

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-106724](#), a report to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

For fiscal years 2016 through 2022, GSA received \$1.9 billion for 15 new federal courthouse projects. GSA and other project stakeholders use the Design Guide to design functional and cost-effective courthouses.

GAO was asked to review issues related to the Design Guide, including key changes the judiciary made in the 2021 version. This report examines, among other things, (1) the judiciary's rationale for making changes in the 2021 Design Guide, and the extent to which these changes could affect the size and cost of selected courthouse projects; and (2) the extent to which the judiciary collaborated with partner agencies in making changes in the 2021 Design Guide.

GAO reviewed documentation and interviewed GSA and judiciary officials. GAO also worked with these officials to model (i.e., estimate) the sizes and construction costs of seven new courthouse projects based on standards in the 2007 and 2021 Design Guides. GAO conducted site visits to five of these courthouses, selected for variation in size and cost.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations, including that the judiciary document a process to better ensure effective collaboration when updating the Design Guide and, in collaboration with GSA, use relevant information to reassess the need for increased circulation requirements. The judiciary did not agree or disagree with GAO's recommendations but stated it will evaluate them and report on follow-up actions. GAO continues to believe these actions would enhance the judiciary's courthouse planning.

View [GAO-25-106724](#). For more information, contact David Marroni at (202) 512-2834 or marronid@gao.gov, or Brian Bothwell at (202) 512-6888 or bothwell@gao.gov.

October 2024

FEDERAL COURTHOUSE CONSTRUCTION

New Design Standards Will Result in Significant Size and Cost Increases

What GAO Found

The U.S. Courts Design Guide (Design Guide) establishes standards for the General Services Administration (GSA) and project stakeholders to follow when designing and constructing new federal courthouses. The judiciary made multiple changes in its 2021 revision of the Design Guide, including 16 that GAO determined could affect the size and cost of courthouse projects. Judiciary officials said they made these changes primarily to provide courts with design flexibility and to incorporate policies the judiciary had adopted since 2007, when it last formally revised the Design Guide. GAO analyzed the potential effects of these changes for six recently or nearly completed courthouses and one planned courthouse designed under the 2007 Design Guide. On the basis of this analysis, GAO estimates that the changes would have increased the size of these selected courthouses by almost 6 percent and construction costs by approximately 12 percent, on average, had the courthouses been built using the new 2021 Design Guide. These increases are due, in part, to the increase in judiciary circulation requirements (i.e., the amount of space required for movement of the public, court staff, and prisoners). Judiciary officials stated that the increased circulation requirements were necessary to enhance safety and address concerns that the 2007 circulation requirements did not provide enough space.

Estimated Percentage Increases in Size and Construction Costs of Selected Courthouses Resulting from Changes in the 2021 U.S. Courts Design Guide

| Courthouse location | Size increase | Construction cost increase |
|---------------------|---------------|----------------------------|
| Anniston, AL | 5.6% | 11.4% |
| Charlotte, NC | 5.6 | 13.2 |
| Greenville, SC | 4.3 | 6.5 |
| Harrisburg, PA | 6.0 | 8.5 |
| Huntsville, AL | 6.4 | 16.8 |
| San Antonio, TX | 6.7 | 13.7 |
| Future courthouse | 5.5 | 17.1 |
| Total | 5.8% | 11.9% |

Source: GAO analysis of judiciary and General Services Administration data. | [GAO-25-106724](#)

GAO found that the judiciary solicited input from GSA and the U.S. Marshals Service on changes to the 2021 Design Guide, but that it did not engage in two-way communication with GSA or involve the Federal Protective Service, which has courthouse security responsibilities. In addition, the judiciary did not indicate how, or whether, it planned to address GSA's concerns that the increased circulation requirements were based on a 2012 assessment of older courthouses that GAO had previously found to be oversized. Moreover, the judiciary did not systematically collect information from project stakeholders or courthouse occupants to determine whether the previous circulation requirements were too restrictive. Developing and documenting a process to ensure effective collaboration, and reassessing the need for increased circulation requirements using relevant information—such as the size and cost estimates above and views of project stakeholders and courthouse occupants—will help the judiciary plan and design functional and cost-effective courthouses.