

Why GAO Did This Study

FEMA uses the National Preparedness System to help assess the nation's emergency management capabilities in preparing for disasters and, in part, to help prioritize federal preparedness grants it provides to state and local jurisdictions. Since 2002, FEMA has provided over \$52 billion in such grants intended to enhance preparedness capabilities.

GAO was asked to examine national preparedness. This report examines the extent to which: (1) FEMA's National Preparedness System and associated preparedness grants have assisted jurisdictions in preparing for disasters; (2) FEMA has strengthened the National Preparedness System and what steps remain; and (3) FEMA is using after-action reports to identify lessons learned and strengthen future preparedness. GAO evaluated agency guidance, analyzed 2013 to 2017 capability data—the most current available; conducted site visits to five states; and interviewed FEMA, state, and local emergency management officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations that FEMA (1) determine what steps are needed to address emergency management capability gaps, and communicate it to key stakeholders (2) prioritize completion of after-action reviews, (3) track corrective actions, and (4) develop guidance on sharing findings externally. The Department of Homeland Security concurred and FEMA is taking actions in response.

View [GAO-20-297](#). For more information, contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or curriec@gao.gov.

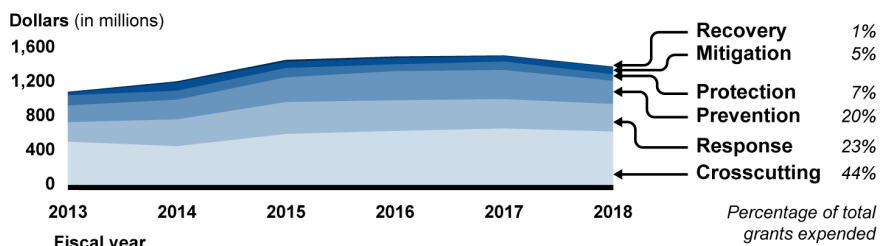
NATIONAL PREPAREDNESS

Additional Actions Needed to Address Gaps in the Nation's Emergency Management Capabilities

What GAO Found

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) National Preparedness System and associated grants have helped build some emergency management capabilities, but gaps remain. Capabilities fall in five mission areas: (1) prevention—preventing imminent acts of terrorism, (2) protection—protecting citizens and assets, (3) mitigation—mitigating the loss of life and property, (4) response—responding quickly to save lives, and (5) recovery—timely restoration of infrastructure and housing, among other things. From fiscal years 2013 through 2018, jurisdictions directed almost 90 percent of FEMA preparedness grants (\$7.3 of \$8.3 billion) to capabilities in the crosscutting (i.e., benefit all five mission areas), response, and prevention areas (figure below). Jurisdictions reported a higher level of preparedness in these areas compared to capabilities in the other mission areas—recovery, mitigation, and protection. Jurisdictions have consistently rated select capabilities in these three mission areas—such as disaster housing and cybersecurity—in the lowest category since 2013. FEMA does not limit jurisdictions' use of preparedness grants for select capabilities, but it has encouraged jurisdictions to address the known gaps.

FEMA Preparedness Grants by Mission Area, Fiscal Years 2013 through 2018



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) data. | GAO-20-297

FEMA is taking steps to strengthen the national preparedness system, but has yet to determine what steps are needed to address the nation's capability gaps across all levels of government. Specifically, FEMA is implementing a new methodology to collect more quantitative data on capabilities at the state, territory, and local levels—as GAO recommended in 2011—and also plans to begin assessing the federal government's capabilities. Including the federal government in such an assessment would enable FEMA and jurisdictions to assess national preparedness capabilities collectively. While these are positive steps that could meet the intent of the 2011 recommendation, FEMA has yet to determine what steps are needed to address the capability gaps once they are identified, including jurisdictions' capability gaps that have been known since 2012. By determining these steps and informing key stakeholders, such as Congress, about what resources will be needed across all levels of government, FEMA will be better positioned to address the nation's capability gaps.

FEMA after-action reports have identified areas for improvement and lessons learned following disasters, but has completed after-action reviews for only 29 percent of disasters from 2017 through 2019. FEMA lacks a formal mechanism to track corrective actions and does not have guidance on sharing after-action reports with key external stakeholders, as appropriate.