

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-108406](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings, and Emergency Management, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Courthouses play an important role in ensuring the proper functioning of the federal judicial system. For fiscal years 2016 through 2024, Congress appropriated \$2.1 billion for the construction of 15 federal courthouse projects. According to the judiciary, this funding addressed long-standing needs for new courthouses.

The Design Guide aims to help GSA and other stakeholders build courthouses that are both functional and cost-effective. In 2021, the judiciary made changes to the Design Guide, citing the need to provide greater security for court personnel and flexibility for local courts involved in new courthouse projects.

This testimony discusses (1) the changes made in the 2021 Design Guide, and the judiciary's rationale for making these changes; (2) how these changes could affect the size and cost of future courthouse projects; and (3) how the judiciary collaborated with selected stakeholders in making these changes. It draws primarily from GAO's October 2024 [report](#) on the judiciary's Design Guide.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made three recommendations to the judiciary that remain open. These include that the judiciary document a process to ensure collaboration with stakeholders when updating the Design Guide and, in collaboration with GSA, use relevant information to reassess the need for increased circulation requirements. In May 2025, the judiciary told us it is continuing to review its collaboration efforts and work to identify an approach to reassess its circulation requirements.

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May 20, 2025

COURTHOUSE CONSTRUCTION

Changes to Design Standards Will Result in Larger and More Costly Future Courthouses

What GAO Found

The judiciary issued a new U.S. Courts Design Guide (Design Guide) in 2021 that included many changes in the standards from the prior 2007 version. GAO determined that 16 of the changes could affect the size or cost of courthouse projects. (See table.) Judiciary officials cited four overarching reasons for making these changes: to incorporate existing policies, provide courts with flexibility to design spaces that meet their needs, contain costs, and meet security needs. To date, no courthouses funded through fiscal year 2024 have been designed under the 2021 Design Guide. According to judiciary officials, as of May 2025, the judiciary was planning five courthouse projects with the intention of using the 2021 Design Guide.

Selected Changes in the 2021 U.S. Courts Design Guide That Could Affect the Size or Cost of Courthouse Projects

Change	Description
Circulation requirements	Increases the circulation pathways (i.e., the amount of space required for movement of the public, court staff, prisoners, and others) required for judiciary spaces—primarily those associated with courtrooms and associated spaces, grand jury suites, probation and pretrial services, and other court units.
Courtroom sharing policy	Incorporates judiciary policies adopted from 2009 through 2011 for judges to share courtrooms in new courthouses with two or more magistrate, bankruptcy, or senior district judges.
Ballistic-resistant materials	Adds a requirement for ballistic-resistant material for the deputy clerk station within the courtroom.
Raised access flooring	Removes the requirement for raised access flooring in the courtroom well—the area that includes the judge's bench, court personnel workstations, witness box, jury box and counsel tables.

Source: GAO analysis of judiciary data. | GAO-25-108406

GAO found that changes made in the 2021 Design Guide will significantly increase the size and cost of future courthouse projects. To reach this conclusion, GAO estimated the potential impacts of these changes for seven recently completed or future courthouses designed under the 2007 Design Guide. According to this analysis, changes in the 2021 Design Guide would increase the size of the courthouses by 6 percent and project costs by 12 percent on average. These hypothetical increases are due, in part, to increases in the amount of circulation within the judiciary's space. Increases in the judiciary's space result in larger courthouses overall, which GAO estimates will lead to more costly courthouses in the future, due to the need for additional construction materials and building components.

Further, GAO found that the judiciary did not fully collaborate with the General Services Administration (GSA) or involve the Federal Protective Service, which has courthouse security responsibilities. As a result, the judiciary missed an opportunity to address significant issues, such as those related to the size, cost, and security of courthouses. Specifically, the judiciary did not fully address GSA's concerns that the revised circulation requirements were based on a 2012 assessment of older courthouses that GAO had previously found to be oversized. Engaging with stakeholders and reassessing the need for increased circulation requirements in the 2021 Design Guide using relevant information will help the judiciary develop functional and cost-effective courthouses and could avoid millions of dollars in future costs.