

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104034](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Major federal courthouse construction, expansion, and renovation projects usually cost hundreds of millions of dollars and can be controversial as federal judicial districts and circuits vie for limited funding. By 2020, the judiciary's AMP process had assessed and scored 385 federal courthouses to generate urgency ratings and rankings that allow the judiciary to prioritize courthouse projects and funding.

GAO was asked to review the AMP process. This report assesses: (1) what the judiciary's assessment scores show about the conditions of federal courthouses; (2) the extent to which the AMP process ensures the accuracy of its courthouse assessment scores it produces; and (3) the extent to which the AMP's scoring methodology is meeting AMP goals. GAO reviewed policies and analyzed the judiciary's 2020 facility assessment and urgency data; selected a non-generalizable sample of 10 courthouses based on courthouse assessment scores and urgency ratings; and interviewed officials about the AMP process.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to the Judicial Conference of the United States to update assessment scores when appropriate, and ensure that the methodology's effects align to the AMP goals and are transparent to judiciary decision makers. The Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts agreed to work with the Judicial Conference to consider ways to better document its decisions and evaluate how its methodologies affect courthouse rankings.

View [GAO-22-104034](#). For more information, contact Catina Latham at (202) 512-2834 or LathamC@gao.gov.

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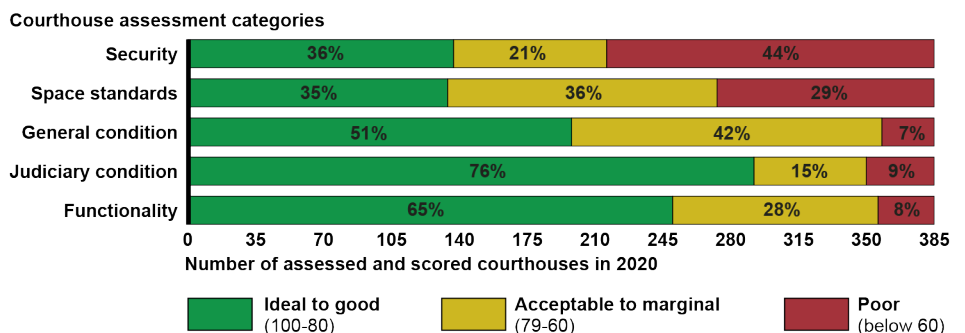
FEDERAL COURTHOUSE CONSTRUCTION

Judiciary Should Refine Its Methods for Determining Which Projects Are Most Urgent

What GAO Found

The judiciary created its Asset Management Planning (AMP) process to prioritize construction projects. As part of that process, the judiciary assesses courthouse conditions. The 2020 assessment results showed that security was the largest concern, with 44 percent of courthouses receiving a poor score. Courthouses' adherence to space standards, such as the size or accessibility of courtrooms, had more balanced scores. The physical condition of the judicial spaces performed the best with more than three-fourths of all courthouses receiving ideal to good ratings (see figure).

Judiciary's 2020 Courthouse Assessment Category Scores and Percentages for 385 Federal Courthouses



Source: GAO analysis of judiciary data. | [GAO-22-104034](#)

By following the AMP process and coordinating with other federal agencies, the judiciary ensured that courthouse assessment scores were accurate at the time they were completed. However, the judiciary did not always update assessment scores, when appropriate, to reflect major changes in courthouses' operating status. For example, one courthouse was destroyed by a hurricane in 2018, and another had a mold problem. Both were required to close. We found that the judiciary did not update these courthouses' assessment scores, an update that would have had an important effect on the urgency ratings—a later part of the AMP process. By updating courthouse assessment scores to reflect major changes in operating status, the judiciary can provide more accurate and reliable information to decision makers.

The judiciary's scoring methodology could amplify or diminish the scores of courthouses and cities in ways that were not always aligned with AMP's goals. For example, the methodology made it more likely that smaller courthouses would receive the worst scores compared to larger, multifaceted courthouses. Also, the judiciary capped certain values within the scoring process in ways that were not always repeatable or consistent due to a lack of documented guidelines for using the caps. This approach could lead to nontransparent and inconsistent results that could affect how projects are prioritized for funding. Absent an analysis of the methodology's effects on the AMP goals, the judiciary cannot have full confidence that the rankings were objective and consistent. This lack of transparency and objectivity could lead the judiciary to inadvertently recommend projects for further study and funding that may not represent the cities with the most urgent space and condition needs.