



July 2021

EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING

Survey Data Identify
Opportunities to
Strengthen Capacity
across Federal
Agencies



A Century of Non-Partisan Fact-Based Work

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-536](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The Evidence Act created a framework for enhancing the federal government’s capacity to build and use evidence in decision-making.

The Evidence Act includes provisions for GAO to review its implementation. This report (1) describes federal managers’ reported availability and use of evidence in decision-making activities, and (2) assesses federal managers’ reported views on their agencies’ capacity for evidence-building activities.

To conduct its work, GAO analyzed results from a survey it administered from July to December 2020 to 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. GAO also reviewed documents from OMB, OPM, and relevant interagency councils, and interviewed federal officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OMB work with OPM and relevant interagency councils to leverage GAO’s survey results as an additional source of information to inform their efforts to enhance federal evidence-building capacity. OMB neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendation. Two of the surveyed agencies—the Agency for International Development and Small Business Administration—also provided comments related to GAO’s survey and evidence-building capacity. The remaining agencies did not comment on the report.

View [GAO-21-536](#). For more information, contact Alissa H. Czyz at 202-512-6806 or CzyzA@gao.gov.

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Survey Data Identify Opportunities to Strengthen Capacity across Federal Agencies

What GAO Found

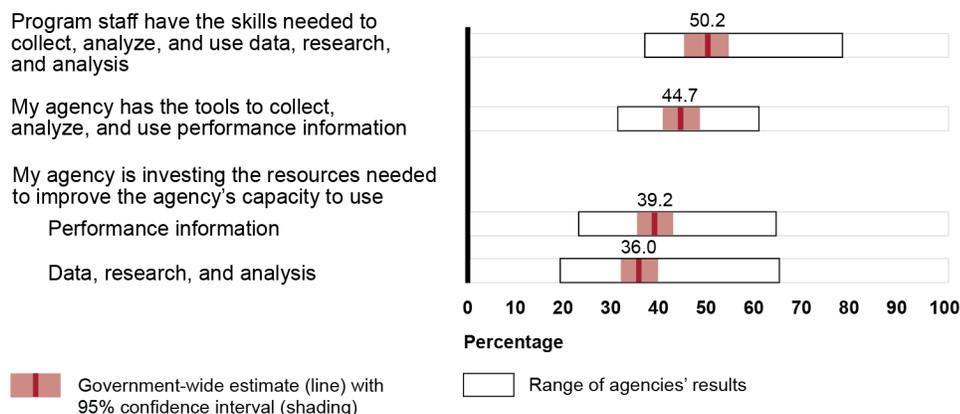
The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act) recognizes that federal decision makers need evidence about whether federal programs achieve intended results. According to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), evidence can include performance information, program evaluations, and other types of data, research, and analysis.

Results from GAO’s 2020 survey of federal managers showed that nearly all managers (an estimated 95 percent) reported having at least one type of evidence for their programs. When they had evidence, generally about half to two-thirds reported using it in different decision-making activities, such as when allocating resources.

However, on most questions related to evidence-building capacity, only about one-third to half of managers across the federal government reported that different aspects of capacity (e.g., having staff with relevant skills) were present to a “great” or “very great” extent. Further, when GAO disaggregated these results, it found that reported aspects of capacity varied widely across federal agencies and types of evidence, as illustrated below.

Federal Managers Reporting Presence of Selected Aspects of Evidence-Building Capacity, with the Range of Agencies’ Responses

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



Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO-21-536

OMB, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and various interagency councils, such as the Chief Data Officers Council, have taken some actions intended to strengthen federal evidence-building capacity. These include collecting and assessing information from various sources to identify (1) issues to address, and (2) best practices for enhancing capacity to share across agencies.

GAO’s survey results could help inform these efforts. For example, survey results could reinforce existing knowledge, or provide new insights, on cross-cutting and agency-specific capacity issues to address. Results could also inform efforts to identify and share promising practices.

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Abbreviations

CDO	Chief Data Officer
Evidence Act	Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018
GPRA	Government Performance and Results Act of 1993
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
PIC	Performance Improvement Council

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July 27, 2021

Congressional Committees

Federal decision makers need evidence about whether federal programs and activities are achieving intended results. Such evidence can help congressional and executive branch leaders determine priorities and consider how to make progress toward objectives, such as improving access to health care, protecting the environment, and ensuring homeland security. Agencies undertake a range of activities to ensure that decision makers have the evidence they need—which can include performance information, program evaluations, statistical data, and other research and analysis. Those evidence-building activities involve (1) assessing existing evidence and identifying any need for additional evidence; (2) determining which new evidence to generate, when, and how (i.e., prioritizing new evidence); (3) generating that evidence; and (4) using evidence in decision-making.

The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act), enacted in January 2019, created a framework for federal agencies to take a more comprehensive and integrated approach to evidence building, and enhance the federal government’s capacity to undertake those activities.¹ For example, the Evidence Act requires agencies to develop evidence-building plans (also referred to as learning agendas) that identify policy questions and the evidence that the agency expects to develop to address them.² Agencies are also to assess various aspects of their evidence-building activities, including their coverage, quality, and capacity (also referred to as capacity assessments).³ The Evidence Act requires agencies to include their evidence-building plans and capacity assessments in their strategic plans, which are to be published in February 2022.⁴

¹Pub. L. No. 115-435, 132 Stat. 5529 (Jan. 14, 2019).

²Pub. L. No. 115-435, § 101(a)(2), 132 Stat. at 5530, *codified at* 5 U.S.C. § 312. This requirement applies to the 24 agencies identified in the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990, as amended; generally the largest federal agencies. 31 U.S.C. § 901(b). However, OMB guidance strongly encourages all other agencies to develop learning agendas.

³Pub. L. No. 115-435, § 101(c)(3), 132 Stat. at 5533, *codified at* 5 U.S.C. § 306(a)(9).

⁴5 U.S.C. § 306.

Guidance from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) laid out an iterative approach for implementing these Evidence Act requirements.⁵ For example, the guidance directed agencies to submit interim evidence-building plans and capacity assessments to OMB in September 2020. In addition, agencies are to provide OMB with drafts of these documents for its review at several points in 2021 (June, September, and December), prior to publication in February 2022.

The Evidence Act includes provisions for us to review different aspects of its implementation at several points in time. This includes provisions for us to report on whether certain required activities improved the use of evidence and program evaluation in the federal government.⁶ In addition, we are to report on findings and trends in agencies' capacity assessments and, if appropriate, recommend actions to further improve agency capacity.⁷

This report is the first in a series of products responding to the Evidence Act provisions highlighted above, and presenting selected results from a survey that we conducted in 2020 to collect the views of federal managers on various organizational performance and management topics.⁸ This report (1) describes federal managers' reported availability and use of evidence in decision-making activities, and (2) assesses federal managers' reported views on their agencies' capacity for evidence-building activities.

⁵See, for example, OMB, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Learning Agendas and Annual Evaluation Plans*, Memorandum M-21-27 (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2021); Circular No. A-11, pt 6 (July 2020); and *Phase 1 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Learning Agendas, Personnel, and Planning Guidance*, Memorandum M-19-23 (Washington, D.C.: July 10, 2019).

⁶Pub. L. No. 115-435, § 201(f)(1), 132 Stat. at 5543, *codified at* 44 U.S.C. § 3520A(e).

⁷Pub. L. No. 115-435, § 101(d), 132 Stat. at 5533, *codified at* 5 U.S.C. 306 note.

⁸The Evidence Act also includes provisions for us to review agency efforts related to developing comprehensive inventories of their data and making certain data publicly available. For reports responding to those provisions, see GAO, *Data Governance: Agencies Made Progress in Establishing Governance, but Need to Address Key Milestones*, [GAO-21-152](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 16, 2020); and *Open Data: Agencies Need Guidance to Establish Comprehensive Data Inventories; Information on Their Progress is Limited*, [GAO-21-29](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 8, 2020).

To address both objectives, we collected and analyzed federal managers' responses to relevant questions from our 2020 survey.⁹ We revised our survey instrument—which we have used since 1997—to update some questions and ensure the survey collected responses across a range of evidence sources: performance information, program evaluation, and other sources of data, research, and analyses (see the text box below for definitions). The survey included questions that asked managers for their views on the availability and quality of evidence, and their use of those sources in different decision-making activities.¹⁰ The survey also asked managers for their views on aspects of their agencies' capacity to develop and use those types of evidence.¹¹

⁹Concurrent with this report, we are issuing a web-based supplement that provides additional details about our scope and methodology for conducting our 2020 survey, and the six prior iterations we have periodically conducted since 1997. See GAO, *2020 Federal Managers Survey: Results on Government Performance and Management Issues*, [GAO-21-537SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2021).

¹⁰The survey questions covered by this report were close-ended; respondents chose from a list of possible response options. See [GAO-21-537SP](#) for a copy of the 2020 survey questionnaire. For most questions, respondents rated the strength of their perception on a five-point extent scale ranging from “no extent” to “very great extent,” with an option to select “no basis to judge/not applicable.” A few questions had other response options, such as “yes,” “no,” or “do not know.”

¹¹In some instances, the survey included questions that asked about these topics at both the program and agency levels. This was intended to recognize variation in evidence-building approaches within and across federal agencies. As we found in December 2019, some agencies have decentralized models for certain activities, such as developing and using performance information at the program level. In other instances, agencies may take a more centralized approach, such as an office or component agency with agency-wide responsibilities for a type of evidence (e.g., evaluation or statistical data). See GAO, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Selected Agencies Coordinate Activities, but Could Enhance Collaboration*, [GAO-20-119](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 4, 2019).

Definitions of Different Sources of Evidence from GAO's 2020 Survey of Federal Managers

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.

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. 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.

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. 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.
- **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.

Source: GAO analysis of past work and OMB guidance. | GAO-21-536.

