



Highlights of [GAO-12-54](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Federal Financial Management, Government Information, Federal Services, and International Security, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

As demand for more and better information increases, rising costs and other challenges require that the federal statistical system identify efficiencies. To explore opportunities to improve cost-effectiveness, GAO was asked to (1) review how the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and agencies improve information collections, (2) evaluate opportunities and constraints for agencies to use administrative data (information collected as part of the administration of a program or held by private companies) with surveys, and (3) assess the benefits and constraints of surveys making greater use of the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) data and resources. GAO focused on collections administered to households and individuals, analyzed statutory and agency documents, did five case studies of surveys, reviewed documentation of representative samples of active surveys, and interviewed agency officials and experts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OMB take several actions to improve the broader efficiency of the federal statistical system, including implementing additional quality-control procedures for selected website data, enhancing awareness of ways to meet information collection requirements, better disseminating information on interagency committees, and developing comprehensive guidance for agencies to use when considering data sharing. OMB generally agreed with all of GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-12-54](#). For more information, contact Robert Goldenkoff at (202) 512-2757 or goldenkoffr@gao.gov or Ronald S. Fecso at (202) 512-7791 or fecsor@gao.gov.

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FEDERAL STATISTICAL SYSTEM

Agencies Can Make Greater Use of Existing Data, but Continued Progress Is Needed on Access and Quality Issues

What GAO Found

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB), agencies, and interagency statistical committees have distinct roles in identifying opportunities to improve federal information collection efforts. OMB exercises several authorities that promote the system's efficiency, including overseeing and approving agency information collections. The website Reginfo.gov provides the public with information, such as cost and burden, on collections that OMB reviews, though GAO's review identified some discrepancies in selected items. OMB periodically issues guidance to agencies on complying with federal requirements for information collections, but this guidance generally does not prescribe specific actions to take. GAO's analysis of agencies' documentation of active surveys indicated that 77 percent included detailed descriptions of efforts to identify duplication, while those that did not tended to be for collections that are unlikely to duplicate existing information; and 75 percent reported actions beyond those required by statute to solicit external input. OMB, through enhanced guidance, could promote additional awareness of options agencies can take to identify duplication and solicit input. Interagency committees, which primarily draw members from the 13 agencies that have statistics as their primary focus, are particularly important in helping ensure collaboration. The committees have numerous projects underway aimed at addressing key challenges facing the statistical system. However, mechanisms for disseminating information about their work are not comprehensive or up-to-date. Though member agencies are the most-likely customers of the committees' products, making information about committee work and priorities more accessible could benefit other agencies, academics, and the general public. It could also benefit committee members by providing a central repository for information.

Administrative data have greater potential to supplement rather than replace survey data. Agencies currently combine the two data sources in four key ways to cost-effectively increase efficiency and quality. Specifically, agencies use administrative data to: (1) link to survey data to create new data products; (2) supplement surveys' sample frames; (3) compare to survey data to improve accuracy and design of surveys; and (4) combine with survey data to create, or model, estimates. However, expanding the use of administrative data faces key constraints related to the access and quality of the data. While agencies and committees are taking steps to address these constraints and facilitate the process through which agencies work together to share data, individual tools may not be sufficient. A more-comprehensive framework for use by all agencies involved in data-sharing decisions that includes key questions to consider when evaluating potential use of administrative data could make the decision process more consistent and transparent.

ACS, an ongoing monthly survey that provides information about the nation's communities, offers agencies important opportunities to increase the efficiency and reduce the costs of their surveys, but its current design limits the extent to which agencies can utilize some of these opportunities. Uses that do not affect ACS design or the survey's respondents, such as using ACS estimates to inform survey design or evaluate other surveys' results, have widespread potential. However, more-intensive uses, such as adding content or supplemental surveys to the ACS, currently have limited potential.