

## Why GAO Did This Study

Environmental justice seeks to address the disproportionately high distribution of health and environmental risks among low-income and minority communities by seeking their fair treatment and meaningful involvement in environmental policy. In 1994, Executive Order 12898 directed 11 federal agencies to identify and address environmental justice issues related to their activities and tasked an interagency working group to coordinate federal environmental justice efforts. In 2011, 16 agencies, including the 11 original agencies, recommitted to planning and reporting on environmental justice efforts by signing an MOU.

GAO was asked to review federal environmental justice efforts. This report examines agencies' environmental justice actions, strategic plans and progress reports, and working group collaboration. GAO reviewed agency environmental justice plans, reports, and funding data; interviewed agency officials; and compared working group collaboration to leading collaborative practices.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 24 recommendations, including that agencies update environmental justice strategic plans and report on progress annually, and that EPA consult with other working group members to provide guidance on assessing progress and to set strategic goals. Of the 15 agencies with recommendations, eight agreed. Other agencies' responses included partial agreement, disagreement, and no comment. GAO continues to support its recommendations.

View [GAO-19-543](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or [gomezj@gao.gov](mailto:gomezj@gao.gov).

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

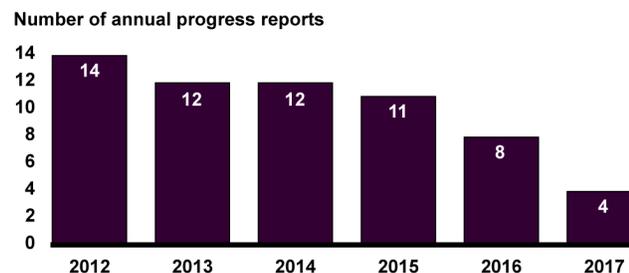
### Federal Efforts Need Better Planning, Coordination, and Methods to Assess Progress

## What GAO Found

Most of the 16 agencies that are members of the interagency working group on environmental justice—created by Executive Order 12898 in 1994—reported taking some actions to identify and address environmental justice issues, such as creating data tools, developing policies or guidance, and building community capacity through small grants and training. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) created a mapping tool that can help identify low-income and minority communities exposed to health or environmental risks. Several agencies, such as EPA and the Departments of Justice, Homeland Security, and the Interior, also developed policies or guidance to analyze environmental justice issues during environmental reviews or enforcement activities. Most of the agencies supported their efforts with funds and staff from related programs, but EPA and the Department of Energy provided funds (\$8.3 million in fiscal year 2018) and staff specifically for environmental justice.

Agencies' progress toward environmental justice is difficult to gauge, however, because most do not have updated strategic plans and have not reported annually on their progress or developed methods to assess progress. As they agreed to do in a 2011 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), most of the agencies developed environmental justice strategic plans, but only six have updated them more recently. Few agencies have measures or methods for assessing progress, and the working group has not provided guidance to help agencies with such assessments. The number of agencies issuing annual progress reports has declined (see fig.). Updated strategic plans and annual progress reports, along with guidance on performance measures and methods, would help agencies provide essential information to assess their progress.

**Number of Annual Progress Reports Issued by 16 Agencies from the Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice since Fiscal Year 2012**



Source: GAO review of agency environmental justice progress reports. | GAO-19-543

The working group, chaired by EPA, has developed committees and written agreements to carry out its responsibilities to coordinate agencies' environmental justice efforts, but it is not carrying out several functions in the 1994 Executive Order. GAO has found that collaborative mechanisms, such as the working group, benefit from clear goals, but the working group's organizational documents do not contain clear strategic goals aligned to address the order. Clear strategic goals to carry out the executive order could enhance the group's strategic direction for intergovernmental environmental justice efforts.