We administered the web-based survey to a stratified random sample of 3,993 managers at 24 major federal agencies between July and December 2020.¹² We received usable questionnaires from about 60 percent of the eligible sample. After accounting for the sampling of federal managers and response rates, the resulting weighted response rate was 56 percent.¹³ The weighted response rate at each agency ranged from 51

¹²Consistent with our prior surveys, we defined managers as federal employees at General Schedule levels 13 through 15, at comparable levels on equivalent schedules, and in the career Senior Executive Service or equivalents. The 24 agencies are those identified in the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990, as amended. 31 U.S.C. § 901(b).

¹³We 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 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. After accounting for this, the weighted government-wide response rate was lower than the unweighted rate.

percent to 83 percent, except for the Department of Justice, which had a weighted response rate of 27 percent.¹⁴

The results of our 2020 survey are generalizable to the population of managers across the 24 agencies, and at each agency included in the survey. We present those results as percentage estimates, aggregated to two different levels:

- **government-wide** estimates, which reflect the views of managers across the 24 agencies; and
- **agency-level** estimates, which reflect the views of managers at individual agencies.¹⁵

We express our confidence in the precision of our particular sample's results as a 95 percent confidence interval.¹⁶ The maximum margin of error was less than or equal to 5.3 percentage points for government-wide estimates, and 21 percentage points for agency-level estimates.

For the second objective, we also analyzed results to determine the distribution of agency responses. We then compared the agency-level results to the government-wide estimates to identify statistically significant differences.¹⁷ Because the scope of this work was limited to analyzing survey results, we did not conduct audit work to determine what may

¹⁴[GAO-21-537SP](#) identifies each agency's weighted response rate. Estimates from agencies with low response rates, such as the Department of Justice, should be interpreted with caution because there is more uncertainty for these estimates.

¹⁵Throughout this report, we use the term "government-wide" to collectively refer to the 24 federal agencies covered by our survey. For the percentage estimates presented in this report, we excluded instances where a respondent did not answer a question (nonrespondents) when we calculated the estimate. The web-based supplement provides the full government-wide and agency-level results for evidence-related survey questions. See [GAO-21-537SP](#).

¹⁶This is the interval that would contain the actual population value for 95 percent of the samples we could have drawn.

¹⁷We defined differences between estimates as statistically significant through the p-value. Statistical significance is achieved when the p-value is < 0.05. We focus on statistically significant results because they indicate that there is less than a 5 percent chance that we would observe a difference as large as we observed if such a difference did not exist, after accounting for the effects of sampling.

have accounted for any statistically significant differences or to corroborate managers' reported perspectives.

In addition, we identified, reviewed, and analyzed documents regarding various efforts to enhance federal evidence-building capacity undertaken by OMB, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and relevant interagency councils, such as the Chief Data Officers Council, the Evaluation Officers Council, and the Performance Improvement Council. This included reviewing capacity-enhancing resources they developed, such as guidance, guides, and playbooks. We also identified other relevant actions (e.g., developing and delivering training sessions) they had taken to strengthen federal evidence-building capacity. We also interviewed OMB staff about these efforts.

We do not make comparisons to results from our past surveys in this particular product.¹⁸ However, we expect to issue subsequent products to further assess 2020 survey results related to performance information and program evaluation, including trend analyses as appropriate.

We conducted this performance audit from January to July 2021 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.

¹⁸The revisions we made to the 2020 survey instrument affect our ability to make comparisons to some of the results related to performance information and program evaluation from past surveys. Survey questions related to data, research, and analysis were newly added in 2020.

Background

Federal Evidence-Building Efforts

OMB defines evidence as “the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid.”¹⁹ According to its guidance, evidence can consist of quantitative or qualitative information and may be derived from a variety of sources, including performance measurement, program evaluations, and other data, research, and analysis.²⁰ OMB recommends that agencies build a portfolio of high-quality, credible sources of evidence—rather than a single source—to support decision-making. The benefit of building a portfolio of evidence, however, is fully realized only when it is used to identify and correct problems, improve program implementation, and make other important management and resource allocation decisions.

Our past work, including our prior surveys of federal managers, has highlighted long-standing weaknesses across the federal government related to building and using high-quality evidence in decision-making. For example:

- **Availability of evidence.** In 2013—the first year we asked questions about program evaluations in our survey—and 2017, most managers reported that they lacked recent evaluations of their programs.²¹
- **Quality of evidence.** In analyzing past survey results, we found that one aspect of quality—having sufficient information about the validity of performance data—was a key driver in ensuring that information

¹⁹OMB, Circular No. A-11, § 200.22 (July 2020). The Evidence Act adopts as its definition of evidence “information produced as a result of statistical activities conducted for a statistical purpose.” It adopts as its definition of statistical purpose “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. Pub. L. No. 115-435, § 101(a)(1); 44 U.S.C. § 3561(6), (12). OMB’s Circular No. A-11 contains these definitions. However, the guidance also states that in the context of improving organizational and agency performance, “evidence” can be viewed more broadly, in line with OMB’s definition.

²⁰OMB, Circular No. A-11, § 200.22 (July 2020), and M-19-23.

²¹GAO, *Program Evaluation: Annual Agency-Wide Plans Could Enhance Leadership Support for Program Evaluations*, [GAO-17-743](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 29, 2017); and *Program Evaluation: Strategies to Facilitate Agencies’ Use of Evaluation in Program Management and Policy Making*, [GAO-13-570](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 26, 2013).

was used in decision-making.²² However, in 2017, less than half of managers (an estimated 42 percent) reported they had such information to a “great” or “very great” extent—the highest result on that question since we introduced it in 2000.

- **Use of evidence.** Since 1997, our surveys have asked managers about their use of performance information in different decision-making activities, such as setting program priorities. However, our 2017 survey results showed that the reported use of performance information for each of these decision-making activities had not changed, or had decreased, when compared to the first year in which we asked about each activity.²³

Our past work has found that having sufficient capacity is critical to agencies’ efforts to generate and use a full range of evidence.²⁴ One key aspect of capacity is ensuring agency staff have relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities—such as through hiring or training—to undertake various evidence-building activities. In addition, agency staff need access to the appropriate tools to collect, analyze, and use data and information.

However, our past work, and that of others, has also identified long-standing weaknesses across the federal government regarding agencies’ capacity to build and use different types of evidence.²⁵ For example, in March 2016, Congress passed and the President signed into law the Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission Act of 2016, establishing a

²²GAO, *Managing for Results: Government-wide Actions Needed to Improve Agencies’ Use of Performance Information in Decision Making*, [GAO-18-609SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 5, 2018); and *Managing for Results: Agencies’ Trends in the Use of Performance Information to Make Decisions*, [GAO-14-747](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 26, 2014).

²³Our 2017 survey covered 10 different decision-making activities. Of those, five were first introduced in 1997, four in 2007, and one in 2013. See GAO, *Managing for Results: Further Progress Made in Implementing the GPRA Modernization Act, but Additional Actions Needed to Address Pressing Governance Challenges*, [GAO-17-775](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 29, 2017).

²⁴See, for example, GAO, *Program Evaluation: Some Agencies Reported that Networking, Hiring, and Involving Program Staff Help Build Capacity*, [GAO-15-25](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 13, 2014); *Managing for Results: Data-Driven Performance Reviews Show Promise But Agencies Should Explore How to Involve Other Relevant Agencies*, [GAO-13-228](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 27, 2013); *Managing For Results: Enhancing Agency Use of Performance Information for Management Decision Making*, [GAO-05-927](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 9, 2005); and *Program Evaluation: An Evaluation Culture and Collaborative Partnerships Help Build Agency Capacity*, [GAO-03-454](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2003).

²⁵See, for example, [GAO-17-775](#) and [GAO-17-743](#).

commission to conduct a comprehensive study of, among other things, the data infrastructure related to federal policymaking.²⁶ According to the commission, it was tasked with studying and developing a strategy for strengthening the federal government's evidence-building activities.

In September 2017, the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking found that agencies' capacities to generate a range of evidence were uneven.²⁷ Moreover, in agencies where that capacity existed, it was often poorly coordinated. Results from our prior surveys have similarly highlighted weaknesses in federal evidence-building capacity and actions that can enhance staff skills, analytical tools, training, and resource investments.²⁸

Evidence-Building Roles and Responsibilities

Beginning with the passage and enactment of the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990, and through a series of subsequent laws and executive actions, Congress and the Executive Branch have established various officer positions and related interagency councils to improve the federal government's management. In particular, many of the officer positions and councils established in the past decade have responsibilities related to strengthening the federal government's ability to build or use different types of evidence.

Agency officer positions. Over the past decade, several senior officer positions were created in statute with responsibilities related to enhancing their agencies' capacity to build or to use the types of evidence covered by our survey: Performance Improvement Officers (performance information), Evaluation Officers (program evaluation), Statistical Officials (statistical data), and Chief Data Officers (data). For example, the Evidence Act directs the Evaluation Officer to coordinate with other officials, to the extent practicable, to assess their agency's capacity to support the development and use of evaluation, and to develop and implement their agency's evidence-building plans.²⁹ As part of this effort, OMB guidance directs these officers to determine whether the agency

²⁶Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission Act of 2016, Pub. L. No. 114-140, 130 Stat. 317 (Mar. 30, 2016).

²⁷Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, *The Promise of Evidence-Based Policymaking* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 7, 2017).

²⁸See, for example, [GAO-18-609SP](#), [GAO-17-775](#), and [GAO-17-743](#).

²⁹Pub. L. No. 115-435, 132 Stat. at 5531, *codified at* 5 U.S.C. § 313.

has appropriate staffing, infrastructure, and processes in place to carry out evidence-building activities, as well as what changes may be needed.³⁰

Interagency councils. Along with the focus on enhancing capacity within individual agencies, Congress and OMB have also established interagency councils for these officials to improve information sharing and coordination. Pursuant to congressional or OMB direction, these councils are responsible for, among other things, assisting OMB with identifying and sharing insights into effective ways that agencies can improve federal evidence-building. For example, established within OMB, the Chief Data Officers (CDO) Council is responsible for identifying ways agencies can improve the production of evidence for use in policymaking.³¹ To address this responsibility, the council was identifying best practices for training programs related to improving the data skills of agency staff, among other activities, according to its 2020 report to Congress and OMB.³² In January 2021, the CDO Council also partnered with staff from OMB’s United States Digital Service and OPM to help 10 agencies hire data scientists—with expertise in the collection, analysis, and presentation of data—through a joint announcement and single application.

