB guidance. Our past work has identified additional actions that can be leveraged by federal leaders and employees, or others, to help develop and implement these different goals (table 4 below).

Table 4: GAO-Identified Actions for Defining Different Types of Goals

Goal	Previously-Identified Actions	Related Past GAO Products
<p>Cross-agency priority (CAP) goals are crosscutting and include outcome-oriented goals covering a limited number of policy areas as well as goals for management improvements needed across the government. OMB is to coordinate with agencies to establish CAP goals at least every 4 years.</p>	<p>Our past work has identified 10 key considerations to facilitate CAP goal implementation. One consideration is to establish a balanced set of outcome-oriented mission and management-focused goals that reflect the government’s highest policy priorities. We have also reported on the ways to improve measuring progress on CAP goals.</p>	<p>GAO-23-106354 GAO-21-104704 GAO-16-509 GAO-14-526</p>
<p>Strategic goals are an outgrowth of the mission and are very often results-oriented. They explain what results are expected from the agency’s major functions and when to expect those results.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cover major functions and operations • Logically relate to mission • Are results-oriented • Expressed in a manner that will allow for assessment of whether the goals are achieved • Complementary, and not duplicative, of goals of other agencies’ performance-related activities • Targeted at results over which the agency has a reasonable degree of influence • Performance goals and strategies are clearly aligned to the strategic goal and objectives they support 	<p>GAO/GGD-97-180 GAO/GGD-10.1.16</p>
<p>Strategic objectives are the outcome or impact the agency is intending to achieve through its various programs and initiatives. Agencies establish strategic objectives in their strategic plans and may update the objectives during the annual update of performance plans.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are objective, measurable, and quantifiable • Address important dimensions of program performance and balance competing priorities • State a particular target level of performance • Are linked to the strategic goals and objectives • Cover all programs/activities • Strategies are clearly aligned to the performance goal they support • Address mission-critical management problems 	<p>GAO-17-740R GAO-15-602</p>
<p>Performance goals are target level of performance expressed as a tangible, measurable objective against which actual achievement is to be compared.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are objective, measurable, and quantifiable • Address important dimensions of program performance and balance competing priorities • State a particular target level of performance • Are linked to the strategic goals and objectives • Cover all programs/activities • Strategies are clearly aligned to the performance goal they support • Address mission-critical management problems 	<p>GAO/GGD/AIMD-99-215 GAO/GGD/AIMD-99-69 GAO/GGD-10.1.20 GAO/GGD-10.1.16</p>
<p>Agency priority goals are a subset of agency performance goals designated as priorities by the heads of certain agencies, in consultation with OMB, every two years. They should be informed by the CAP goals as well as consultations with relevant congressional committees and other interested parties.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambitious targets that can be achieved within a two-year period • Interim quarterly targets for performance measures • Clearly defined quarterly milestones • Alignment to strategic goals and CAP goals, as applicable • A description of how input from congressional consultations was incorporated into the goals 	<p>GAO-13-174</p>

Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Appendix V: Comments from the U.S. Agency for International Development



June 6, 2023

Dawn Locke
Director, Strategic Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20226

Re: **EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts (GAO-23-105460)**

Dear Ms. Locke:

This letter serves as the formal response of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to the draft report produced by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) titled, EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING: Practices to Help Manage and Assess the Results of Federal Efforts (GAO-23-105460). USAID would like to thank GAO for the opportunity to review this draft report and we sincerely appreciate the extensive work of the GAO engagement team.

The draft report highlights USAID's current evaluation practices, including use, quality, and human capacity for evaluation, and how USAID uses such evaluations in decision making. As USAID continuously seeks to maximize the effectiveness of our programs, we look forward to continuing to apply these principles and practices in the implementation of our activities.

I am transmitting this letter for inclusion in the final GAO report. Thank you for the courtesies extended by your staff while conducting this engagement. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in GAO engagement and guidance on federal use of evaluation in decision making.

Sincerely,

Colleen R. Allen

Colleen Allen
Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Management

Appendix VI: GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contacts

Dawn G. Locke, (202) 512-6806 or locked@gao.gov

Jamila Jones Kennedy, at (202) 512-3637 or kennedyjj@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contacts named above, Benjamin T. Licht (Assistant Director), Terell Lasane (Assistant Director), Gergana Danailova-Trainor (Analyst-in-Charge), Pille Anvelt, Jacob Balcom, Michael Bechetti, Valerie Caracelli, Jacqueline Chapin, Ann Czapiewski, Alissa Czyz, Emily Gruenwald, Peter Kramer, Samantha Lalis, Won (Danny) Lee, K. Pierce, Amanda Prichard, Steven Putansu, and Joseph Shir made significant contributions to this report.

