

Why GAO Did This Study

The DATA Act required OMB and Treasury to establish data standards for the reporting of federal government spending and required agencies to report spending data using these standards beginning in May 2017. GAO's prior work examining the quality of the data reported under the act found significant challenges that limit the usefulness of the data for Congress and the public. These data quality challenges underscore the need for OMB and Treasury to make progress on addressing GAO's prior recommendation to establish a set of clear policies and processes for developing and maintaining data standards.

The DATA Act includes a provision for GAO to report on the implementation and use of data standards, and on the quality of the data reported using those standards. This report (1) describes the status of OMB's and Treasury's efforts to establish policies and procedures for governing data standards; and (2) evaluates the extent to which procedures for changing established data standards are consistent with key practices for data governance.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes two recommendations to OMB to (1) document its procedure for changing data definition standards for DATA Act reporting, and (2) ensure that changes made in June 2018 to clarify policy regarding data definitions are identified in an authoritative public source of DATA Act standards and guidance. OMB neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendations, but provided comments, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-19-284](#). For more information, contact Michelle Sager at (202) 512-6806 or SagerM@gao.gov.

DATA ACT

OMB Needs to Formalize Data Governance for Reporting Federal Spending

What GAO Found

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Department of the Treasury (Treasury) have established some procedures for governing the data standards established under the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014 (DATA Act), but a formal governance structure has yet to be fully developed. Since enactment, OMB has relied on a shifting array of advisory bodies to obtain input on data standards. As of December 2018, some governance procedures are in place, but others continue to evolve. OMB staff told us that the governing bodies involved in initial implementation efforts had been disbanded, and that the functions previously performed by these advisory bodies over governance of DATA Act data standards would be accomplished within the broader context of the cross-agency priority goals established under the 2018 President's Management Agenda (PMA). However, the documentation of the governance structure established for these goals does not make explicit how it would apply to the data standards established under the DATA Act. Clarifying the connection between this governance structure and the DATA Act could help stakeholders understand how governance of the DATA Act standards is accomplished within the broader context of the PMA.

With regard to one specific data governance function—making changes to existing standards—GAO found that OMB does not have procedures for managing changes to the web page it identifies in guidance as the authoritative source for data definition standards. The DATA Act requires, to the extent reasonable and practicable, that data standards be capable of being continually upgraded. In addition, key practices for data governance state that organizations should document policies and procedures for making decisions about changes to standards. In June 2018, revisions were made to the *Primary Place of Performance Address* data element without following a documented process. OMB staff described these revisions as minor technical corrections to align the definitions with the technical guidance agencies were already using to report data. However, without documented procedures for revising the definitions, needed changes may not be made in a timely manner, which could lead to inconsistent reporting.

OMB also did not transparently communicate to stakeholders these changes to data definition standards. Along with the corrections to definitions, in June 2018 OMB changed introductory text on the data definitions web page to clarify policy about how agencies should use DATA Act definitions. However, OMB did not publicly announce this clarification or identify on the website that changes had been made. Without transparent communication of changes to data definition standards, stakeholders—including staff at federal agencies required to report data according to these definitions—may miss important information relating to changes in how, when, and by whom data definitions are to be applied.

Although OMB lacks procedures governing changes to DATA Act data definitions, Treasury has established a process for changing related technical guidance in consultation with stakeholders. Treasury's procedures contribute to the objectives of data quality and transparency by helping to ensure that agencies are aware of reporting requirements and users understand how those data are created and reported.