These councils also identify and share best practices through written resources and training sessions. For example, the interagency Performance Improvement Council (PIC) has responsibilities to, among other things, facilitate exchange among agencies of practices that have led to performance improvements.³³ In 2017, the PIC developed a “playbook” for setting and achieving goals.³⁴ The playbook includes guidance on how agencies can use data to measure and assess progress. The PIC also holds training sessions available to agency staff

³⁰OMB, Circular No. A-11, § 290.13 (July 2020).

³¹Pub. L. No. 115-435, 132 Stat. at 5542-43, *codified at* 44 U.S.C. § 3520A(b)(3).

³²CDO Council, *Report to Congress and the Office of Management and Budget* (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 21, 2020).

³³Originally created by a 2007 executive order, the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010, Pub. L. No. 111-352, established the PIC in law. The acronym “GPRA” in the act’s title refers to the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993. Pub. L. No. 103-62, 107 Stat. 285 (Aug. 3, 1993). See Executive Order No. 13450, *Improving Government Program Performance*, 72 Fed. Reg. 64519 (Nov. 13, 2007), and 31 U.S.C § 1124(b).

³⁴PIC, *Goal Playbook*. Available at <https://www.pic.gov/goalplaybook/>. Last accessed April 20, 2021.

across the Executive Branch. Those sessions cover a variety of topics, including strategies for improving how performance information is collected and shared to ensure it is used in decision-making.

OPM. OPM has broad responsibilities for strategic human capital management across the federal government.³⁵ These include supporting and assessing agencies' management of human capital, including efforts to identify and close skill gaps, and to attract, develop, and promote a quality workforce.³⁶ For example, as part of the data scientist hiring effort described earlier, OPM partnered with subject matter experts from participating agencies to develop competency-based qualifications for the position. In addition, various statutes have given OPM responsibilities to support efforts to enhance agency capacity to build or use evidence. For example, the GPRA Modernization Act of 2010 directed OPM, in consultation with the PIC, to identify skills and competencies needed by federal staff to evaluate programs, and to analyze and use performance information.³⁷ In April 2013, we reported that OPM identified 15 core competencies for staff, and worked with agencies to incorporate these key skills into agency training programs.³⁸

OMB. OMB has broad responsibilities for overseeing federal evidence-building activities.³⁹ For example, OMB is playing a primary role in supporting agencies' efforts to assess and enhance their capacities as part of Evidence Act implementation.⁴⁰ OMB outlines in its guidance how

³⁵U.S.C. § 1103(c).

³⁶5 C.F.R. part 250, subpt. B.

³⁷Pub. L. No. 111-352, § 12, 124 Stat. at 3882. Similarly, the Evidence Act requires that OPM, in consultation with OMB, identify key skills and competencies needed for program evaluation in an agency, and establish a new career path for staff in these positions. Pub. L. No. 115-435, § 101(e), 132 Stat. at 5534.

³⁸GAO, *Managing For Results: Agencies Have Elevated Performance Management Leadership Roles, but Additional Training Is Needed*, [GAO-13-356](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 16, 2013).

³⁹For example, OMB is responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of best practices, including training, for agencies' management of their information and related resources, to accomplish agency missions and improve performance. 44 U.S.C. § 3504(b)(4).

⁴⁰OMB is responsible for providing agencies with guidance on their evidence-building and evaluation plans. Pub. L. No. 115-435, § 101(a), 132 Stat. at 5530, *codified at* 5 U.S.C. § 312(a)(6) and (b)(3).

it will provide assistance, direction, and support to agencies as they assess their evidence-building capacity and develop plans for future activities. This includes providing agencies with suggestions for improving their ability to build and use evidence.⁴¹ Other capacity-enhancing activities include monthly training sessions on evidence and evaluation topics—led by staff from OMB’s Evidence Team and the Office of Evaluation Sciences at the General Services Administration—and an Evidence and Evaluation page on MAX.gov to share guidance, best practices, and other tools across the federal government.⁴²

Given its broad purview across the entire executive branch, OMB also plays a key role in coordinating cross-cutting efforts, including those related to evidence building. For example, OMB staff work closely with OPM to implement federal personnel policies and practices, as highlighted by the effort to hire data scientists described above. OMB officials and staff also generally direct or participate in the activities of relevant interagency councils.⁴³ OMB’s guidance emphasizes that it expects the efforts of these councils will be coordinated through OMB to ensure that their activities are complementary and carried out efficiently and effectively.⁴⁴

⁴¹OMB, M-21-27 and Cir. No. A-11 § 290.17 (July 2020).

⁴²According to the site, MAX.gov provides tools and services to facilitate cross-government collaboration and knowledge sharing. It has more than 200,000 users across 180 federal agencies. Available at <https://portal.max.gov/portal/home>. Last accessed April 20, 2021.

⁴³For example, the Interagency Council on Statistical Policy is headed by the Chief Statistician of the United States, a position within OMB. The council is tasked with, among other things, assisting the Chief Statistician with the development and oversight of the implementation of statistical principles, standards, and guidelines. 44 U.S.C. § 3504(e). OMB guidance also directs the council to facilitate collaboration and information sharing among agencies on issues such as data quality and providing data access. OMB, M-19-23.

⁴⁴OMB, M-19-23.

Federal Managers Reported Having and Using Different Types of Evidence for Decision-Making Activities

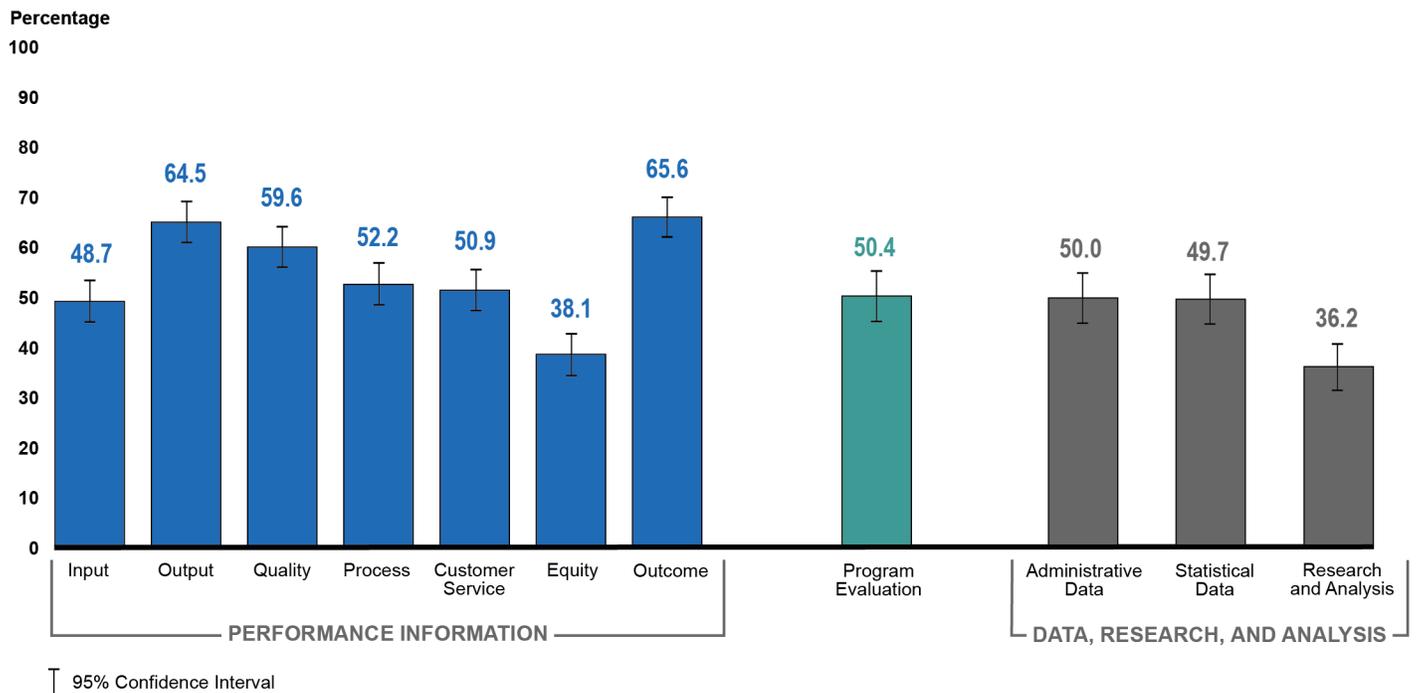
Our 2020 survey found that nearly all managers—an estimated 95 percent—reported they had access to at least one type of evidence for their programs. Moreover, in line with OMB’s guidance to develop a portfolio of evidence:

- 71 percent of managers reported having two or more types of evidence for their programs; and
- 35 percent reported having all three types covered by our survey: performance information; program evaluations; and data, research, and analysis.

To further show the range of evidence within these portfolios, our survey also asked about the extent to which managers had specific types of data and information. Of the managers who answered these questions, generally half reported having specific types of evidence to a “great” or “very great” extent. Figure 1 illustrates these results.

