

A report to congressional committees.

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What GAO Found

The 12 experts in a forum GAO convened said that to develop effective media campaigns and evaluate media campaigns, whether on drug misuse prevention or other topics, campaigns need to consider the following:

Considerations for developing effective media campaigns



Identify and understand intended audience



Create content, select messengers, and decide how to deliver campaign messages



Test messages before deploying the campaign

Considerations for evaluating media campaigns



Define the intended campaign outcome



Select qualified evaluators



Decide when to measure effectiveness



Decide how to measure effectiveness

Source: GAO analysis of media campaign forum experts' comments; Icons-Studio/stock.adobe.com (icons). | GAO-25-107845

- **Identify and understand intended audience.** Once a campaign has identified who it wants to reach, it needs to understand the intended audience—including by identifying the underlying causes of the behavior the campaign wants to change. For example, experts noted that campaigns may decide to target the underlying reasons why people misuse drugs rather than developing campaigns to target specific drugs.
- **Create content, select messengers, and decide on delivery methods.** Campaigns need to create content to deliver their messages, which need to be credible and relevant for the intended audience. Campaigns also need to select messengers to deliver their messages, such as community leaders. Additionally, campaigns need to decide how to deliver their messages. For example, campaigns may use print and social media, among other options.
- **Test messages.** Campaigns need to test their messages with the intended audience to ensure that the messages are relevant and resonate with the intended audience. This testing can include using focus groups, interviews, or surveys, among other methods.
- **Define the intended outcome.** Campaigns need to have a clear understanding of what they are trying to achieve. Then, evaluators can decide what data are needed to determine whether a campaign is meeting its goals.
- **Select qualified evaluators.** Campaigns need independent evaluators who can speak to campaign managers about a campaign's effectiveness using evidence from evaluations. Evaluators need expertise in research methods, evaluation, and other disciplines and need to understand the campaign substance.
- **Decide when and how to measure effectiveness.** Campaigns need to decide if they will evaluate the campaign while it is ongoing or after the campaign has concluded. They also need to decide what they want to measure and what data collection methods they will use.

Why GAO Did This Study

Drug misuse—the use of illicit drugs and the misuse of prescription drugs—has been a persistent and long-standing public health issue in the U.S. In recent years, hundreds of thousands of people have died from misusing drugs. The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) manages the National Anti-Drug Media Campaign, which aims to change attitudes about drug use and reverse drug use trends through targeted media advertisements.

The Substance Use-Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment (SUPPORT) for Patients and Communities Act includes a provision for GAO to review various ONDCP activities, including national media campaigns.

On February 11, 2025, GAO convened a forum with 12 experts selected for their expertise in public media campaigns, including but not limited to campaigns intended to prevent drug misuse. The experts discussed considerations for developing and evaluating media campaigns.

GAO selected experts to represent a range of experiences and viewpoints from academic institutions; nonprofit, communications, and consulting organizations; and federal and state governments. Experts reviewed a draft of our summary of their comments. Their comments were incorporated as appropriate. Views expressed during the proceedings do not necessarily represent the opinions of all experts, their affiliated organizations, or GAO.

GAO provided a draft of this report to the Departments of Health and Human Services and Justice and ONDCP for review. They did not have any comments on the report.