

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106982](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal decision-makers need evidence about whether federal programs and activities are achieving intended results. The Evidence Act aims to enhance federal agencies' capacity to build and use evidence.

The Evidence Act includes provisions for GAO to report on findings and trends in agencies' capacity assessments. This report describes (1) common themes in agencies' capacity assessments, and (2) benefits and challenges related to conducting capacity assessments identified by agency officials.

To address these objectives, GAO conducted a content analysis of 23 agencies' capacity assessments. GAO also interviewed OMB and Evaluation Officer Council staff as well as officials at the 24 agencies directed by OMB to conduct capacity assessments—those covered by the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that OMB should leverage the Evaluation Officer Council to (1) identify agency officials' needs for additional guidance on capacity assessments and address them accordingly and (2) identify, document, and share lessons learned on capacity assessment methods. OMB neither agreed nor disagreed with the recommendations and stated that it would take them into consideration moving forward. The Departments of Agriculture and the Treasury, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Social Security Administration, and U.S. Agency for International Development also provided comments. The remaining agencies did not comment.

View [GAO-24-106982](#). For more information, contact Dawn Locke at (202) 512-6806 or locked@gao.gov.

August 2024

EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING

Agencies Need Additional Guidance to Assess Their Capacity

What GAO Found

The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (Evidence Act) requires agencies, every 4 years, to assess aspects of their statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis efforts by addressing five topics, such as quality and methods. Agencies published capacity assessments for the first time in 2022.

GAO identified 12 themes related to six topics across agencies' assessments.

Topics	Themes
	Agencies identified:
Capacity	1. Strengths to build one or more source of evidence, including having staff and tools to undertake various evidence-building activities 2. Opportunities to enhance capacity, including hiring new staff and training existing staff
Coverage	3. Their organizational approach (e.g., centralized vs. dispersed) to evidence-building 4. The programs, operations, and activities covered by their evidence-building activities
Quality	5. Strengths to ensure evidence quality by following policies and guidance and leveraging expertise 6. Opportunities to enhance the quality of evidence, including by standardizing evidence-building approaches and tools
Methods	7. Strengths to ensure methods were rigorous and appropriate by following policies and guidance and leveraging expertise 8. Opportunities to enhance capacity for and the implementation of certain methodologies
Effectiveness	9. Strengths to ensure evidence was useful and used, including by incorporating it into existing decision-making processes 10. Opportunities to enhance use by prioritizing new evidence to meet needs and better disseminating evidence
Independence	11. Strengths for ensuring independence, including by following relevant policies, guidance, and leading practices 12. Opportunities to enhance independence by revising evidence-building policies, practices, and organizational structures

Source: GAO analysis of agency capacity assessments. | GAO-24-106982

Agency officials identified common benefits and challenges related to developing capacity assessments. Officials expect some challenges will not persist. For example, officials stated it was challenging to identify all evidence-building activities because they are dispersed around their agencies, but they have now developed a better understanding of where those activities occurred.

Agency officials also identified unresolved challenges:

- **Guidance.** Agency officials said they faced challenges understanding Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance and how the assessments would be used. GAO found variation in what agencies assessed and how they presented their findings. Additional guidance could help agencies provide more comparable information in future iterations. This could also help decision-makers identify and address common issues across agencies.
- **Methods.** Agency officials said it was a challenge to identify appropriate approaches for conducting the assessment. They used different methodologies to assess their evidence-building capacity, which sometimes did not result in useful information. Identifying, documenting, and sharing lessons learned could help agencies select appropriate methodologies to ensure future capacity assessments consistently provide useful information.

The interagency Evaluation Officer Council, chaired by OMB, has responsibilities for sharing information and helping agencies with Evidence Act implementation.