Figure 1: Federal Managers Reporting They Had Specific Types of Evidence for Their Programs

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



Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO-21-536

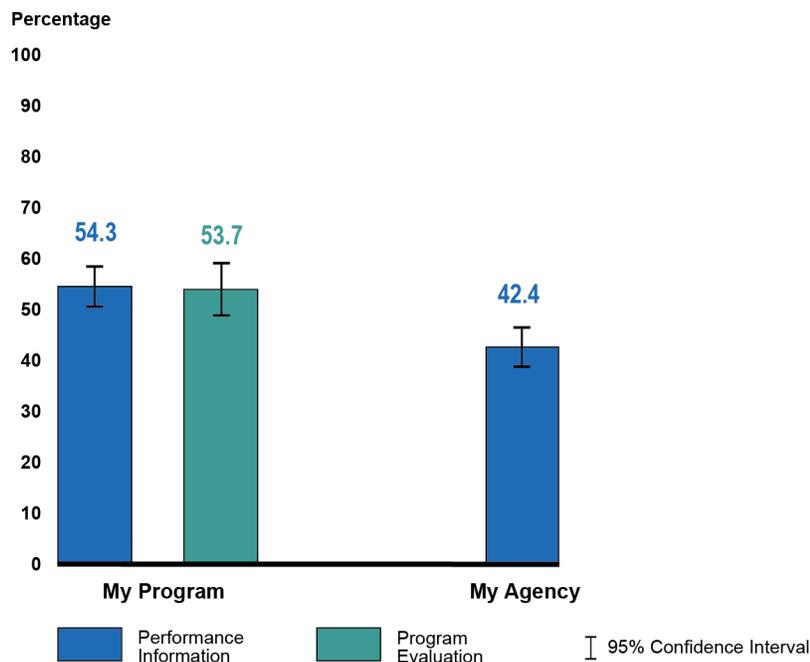
Notes: Percentages are based on the 88 percent (performance information), 62 percent (program evaluations), and 55 percent (data, research, and analysis) of managers who first reported having or

being familiar with those types of evidence at their agencies on survey items 2, 17a, and 24, respectively, before responding to the specific survey items presented in this figure. For additional information on the results presented in this figure, see survey items 4a-g, 17b, and 24a-c in [GAO-21-537SP](#).

Our 2020 survey included new questions asking managers about the quality of the performance information and program evaluations at their agencies. When asked about their programs, about half of the respondents agreed that those two types of evidence were of sufficient quality to a “great” or “very great” extent (about 54 percent on both questions). However, when asked more broadly for their perspectives on the quality of their agencies’ performance information, a statistically significantly lower number of managers (about 42 percent) agreed that it was of sufficient quality (see fig. 2).

Figure 2: Federal Managers Reporting They Had Evidence of Sufficient Quality

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

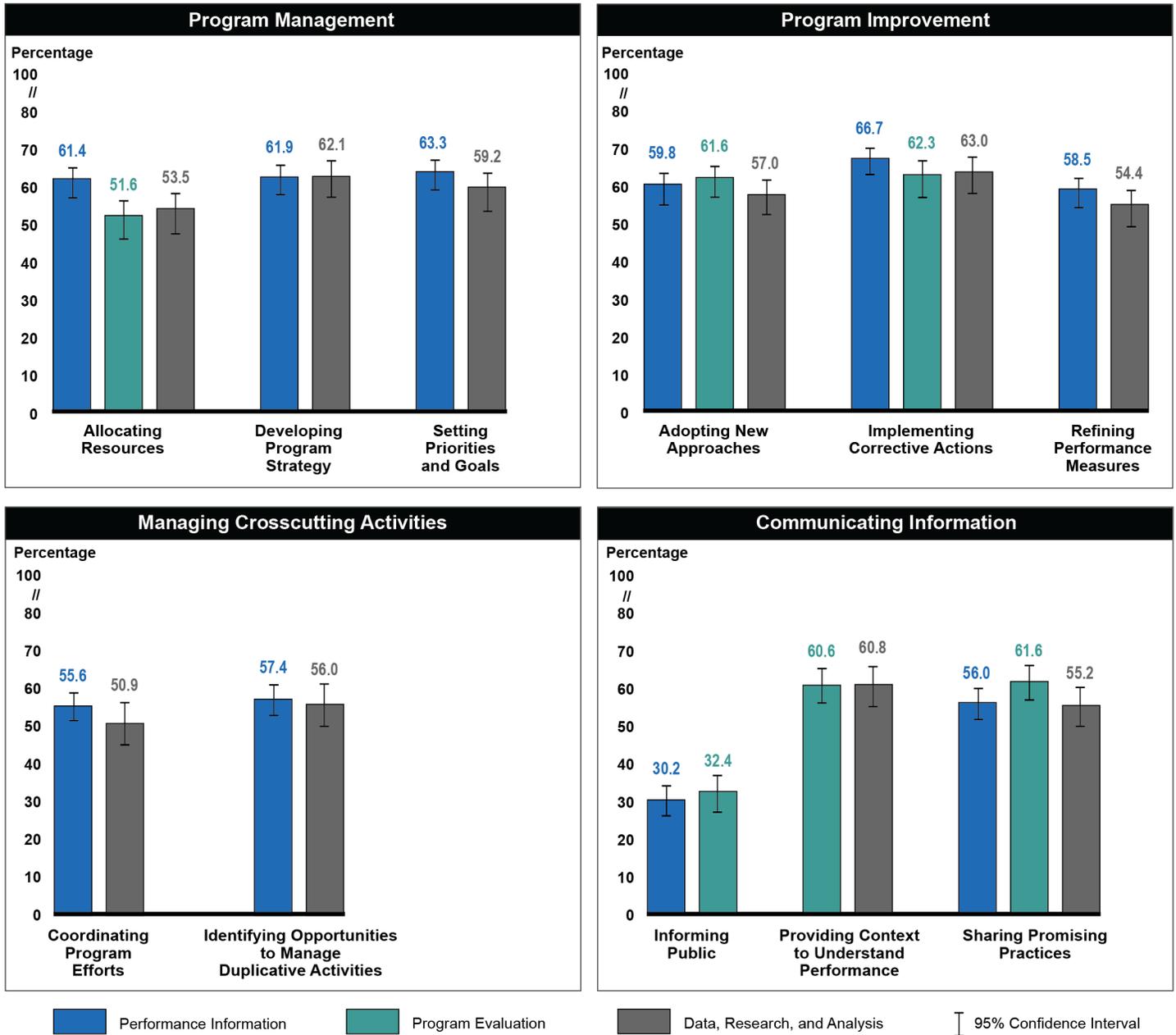


Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO-21-536

Notes: The percentage for program evaluation is based on the 62 percent of managers who first reported familiarity with that type of evidence at their agencies on survey item 17a before responding to the specific survey item presented in this figure. For additional information on the results presented in this figure, see survey items 7c, 12d, and 20c in [GAO-21-537SP](#).

Of those managers who reported having certain types of evidence, half to two-thirds also reported using it in different decision-making activities. These included activities related to managing and improving their programs, identifying and coordinating cross-cutting programs, and communicating information. However, as shown in figure 3, the one exception was using evidence to inform the public about a program's performance, where approximately one-third of managers reported taking that action.

Figure 3: Federal Managers Reporting They Used Various Types of Evidence for Selected Management Activities
 Estimated Percentage Reporting to a “Great” or “Very Great” Extent



Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO-21-536

Notes: Percentages are based on the 88 percent (performance information), 62 percent (program evaluations), and 55 percent (data, research, and analysis) of managers who first reported having or being familiar with those types of evidence at their agencies on survey items 2, 17a, and 24,

respectively, before responding to the specific survey items presented in this figure. Our survey covered additional types of management activities; this figure focuses on those for which we asked about the same management activity across two or three types of evidence. Questions on those activities that have only two bars in the figure above were only asked for those two types of evidence. For additional information, see survey items 6b-e, 6g-l, 19a-f, and 25b-k in [GAO-21-537SP](#).

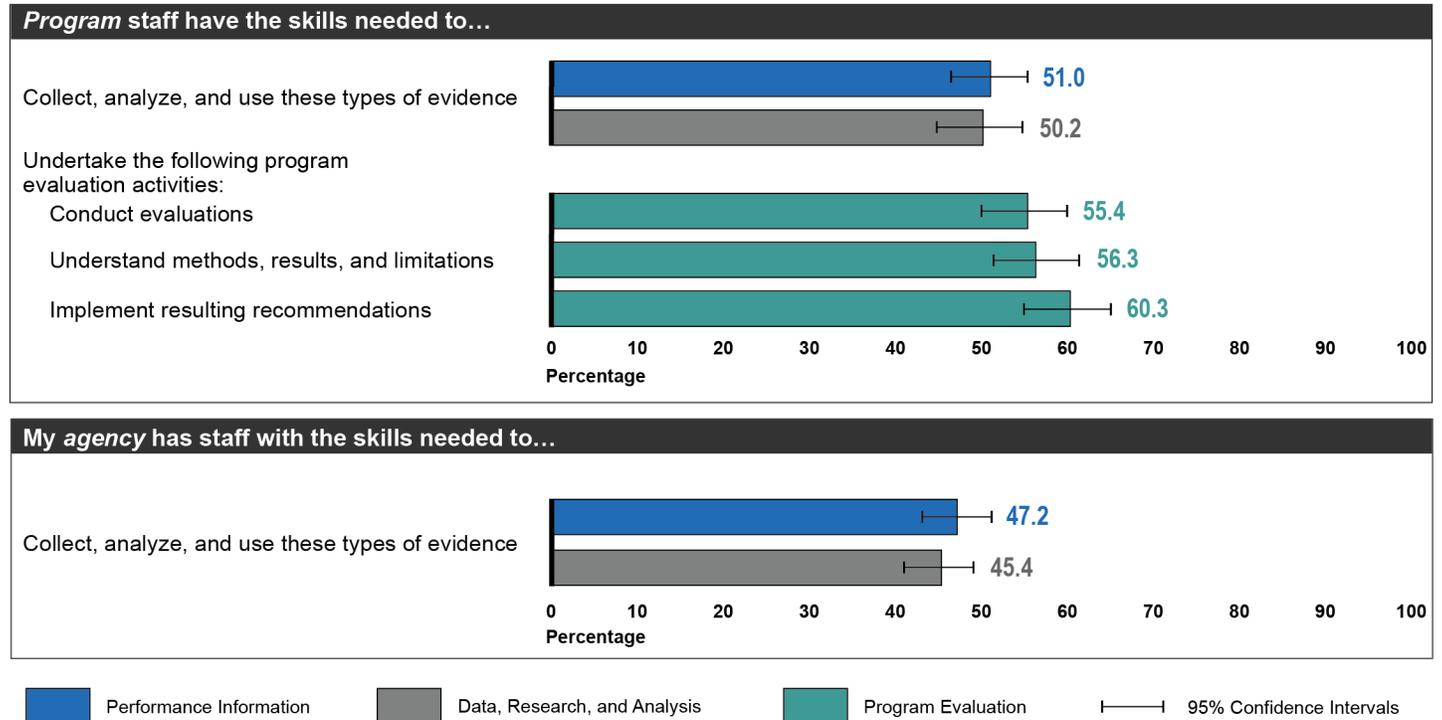
Federal Managers' Reported Views on Evidence-Building Capacity Varied across Agencies

Survey Results Suggest Opportunities Exist to Enhance Government-wide Evidence-Building Capacity

Existing evidence-building capacity. Approximately half of managers reported aspects of evidence-building capacity existed to a “great” or “very great” extent across types of evidence. For example, between 50 and 60 percent of managers reported that their programs had staff with skills needed to collect, analyze, and use different types of evidence, as shown in figure 4. An estimated 45 to 47 percent of managers reported that their agencies had staff with these skills.