Glossary of Terms

This glossary provides definitions—based on ones we used in our past work—for selected terms used throughout this guide. When applicable, they also reflect definitions in relevant laws.

administrative data: Data collected by agencies, contractors, or grantees, among others, to carry out the basic operations and administration of a program.

agency priority goals: A subset of agency performance goals designated as priorities by the heads of certain agencies, in consultation with OMB, every two years.

capacity assessment: An assessment agencies are to include in their strategic plans of the coverage, quality, methods, effectiveness, and independence of the statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis efforts of the agency.

collaboration: Any joint activity that is intended to produce more public value than could be produced when the organizations act alone.

cross-agency priority (CAP) goals: Four-year outcome-oriented crosscutting goals covering a limited number of mission areas as well as goals to improve management across the federal government.

data-driven reviews: Regularly scheduled, structured meetings used by organizational leaders and managers to review and analyze data on progress toward key performance goals and other management-improvement priorities.

duplication: Occurs when two or more agencies or programs are engaged in the same activities or provide the same services to the same beneficiaries.

evaluation plans: An annual agency-wide plan that is to describe, among other things, (1) the key questions for each significant evaluation the agency intends to begin in the next fiscal year; (2) the key information collections or acquisitions the agency plans to begin during the year covered by the plan; and (3) any other information included in guidance issued by OMB.

evidence: The available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid consisting of quantitative or qualitative information derived from a variety of sources.

evidence-building activities: Evidence-building activities involve assessing existing evidence and identifying any need for additional evidence; determining which new evidence to generate, when, and how (i.e., prioritizing new evidence); generating that evidence; and using evidence in decision-making.

evidence-building plan: A systematic plan (also known as a learning agenda) for identifying and addressing policy questions relevant to the programs, policies, and regulations of the agency. The plan—a component of the agency’s strategic plan and developed in consultation with relevant stakeholders—is to include, among other things, the data, methods, and analytic approaches that the agency may use to develop evidence and any challenges faced in obtaining evidence to support policymaking.

evidence-clearing houses: Repositories that synthesize evaluation findings in ways that make research more useful to decision makers, researchers, and service organizations. These repositories provide tools for understanding what service models are ready for replication or expansion and disseminating results.

fragmentation: Circumstances in which more than one federal agency (or organization within an agency) is involved in the same activity, and opportunities exist to improve implementation of that activity.

goals: Goals communicate the results that an organization seeks to achieve. They guide the organization’s activities, and allow decision makers, staff, and stakeholders to assess performance by comparing planned and actual results.

goal leader: The individual responsible for developing strategies to achieve certain federal goals, managing implementation, and regularly reviewing performance.

learning agenda: See evidence-building plan.

logic model: A diagram that documents a program’s theory of change, including expected inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes.

open data: Public access to federal data that are free to use, modify, and share.

outcome: The desired results of products and services delivered by a program or activity.

output: The direct products and services delivered by a program or activity.

overlap: Occurs when multiple agencies or programs have similar goals, engage in similar activities or strategies to achieve them, or target similar beneficiaries.

performance goals: Target levels of performance to be accomplished within a timeframe. They are generally expressed as a tangible, measurable objectives, or as quantitative standards, values, or rates.

performance information: Quantitative or qualitative data used to track progress toward achieving agency goals or objectives, or to assess the overall performance of a program, operation, or project. It can be used to focus on different aspects of performance, such as customer satisfaction, efficiency, or quality.

performance management: A three-step process by which organizations (1) set goals to identify the results they seek to achieve; (2) collect performance information (a type of evidence) to measure progress; and (3) use that information to assess results and inform decisions to ensure progress towards achieving those goals.

performance measurement: The ongoing monitoring and reporting of a program's accomplishments and progress, particularly towards its pre-established goals.

policy analysis: A source of evidence consisting of a systematic process of identifying and comparing potential options for addressing a policy problem based on certain criteria, and choosing the option that best meets the criteria.

program evaluation: Individual, systematic studies using research methods to assess how well a program, operation, or project is achieving its objectives, and the reasons why it may, or may not, be performing as expected. Program evaluations answer specific questions, typically associated with a single product or report, such as how well a program is operating, whether a program is reaching targeted recipients, why a program is not achieving its desired outcomes, or whether one approach is more effective than another.

research and analysis: Studies providing additional information and insights pertinent to a program, its objectives, the populations it serves, or challenges it faces. An agency may conduct its own research and analysis, or it may contract for others to conduct it. The agency may also identify relevant research and analysis conducted by other entities, such as other federal, state or local government entities; academic researchers; or think tanks.

