

## Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. has many indicators on a variety of topics such as the economy and health, but has no official vehicle for integrating and disseminating this information to better inform the nation about complex challenges. Diverse jurisdictions across the U.S. and internationally are integrating and disseminating this information through comprehensive key indicator systems. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (PPACA) authorized a congressionally appointed commission and the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to oversee the development of a key national indicator system for the U.S.

PPACA also directed GAO to study (1) how indicator systems are being used; (2) how indicator systems are designed and developed; (3) some factors necessary to sustain a system; and (4) potential implications for the development and use of a U.S. system. This study builds on a 2004 GAO report on key indicator systems. GAO also obtained information on 20 comprehensive indicator systems from diverse U.S. and international areas; reviewed seven of those systems in greater depth; and interviewed system experts, representatives, and stakeholders. GAO verified the accuracy of the information about indicator systems with system representatives, the NAS, the Office of Management and Budget, and selected federal agencies and made technical changes as appropriate. GAO does not make recommendations in this report.

View [GAO-11-396](#) or key components. For more information, contact Bernice Steinhardt at (202) 512-6543 or [steinhardtb@gao.gov](mailto:steinhardtb@gao.gov).

## KEY INDICATOR SYSTEMS

### Experiences of Other National and Subnational Systems Offer Insights for the United States

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

#### Possible Topics for a Comprehensive Key Indicator System



Sources: GAO (information); PhotoDisc and BrandXPictures (photos).

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

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