Figure 4: Federal Managers Reporting Program and Agency Staff Had Evidence-Building Skills

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



Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO -21-536

Note: Percentages for program evaluation are based on the 62 percent of managers who first reported familiarity with that type of evidence at their agencies on survey item 17a before responding to the specific survey items presented in this figure. For additional information, see survey items 8b, 13d, 21a-c, 26a, and 27c in [GAO-21-537SP](#).

To effectively use a portfolio of evidence, as OMB recommends, agency staff need to understand what conclusions can and cannot be drawn from them.⁴⁵ When asked about the extent to which agency staff had the knowledge and skills to integrate and compare findings from different

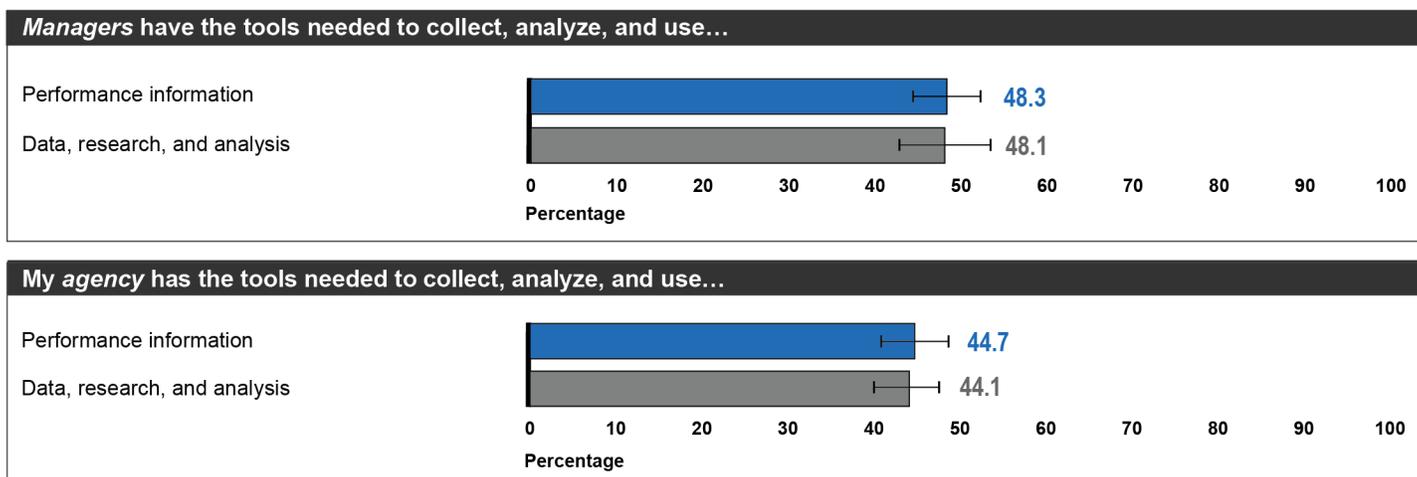
⁴⁵OMB’s guidance illustrates the types of conclusions that can and cannot be drawn for various sources of evidence. For example, it notes that multiple rigorous program evaluations may provide strong evidence that a particular strategy is effective in a particular setting or with a particular population. However, those sources may not provide certainty on the effectiveness of that approach in other settings or with different populations. Similarly, descriptive analyses from federal statistical data provide context to examine societal, economic, or environmental trends but do not speak to program outcomes or impacts. OMB Cir. No. A-11, § 200.22 (July 2020).

types of evidence, an estimated 43 percent of managers agreed to a “great” or “very great” extent.⁴⁶

Results were generally similar on questions related to another aspect of existing capacity: the availability of analytical tools. As shown in figure 5, about half of managers reported that both their programs and agencies had tools to collect, analyze, and use performance information. A comparable percentage of managers reported having those tools for data, research, and analysis.

Figure 5: Federal Managers Reporting They Had Tools to Collect, Analyze, and Use Evidence

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



—| 95% Confidence Intervals

Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO-21-536

Note: For additional information, see survey items 8a, 11f, 26b, 27b in [GAO-21-537SP](#).

According to the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, the federal government has a legitimate need and responsibility to use data for evidence building. At the same time, the public has a legitimate interest in knowing that the government is protecting their privacy while using their data.⁴⁷ Our past work has similarly concluded that protecting

⁴⁶See survey item 27e in [GAO-21-537SP](#) for details.

⁴⁷Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, *The Promise of Evidence-Based Policymaking* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 7, 2017).

these data is vital to public confidence and national security, as their loss or compromise can result in substantial harm to individuals and the federal government.⁴⁸ Administrative and statistical data may include sensitive or confidential information, such as personally identifiable information.⁴⁹ In the new section of our 2020 survey that covered those types of data, we asked managers for their views on the extent to which their agencies have information systems and processes in place to protect privacy and ensure data security. An estimated 63 percent of managers reported that their agencies had the systems and processes in place to do so to a “great” or “very great” extent.⁵⁰

Activities to enhance capacity. Results on questions reflecting activities that can enhance capacity were less consistent, showing differences across types of evidence.

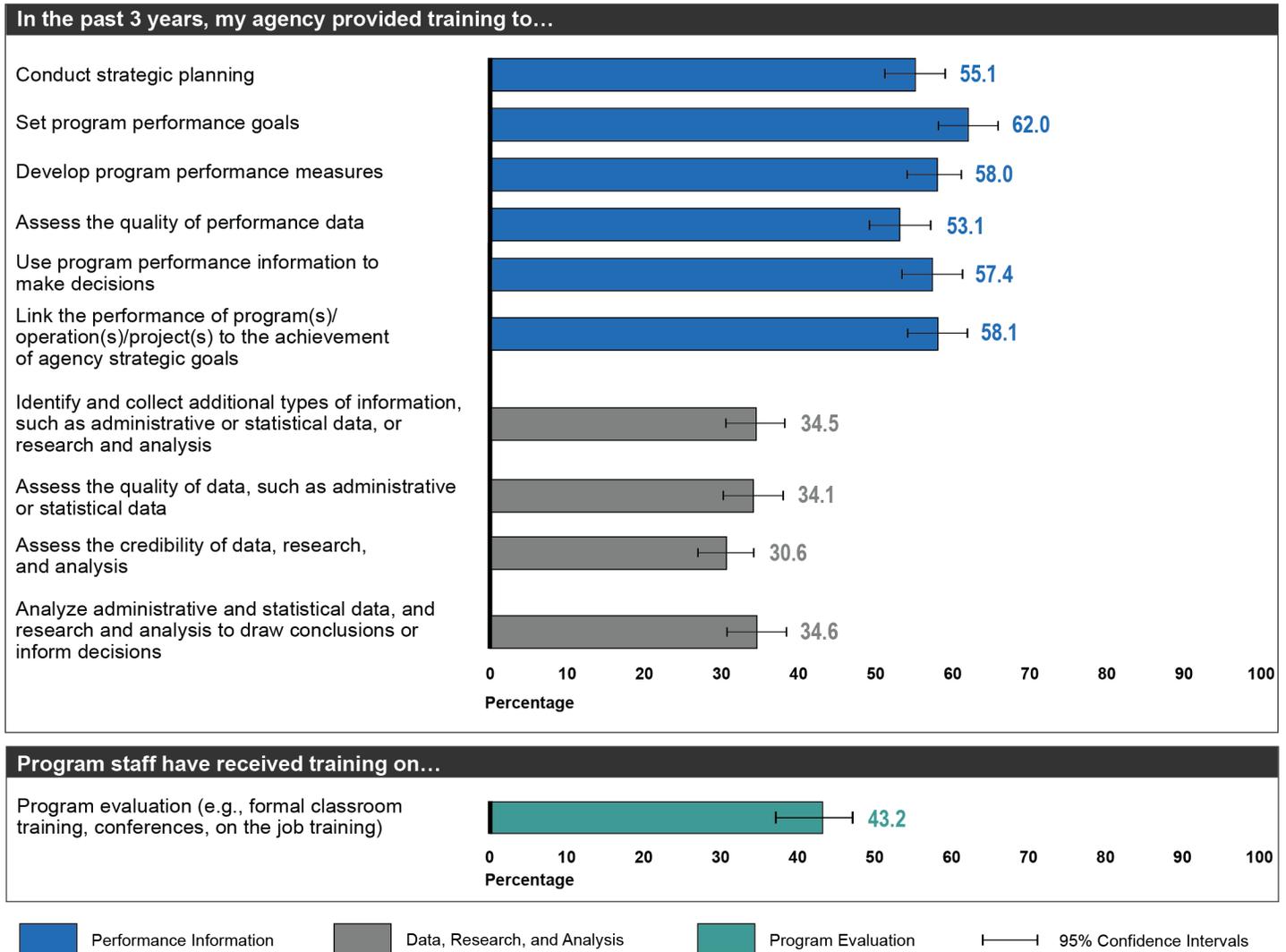
Figure 6 illustrates differences in the reported availability of training related to the types of evidence covered by our survey. For example, approximately half to two-thirds of managers reported their agencies provided such training to develop, assess, or use performance information, but only about one-third of managers reported their agencies provided training related to data, research, and analysis.