statistical activities: (1) The collection, compilation, processing, or analysis of data for the purpose of describing or making estimates concerning the whole, or relevant groups or components within the economy, society, or the natural environment; and (2) includes the development of methods of resources that support those activities, such as measurement methods, models, statistical classifications, or sampling frames.

statistical data: Data collected for the purpose of describing or making estimates concerning society, the economy, or the environment, or relevant subgroups or components. They can consist of survey data, aggregate indicators, descriptive statistics, or other data collected by an agency or others to better understand a population or condition.

strategic goals: Outcome-oriented statements of aim or purpose. They articulate what the organization wants to achieve to advance its mission and address relevant problems, needs, challenges, and opportunities.

strategic objectives: The outcomes or impacts the organization is intending to achieve through its various activities. They are usually outcome-oriented to reflect core mission and service-related functions, as well as the breadth of the organization's efforts.

strategic review: Leadership-driven annual reviews of agency progress towards achieving each strategic objective established in their strategic plans.

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Stephen J. Sanford, Managing Director, spel@gao.gov, (202) 512-4707 U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7814, Washington, DC 20548



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Appendix VII: Data for Figures (Accessible Version)

Data for Figure 3: 2020 Federal Agencies' Reported Evaluation Use Scores Compared to the Government-wide Average

Agency	Mean	Lower95CI	Upper95CI
Government-wide mean	3.6	3.5	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE	3.2	3.0	3.5
DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT	3.3	2.9	3.6
DEPARTMENT OF STATE	3.3	3.0	3.5
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	3.3	3.1	3.6
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY	3.4	3.1	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR	3.4	3.1	3.6
OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT	3.4	3.1	3.6
DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY	3.5	3.2	3.8
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE	3.5	3.3	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY	3.5	3.2	3.7
NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION	3.5	3.4	3.7
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION	3.5	3.2	3.9
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR	3.6	3.3	3.8
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY	3.6	3.3	3.8
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE	3.6	3.2	3.9
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION	3.6	3.3	3.9
AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	3.7	3.5	3.9
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS	-	-	-
NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION	3.7	3.4	4.0
SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION	3.8	3.5	4.1
NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION	3.8	3.5	4.0
GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION	3.8	3.5	4.0
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE	3.8	3.6	4.0
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES	3.9	3.6	4.1

Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Data for Figure 4: Estimated Percentage of Federal Managers Reporting Presence of Selected Aspects of Evaluation Use

Question	Agency	Percent ("Very Great" or Great")	Lower95CI	Upper95CI
Implementing changes to improve program performance		64.5	59.7	69.4
Adopting new program approaches, operations, or processes'		63.7	58.8	68.6
Sharing effective program approaches or lessons learned		63.5	58.7	68.3
Allocating resources within the program		55.5	50.4	60.7
Explaining or providing context for performance result		63.2	58.2	68.1
Informing the public about the program performance, as appropriate		43.2	37.8	48.5

Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Data for Figure 5: 2020 Federal Agencies' Reported Evaluation Quality Scores Compared to the Government-wide Average

Agency	Mean	Lower95CI	Upper95CI
Government-wide mean	3.6	3.5	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE	3.3	3.1	3.6
DEPARTMENT OF STATE	3.3	3.0	3.5
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	3.3	3.1	3.6
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY	3.4	3.0	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT	3.4	3.1	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR	3.4	3.2	3.6
OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT	3.4	3.1	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY	3.5	3.2	3.8
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION	3.5	3.1	3.8
DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY	3.5	3.2	3.8
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE	3.6	3.4	3.8
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE	3.6	3.2	4.0
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR	3.6	3.4	3.9
NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION	3.6	3.4	3.8
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION	3.6	3.3	3.9
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS	3.6	3.4	3.9
AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	3.7	3.5	4.0
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE	3.8	3.6	4.0
GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION	3.8	3.5	4.1
NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION	3.8	3.5	4.1
SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION	3.8	3.5	4.1
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY	3.8	3.5	4.0
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES	3.9	3.6	4.2
NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION	3.9	3.6	4.1

Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Data for Figure 6: Estimated Percentage of Federal Managers Reporting Presence of Selected Aspects of Evaluation Quality

Question	Agency	Percent ("Very Great" or Great")	Lower95CI	Upper95CI
Evaluations addressed issues important to key stakeholders		60.5	55.5	65.5
Evaluations were completed without undue influence		64.7	59.6	69.8
Evaluations were technically rigorous (i.e., they produced accurate, valid, and high quality evidence)		58.2	53.0	63.5
Evaluation results had clear implications for program improvement		59.6	54.4	64.7
Evaluation results were delivered in time to be useful		56.4	51.2	61.6
Evaluation recommendations were feasible to implement with existing resources		52.0	46.8	57.3

Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Data for Figure 7: 2020 Federal Agencies' Reported Human Capital Capacity for Evaluation Scores Compared to the Government-wide Average

Agency	Mean	Lower95CI	Upper95CI
Government-wide mean	3.5	3.4	3.6
DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY	3.3	3.1	3.6
DEPARTMENT OF STATE	3.3	3.0	3.5
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	3.3	3.1	3.5
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE	3.4	3.2	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE	3.4	3.2	3.6
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION	3.4	3.1	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT	3.4	3.1	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR	3.4	3.2	3.6
OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT	3.4	3.1	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE	3.5	3.1	3.9
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR	3.5	3.3	3.8
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY	3.5	3.2	3.8
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS	3.5	3.3	3.8
AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	3.6	3.3	3.8
DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY	3.6	3.3	3.9
NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION	3.6	3.4	3.8
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION	3.6	3.3	3.9
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY	3.6	3.3	3.9
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE	3.7	3.4	3.9
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES	3.7	3.5	4.0
NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION	3.7	3.4	3.9
SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION	3.7	3.5	4.0
GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION	3.8	3.5	4.0
NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION	3.9	3.7	4.2

Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Data for Figure 8: Estimated Percentage of Federal Managers Reporting Presence of Selected Aspects of Human Capital Capacity for Evaluation

Question	Agency	Percent ("Very Great" or Great")	Lower95CI	Upper95CI
Program staff have the skills necessary to conduct program evaluations		58.0	52.8	63.3
Program staff have the skills necessary to understand program evaluation methods, results, and limitations		59.8	54.6	65.0
Program staff have the skills necessary to implement evaluation recommendations		62.3	57.2	67.3
Program staff receive training in program evaluation (e.g., formal classroom training, conferences, on the job training)		47.4	42.0	52.7

Question	Agency	Percent ("Very Great" or Great")	Lower95CI	Upper95CI
Program staff have access to evaluation experts to support evaluation-related tasks (e.g., through other agency programs, external organizations)		48.7	43.2	54.1

Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Data for Figure 9: 2020 Federal Agencies' Reported Scores on Presence of Other Facilitating Factors Perceived to Foster Evaluation Use Compared to the Government-wide Average

Agency	Mean	Lower95CI	Upper95CI
Government-wide mean	3.5	3.4	3.6
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY	3.1	2.8	3.5
DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT	3.1	2.8	3.5
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE	3.2	2.9	3.4
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR	3.2	3.0	3.5
DEPARTMENT OF STATE	3.2	3.0	3.4
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE	3.3	3.1	3.6
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION	3.3	3.0	3.6
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	3.3	3.1	3.5
OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT	3.3	3.0	3.6
DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY	3.4	3.1	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY	3.4	3.1	3.6
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION	3.4	3.0	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE	3.5	3.1	3.9
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR	3.5	3.3	3.8
NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION	3.5	3.3	3.7
DEPARTMENT OF TREASURY	3.5	3.2	3.8
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS	3.5	3.3	3.8
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE	3.6	3.3	3.8
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES	3.6	3.3	3.9
NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION	3.6	3.3	3.9
AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT	3.7	3.4	3.9
GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION	3.8	3.5	4.0
NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION	3.8	3.6	4.0
SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION	3.8	3.5	4.0

Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460

Data for Figure 10: Estimated Percentage of Federal Managers Reporting Presence of Other Facilitating Factors Perceived to Foster Evaluation Use

Question	Agency	Percent ("Very Great" or Great")	Lower95CI	Upper95CI
Agency top leadership was committed to using evaluations		58.4	53.1	63.8
Congress supported the use of evaluations		55.7	50.0	61.3
Evaluations of my program were guided by an agency evaluation plan		52.9	47.6	58.3

Question	Agency	Percent ("Very Great" or Great")	Lower95CI	Upper95CI
Evaluations were guided by agency evaluation policies		56.8	51.5	62.1
Evaluations involved consultation with key staff in my program		57.6	52.4	62.9
Evaluations involved consultation with key external stakeholders		51.3	46.0	56.6
Disagreements among stakeholders were easy to resolve		39.9	34.5	45.3
Evaluation results were made easily accessible and available to the public, as appropriate		41.0	35.7	46.3
My program systematically tracked the implementation of evaluation recommendations		50.1	44.7	55.4

Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-23-105460