⁴⁸See, for example, GAO, *High Risk Series: Federal Government Needs to Urgently Pursue Critical Actions to Address Major Cybersecurity Challenges*, [GAO-21-288](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 24, 2021); and *Information Security: Protecting Personally Identifiable Information*, [GAO-08-343](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 25, 2008).

⁴⁹Personally identifiable information is defined as any information that can be used to distinguish or trace an individual’s identity, such as name, date and place of birth, or Social Security number. It can also include information that can be linked to an individual, such as medical, educational, financial, and employment information. See [GAO-21-288](#).

⁵⁰See survey item 27f in [GAO-21-537SP](#) for details.

Figure 6: Federal Managers Reporting They or Their Staff Received Training to Conduct Various Evidence-Building Activities
 Estimated Percentages Reporting “Yes,” or to a “Great” or “Very Great” Extent, as Appropriate



Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO-21-536

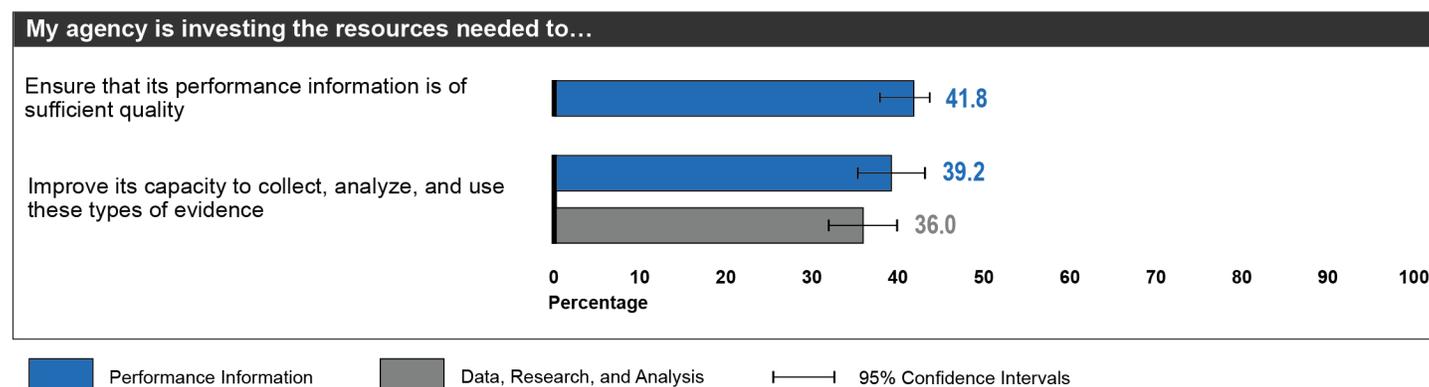
Note: The percentage for program evaluation is based on the 62 percent of managers who first reported familiarity with that type of evidence at their agencies on survey item 17a before responding to the specific survey item presented in this figure. For additional information, see survey items 10a-f, 21d, and 28a-d in [GAO-21-537SP](#).

In addition, slightly more than one-third of managers (an estimated 35 to 42 percent) reported that their agencies were making certain evidence-related resource investments to improve quality and capacity, which could

include acquiring new analytical tools or upgrading existing ones (see fig. 7).

Figure 7: Federal Managers Reporting Agency Resource Investments in Evidence-Building Capacity

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



Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO-21-536

Note: For additional information, see survey items 13c, 13e, and 27d in [GAO-21-537SP](#).

Survey Results Suggest Uneven Evidence-Building Capacity across Agencies

When we disaggregated the survey results, we found that the reported presence of different aspects of capacity varied widely across the 24 agencies. For example:

- Across the survey questions related to existing capacity, agency-level results ranged from an estimated 23 to 80 percent.
- Similarly, across survey questions related to actions that can enhance capacity, agency-level results ranged from an estimated 16 to 74 percent.
- When looking at the difference between the highest and lowest estimated agency *result on each individual question*, that difference ranged from 23 to 46 percentage points.

These results suggest the finding from the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking’s report—that capacity to support evidence-building functions is uneven across agencies—persists.⁵¹

⁵¹Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, *The Promise of Evidence-Based Policymaking* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 7, 2017).

Figure 8 shows the range of agency results on questions reflecting aspects of existing capacity. Figure 9 illustrates the range for activities that can enhance capacity. Both figures include the government-wide average on each question for context.

Figure 8: Federal Managers Reporting Aspects of Evidence-Building Capacity Were Present, with the Range of Agencies' Responses

Estimated Percentage Reporting to a "Great" or "Very Great" Extent

Program staff have the skills needed to...

Collect, analyze, and use:

1. Performance information
2. Data, research, and analysis

Undertake program evaluation activities:

3. Conduct evaluations
4. Understand methods, results, and limitations
5. Implement resulting evaluations

My agency has staff with the skills needed to...

Collect, analyze, and use:

6. Performance information
7. Data, research, and analysis
8. Integrate and compare findings from performance measurement, program evaluations, and additional sources of evidence

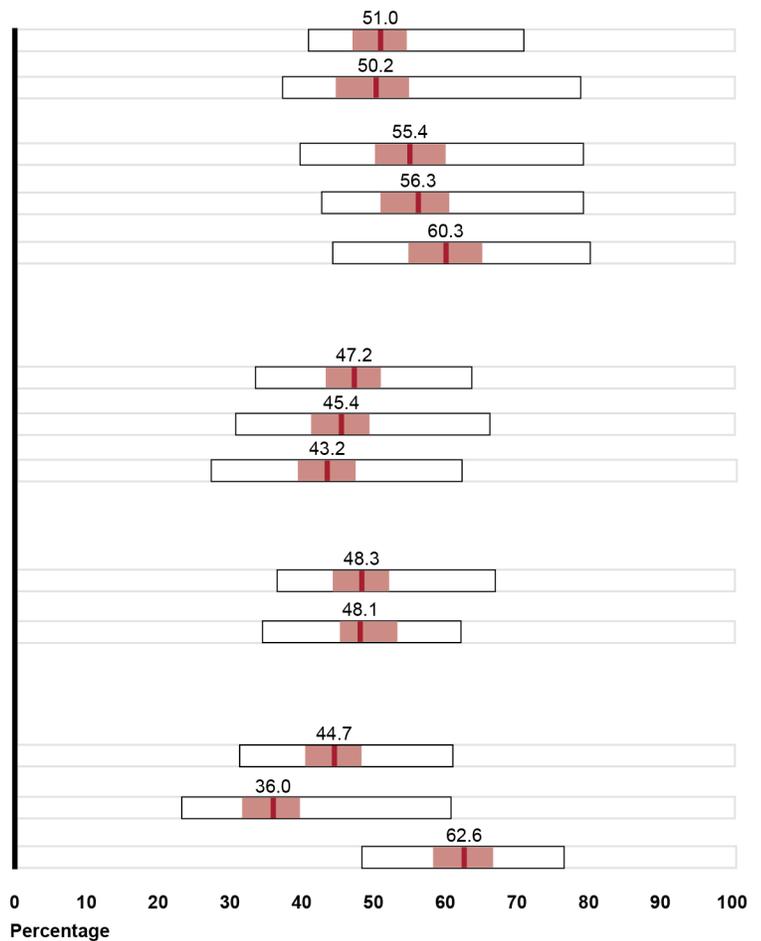
Managers have the tools needed to collect, analyze, and use...

9. Performance information
10. Data, research, and analysis

My agency has the tools needed to...

Collect, analyze, and use:

11. Performance information
12. Data, research, and analysis
13. Protect the privacy and security of data



Government-wide estimate (line) with 95% confidence interval (shading) Range of agencies' results

Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO-21-536

Note: Percentages for program evaluation are based on the 62 percent of managers who first reported familiarity with that type of evidence at their agencies on survey item 17a before responding

to the specific survey items presented in this figure. For additional information, see survey items 8a-b, 11f, 13c, 21a-c, 26a-b, 27b-c, and 27e in [GAO-21-537SP](#).

Figure 9: Federal Managers Reporting Their Agencies Were Taking Actions to Enhance Evidence-Building Capacity, with the Range of Agencies' Responses

Estimated Percentages Reporting "Yes" or to a "Great" or "Very Great" Extent, as Appropriate

In the past 3 years, my agency provided training to...

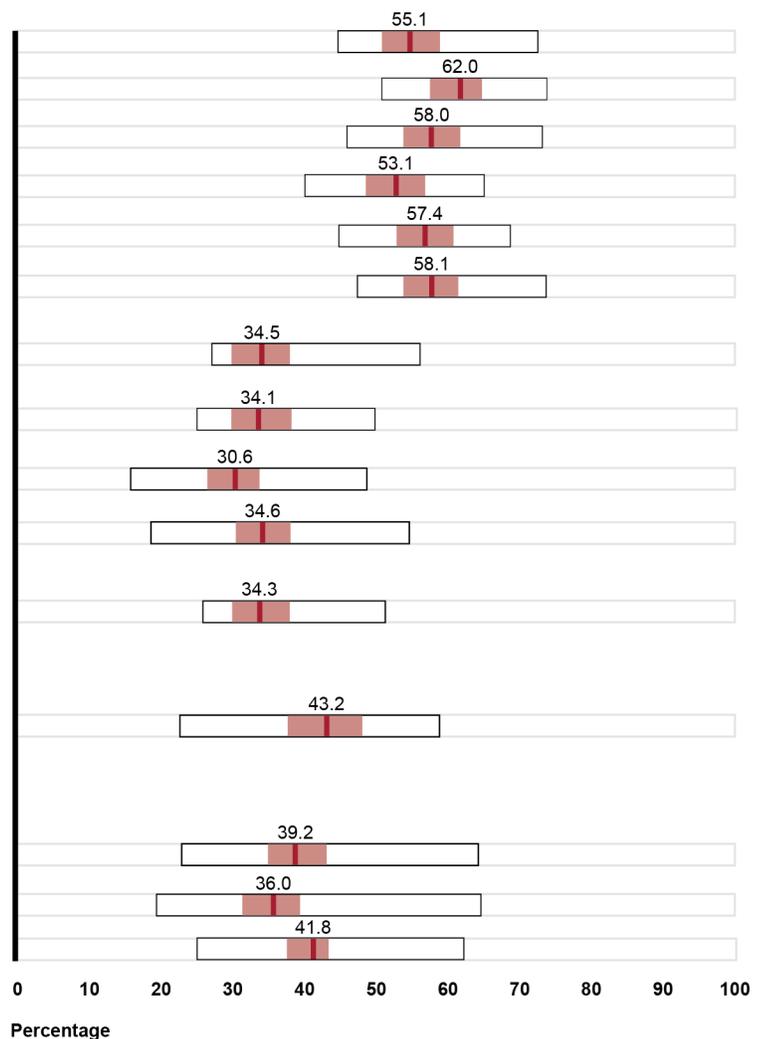
1. Conduct strategic planning
2. Set program performance goals
3. Develop program performance measures
4. Assess the quality of performance data
5. Use program performance information to make decisions
6. Link the performance of program(s)/operation(s)/project(s) to the achievement of agency strategic goals
7. Identify and collect additional types of information, such as administrative or statistical data, or research and analysis
8. Assess the quality of data, such as administrative or statistical data
9. Assess the credibility of data, research, and analysis
10. Analyze administrative and statistical data, and research and analysis to draw conclusions or inform decisions
11. Better understand how to choose the right type(s) of information for different kinds of decisions

Program staff have received training on...

12. Program evaluation (e.g., formal classroom training, conferences, on the job training)

My agency is investing the resources needed to...

- Improve the agency's capacity to use
13. Performance information
 14. Data, research, and analysis
 15. Ensure that its performance information is of sufficient quality



Government-wide estimate (line) with 95% confidence interval (shading) Range of agencies' results

Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO-21-536

Note: The percentage for program evaluation is based on the 62 percent of managers who first reported familiarity with that type of evidence at their agencies on survey item 17a before responding to the specific survey item presented in this figure. For additional information, see survey items 10a-f, 13c, 13e, 21d, 27d, and 28a-e in [GAO-21-537SP](#).

Sixteen agencies had results that were statistically significantly different from the government-wide average on one or more questions related to existing evidence-building capacity. Figure 10 identifies the agencies that had results statistically significantly higher (seven agencies), lower (eight agencies), or both (one agency) when compared to the government-wide average on one or more questions (for statistically significant results on individual questions see fig. 12 in appendix I).

Figure 10: Agencies Where Managers Reported Aspects of Existing Evidence-Building Capacity Were Statistically Significantly Higher or Lower than the Government-Wide Average

Agency	Staff Skills (8 questions total)				Analytical Tools (5 questions total)	
	Performance Information (2)	Program Evaluations (3)	Data, Research, and Analysis (2)	Across Types of Evidence (1)	Performance Information (2)	Data, Research, and Analysis (3)
National Science Foundation	+	+	+	+	+	+
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	+	+	+			+
General Services Administration	+			+	+	
Department of Labor	+				+	
Department of Veterans Affairs					+	+
Social Security Administration					+	+
Small Business Administration		+				
Agency for International Development	+	-	+	+		+
Office of Personnel Management	-		-	-	-	-
Department of Housing and Urban Development	-		-	-		-
Department of Agriculture	-				-	-
Department of Education			-			-
Department of Homeland Security		-	-			
Department of Commerce					-	
Department of the Interior					-	
Department of Transportation		-				

+/- Agency result on one or more questions was statistically significantly higher/lower than the 2020 government-wide average.

Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO-21-536

Eight agencies had results that were statistically significantly higher than the government-wide average. This suggests the agencies' results were among the highest when compared to the rest of government. Four agencies—the National Science Foundation, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Agency for International Development, and

General Services Administration—had such results across several types of evidence and different aspects of capacity (staff skills and analytical tools).

Nine agencies had results that were statistically significantly lower than the government-wide average.⁵² Two agencies—OPM and the Department of Housing and Urban Development—had such results across several types of evidence and different aspects of capacity.

We also analyzed agency results related to actions that can enhance evidence-building capacity. Figure 11 identifies the agencies that had results statistically significantly higher (11 agencies), lower (nine agencies), or both (one agency) when compared to the government-wide average on one or more questions (for statistically significant results on individual questions see fig. 13 in appendix I).

⁵²The Agency for International Development had results that were both higher and lower, albeit for different types of evidence.

Figure 11: Agencies Where Managers Reported Capacity-Enhancing Actions Were Statistically Significantly Higher or Lower than the Government-Wide Average

Agency	Training (12 questions total)				Resource Investments (3 questions total)	
	Performance Information (6)	Program Evaluations (1)	Data, Research, and Analysis (4)	Across Types of Evidence (1)	Performance Information (2)	Data, Research, and Analysis (1)
Agency for International Development	+		+	+	+	+
Department of Health and Human Services	+		+	+	+	+
General Services Administration	+	+	+	+	+	
Department of Veterans Affairs	+		+	+	+	
National Science Foundation			+	+	+	+
Department of Labor	+		+			
Nuclear Regulatory Commission					+	+
Department of Transportation	+					
Small Business Administration	+					
National Aeronautics and Space Administration			+			
Social Security Administration				+		
Environmental Protection Agency	+	-				
Department of the Interior	-	-			-	-
Office of Personnel Management	-				-	-
Department of Commerce		-			-	
Department of Agriculture			-			
Department of Education						-
Department of Homeland Security	-					
Department of Housing and Urban Development						-
Department of Justice			-			
Department of State		-				

+/- Agency result on one or more questions was statistically significantly higher/lower than the 2020 government-wide average.

Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO-21-536

Of the 12 agencies that had results that were statistically significantly higher, five—the Department of Health and Human Services, Agency for International Development, General Services Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs, and National Science Foundation—had significantly higher results across several types of evidence and different capacity-enhancing actions (training and resource investments). The General Services Administration was the only agency to have such a significantly higher result related to training for program evaluations. As was mentioned earlier, that agency’s Office of Evaluation Sciences conducts monthly training sessions on evidence and evaluation topics in coordination with staff from OMB.

Agencies Where Managers Reported Results Related to Existing Evidence-Building Capacity and Actions to Enhance It That Were Statistically Significant

Results higher than the government-wide average at:

- Agency for International Development
- Department of Labor
- Department of Veterans Affairs
- General Services Administration
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration
- National Science Foundation
- Small Business Administration
- Social Security Administration

Results lower than the government-wide average at:

- Department of Agriculture
- Department of Commerce
- Department of Education
- Department of Homeland Security
- Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Department of the Interior
- Office of Personnel Management

Source: GAO | GAO-21-536

Ten agencies had results that were statistically significantly lower than the government-wide average.⁵³ Of those 10 agencies, three—the Departments of Commerce and the Interior, and OPM—had statistically significantly lower results across several types of evidence or different capacity-enhancing actions.

When looking across all capacity-related questions, we identified 15 agencies that had statistically significant results related to both their existing evidence-building capacity and actions to enhance it (see sidebar). That is, they were identified in both figures 10 and 11 above.

As described earlier, OMB, OPM, and relevant interagency councils have taken actions aimed at improving federal evidence-building capacity. These have included developing guidance and other resources, providing training sessions, identifying and sharing best practices, and helping agencies hire staff with specific expertise. In addition, OMB staff told us that they have supported several interagency councils' efforts to collect information on the needs of their respective members. OMB staff and council leadership have used that input to inform the respective councils' priorities.

OMB guidance and our past work on federal evidence building emphasize that agencies should build a portfolio of evidence to support organizational learning and decision-making.⁵⁴ OMB, OPM, and relevant interagency councils have taken actions to collect and analyze different types of evidence (such as the results from surveys of council members and agencies' draft capacity assessments) to inform their efforts to identify and prioritize actions to enhance evidence-building capacity at individual agencies and across the federal government.

The results from our 2020 survey provide another source of information on federal evidence-building capacity, as reported directly by managers from across the government. In particular, the government-wide averages and ranges of agency results in figures 8 and 9, and the statistically significant agency results in figures 10 and 11 could corroborate existing

⁵³The Environmental Protection Agency had results that were both higher and lower, but for different types of evidence.

⁵⁴See, for example, OMB, Circular No. A-11, § 200.22 (July 2020), and M-19-23; and [GAO-20-119](#) and GAO, *Managing for Results: Practices for Effective Agency Strategic Reviews*, [GAO-15-602](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 29, 2015).

evidence about strengths and weaknesses in such capacity, or help identify new insights, about individual agencies and cross-cutting issues.

OMB is well positioned to lead efforts to analyze and use these results, given its government-wide purview, broad responsibilities related to federal evidence building, and involvement with the work of OPM and various interagency councils. OMB has set an expectation with the councils that their efforts should be coordinated through OMB to ensure they are complementary and carried out efficiently and effectively.⁵⁵

Conclusions

Congress and the Executive Branch have taken actions in recent years intended to strengthen evidence-building capacity across the federal government. However, our survey results suggest that additional opportunities exist to enhance capacity across the federal government and at individual agencies. OMB, OPM, and relevant interagency councils have already taken some steps to collect evidence about these issues and address them. Our survey results could further help inform their learning by reinforcing existing knowledge or providing potentially new perspectives and insights. The results could also help them identify and prioritize efforts to enhance capacity across the federal government and at individual agencies.

Recommendation for Executive Action

The Director of the Office of Management and Budget should work with the Office of Personnel Management and relevant interagency councils to leverage our survey results as an additional source of information to inform efforts to enhance evidence-building capacity across the federal government and at individual agencies, as appropriate. This could include using our survey results to help identify promising practices at certain agencies and address challenges at others. Results could also be used to help identify cross-cutting capacity issues affecting multiple agencies, and prioritize actions to address them. (Recommendation 1)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to OMB for review and comment. We also provided a draft of the report to each of the 24 federal agencies covered by our survey.

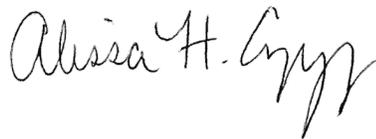
An OMB staff member informed us via email that OMB neither agreed nor disagreed with our recommendation, and provided technical comments, which we have incorporated into the final report. The Small Business Administration also provided technical comments via email, which we

⁵⁵OMB, M-19-23.

have incorporated into the final report as appropriate. The U.S. Agency for International Development provided written comments—reprinted in appendix II—describing its efforts to implement the Evidence Act and highlighting a selection of the agency’s results from our survey.

Fourteen agencies informed us that they had no comments: the Departments of Defense, Energy, Homeland Security, Labor, State, Transportation, and Veterans Affairs; Environmental Protection Agency; General Services Administration; OPM; National Aeronautics and Space Administration; National Science Foundation, Nuclear Regulatory Commission; and Social Security Administration. The remaining eight agencies did not provide a response.

We are sending copies of this report to congressional addressees, the Acting Director of OMB, the heads of each of the 24 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 Alissa Czyz at (202) 512-6806 or czyza@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of our report. Key contributors to this report are listed in appendix III.



Alissa H. Czyz
Acting Director, Strategic Issues

List of Congressional Committees

The Honorable Gary C. Peters
Chairman
The Honorable Rob Portman
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Jon Ossoff
Chairman
The Honorable Ron Johnson
Ranking Member
Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
Chair
The Honorable James Lankford
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Government Operations and Border Management
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Carolyn B. Maloney
Chairwoman
The Honorable James Comer
Ranking Member
Committee on Oversight and Reform
House of Representatives

The Honorable Gerald E. Connolly
Chairman
The Honorable Jody Hice
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Government Operations
Committee on Oversight and Reform
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Agencies with Statistically Significant Results on Survey Questions Related to Evidence-Building Capacity

Figure 12: Agencies Where Managers Reported Aspects of Their Existing Evidence-Building Capacity Were Statistically Significantly Higher or Lower than the Government-Wide Average

	Department of															
	Agriculture	Commerce	Education	Homeland Security	Housing and Urban Development	the Interior	Labor	Transportation	Veterans Affairs	Agency for International Development	General Services Administration	National Aeronautics and Space Administration	National Science Foundation	Office of Personnel Management	Small Business Administration	Social Security Administration
Program staff have the skills needed to...																
Collect, analyze, and use:																
Performance information									+	+	+	+				
Data, research, and analysis			-						+		+	+				
Undertake program evaluation activities:																
Conduct evaluations							-	-			+				+	
Understand methods, results, and limitations			-				-				+	+				
Implement resulting recommendations			-				-				+					
My agency has staff with the skills needed to...																
Integrate and compare findings from different sources of evidence				-					+	+		+	-			
Collect, analyze, and use:																
Performance information	-			-		+			+	+		+	-			
Data, research, and analysis		-		-					+		+	+	-			
Managers have the tools needed to collect, analyze, and use...																
Performance information	-									+		+	-			
Data, research, and analysis											+					
My agency has the tools needed to...																
Protect the privacy and security of its data	-							+				+				+
Collect, analyze, and use:																
Performance information	-	-			-	+		+					-			+
Data, research, and analysis		-		-				+	+			+	-			+

+/- Agency result statistically significantly higher/lower than government-wide average in 2020.

Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO-21-536

Note: Results reflect the percentage of managers who responded “great extent” or “very great extent” on each question. For additional information, see items 8a-b, 11f, 13d, 21a-c, 26a-b, 27b-c, and 27e-f in [GAO-21-537SP](#).

Appendix I: Agencies with Statistically Significant Results on Survey Questions Related to Evidence-Building Capacity

Figure 13: Agencies Where Managers Reported Actions That Can Enhance Evidence-Building Capacity Were Statistically Significantly Higher or Lower than the Government-Wide Average

	Department of																					
	Agriculture	Commerce	Education	Health and Human Services	Homeland Security	Housing and Urban Development	the Interior	Justice	Labor	State	Transportation	Veterans Affairs	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	Social Security Administration	
In the past 3 years, managers reported receiving training to...																						
Conduct strategic planning			+					+			+	+		+								
Set program performance goals			+																			
Develop program performance measures														+							+	
Assess the quality of performance data			+			-																
Use program performance information to make decisions										+										-	+	
Link the performance of program(s)/operation(s)/ project(s) to the achievement of agency strategic goals				-				+				+	+									
Identify and collect additional types of information, such as administrative or statistical data, or research and analysis			+					+			+	+		+		+						
Assess the quality of data, such as administrative or statistical data			+								+	+		+								
Assess the credibility of data, research, and analysis			+				-					+		+		+						
Analyze administrative and statistical data, and research and analysis to draw conclusions or inform decisions			+				-				+	+		+	+	+						
Better understand how to choose the right type(s) of information for different kinds of decisions			+								+	+		+		+						+
Managers reported receiving training on...																						
Program evaluation	-	-												-	+							
My agency is investing the resources needed to...																						
Ensure that its performance information is of sufficient quality			+			-						+		+				+		-		
Improve its capacity to collect, analyze and use:																						
Performance information	-	+			-						+	+					+	+		-		
Data, research, and analysis		-	+		-	-						+					+	+		-		

+/- Agency result statistically significantly higher/lower than government-wide average in 2020.

Source: GAO analysis of survey results. | GAO-21-536

Note: Results reflect the percentage of managers who responded "great extent" or "very great extent," or "yes" on each question, as appropriate. For additional information, see items 10a-f, 13c, 13e, 21d, 27d, and 28a-e in [GAO-21-537SP](#).

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



July 8, 2021

Alissa H. Czyz
Acting Director, Strategic Issues
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20226

Re: Evidence-Based Policymaking: Survey Data Identify Opportunities to Strengthen Capacity across Federal Agencies (GAO-21-536) & 2020 Federal Managers Survey: Results on Government Performance and Management Issues (GAO-21-537SP)

Dear Ms. Czyz:

I am pleased to provide 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: Survey Data Identify Opportunities to Strengthen Capacity across Federal Agencies (GAO-21-536) & 2020 Federal Managers Survey: Results on Government Performance and Management Issues (GAO-21-537SP)*.

USAID is committed to enhancing evidence-based policymaking through systematic planning and evidence-building activities. The Learning Agenda (Evidence-Building Plan), Annual Evaluation Plan, Capacity Assessment, and Agency Program Evaluation Standards and Competencies facilitate the use of data and evidence in policy and decision-making. Effective federal data asset use requires high-quality data governance. These activities are a key component reinforcing the use of results from evaluations in strategic plans, programming, and operations.

I am transmitting this letter and the enclosed comments for inclusion in the GAO's final report. Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the draft report, and for the courtesies extended by your staff while conducting this engagement. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in the complete and thorough evaluation of our evidence-based policy making.

Sincerely,

Colleen Allen

Colleen Allen
Acting, Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Management

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

**COMMENTS BY THE U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON
THE DRAFT REPORT PRODUCED BY THE U.S. GOVERNMENT
ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE (GAO) TITLED, Evidence-Based Policymaking: Survey Data
Identify Opportunities to Strengthen Capacity across Federal Agencies (GAO-21-536) & 2020
Federal Managers Survey: Results on Government Performance and Management Issues
(GAO-21-537SP)**

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) would like to thank the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) for the opportunity to respond to this draft report. We appreciate the extensive work of the GAO engagement team.

USAID continues to maintain a sharp focus on using evidence in its programming and operations, and we appreciate the recognition of USAID's leadership within the Federal Government in this space. The Agency has operationalized the Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act) and incorporated the principles in the following capacities:

- USAID is leveraging the Evidence Act in the FY 2022-2026 strategic planning process. The Agency will establish strategic objectives and effective strategies that will be based on credible high-quality evidence, leading to the achievement of each objective.
- USAID's Learning Agenda will align with the FY 2022-2026 strategic plan to focus evidence-building on top Agency policy priorities.
- USAID will ensure the Strategic Objectives, Performance Goals, and Agency Priority Goals all gather evidence that supports decision making and strategic planning.
- USAID will also utilize statistics, policy analysis, and foundational fact-finding in our strategic planning and evidence enterprise.
- USAID will identify indicators that provide relevant information to demonstrate progress toward the strategic plan; and the Agency will leverage the results of these evidence-building activities to feed into our annual strategic reviews and other processes.
- USAID's Capacity Assessment will drive strengthening of staff capacity to use data and evidence from statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis activities.

In addition, USAID exceeded the government standards by statistically significant margins of 10 percent or greater on the 2020 Federal Manager Survey in areas such as:

- Conducting strategic planning;
- Using program performance information to make decisions;
- Linking the performance of program (s)/operations(s)/project(s) to the achievement of agency strategic goals;
- Managers taking steps to align program performance measures with agency-wide goals and objectives to a greater extent;
- Managers being held accountable for agency accomplishments of its strategic goals;
- Managers take steps to ensure that performance information is useful and/or appropriate; and

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

- Managers use performance information to share effective program approaches with others.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Alissa H. Czyz, (202) 512-6806 or czyza@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the above contacts, Benjamin T. Licht (Assistant Director), Adam Miles (Analyst-in-Charge), Mariel Alper, Jacqueline Chapin, Caitlin Cusati, Karin Fangman, Chloe Kay, Samantha Lalisian, Terell Lasane, Won (Danny) Lee, Jungjin Park, Amanda Prichard, Steven Putansu, Alan Rozzi, and Alicia White made significant contributions to this report.

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