
June 1995

**Program
Evaluation and
Methodology
Issue Area Plan**

**Fiscal Years
1995-97**

Foreword

As the investigative arm of Congress and the nation's auditor, the General Accounting Office is charged with following the federal dollar wherever it goes. Reflecting stringent standards of objectivity and independence, GAO's audits, evaluations, and investigations promote a more efficient and cost-effective government; expose fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement in federal programs; help Congress target budget reductions; assess financial and information management; and alert Congress to developing trends that may have significant fiscal or budgetary consequences. In fulfilling its responsibilities, GAO performs original research and uses hundreds of databases, or creates its own when information is unavailable elsewhere.

To ensure that GAO's resources are directed toward the most important issues facing Congress, each of GAO's 35 issue areas develops a strategic plan that describes the significance of the issues it addresses, its objectives, and the focus of its work. Each issue area relies heavily on input from congressional committees, agency officials, and subject-matter experts in developing its strategic plan.

The Program Evaluation and Methodology issue area is a technical area of work implemented within GAO. Because of the growing need of Congress to understand the impact or effects of federal programs, the issue area was developed to use innovative research methodologies for evaluating federal and related programs and activities. Consequently, the work is characterized by its interdisciplinary approach. Projects are conducted by sociologists, psychologists, engineers, economists, and statisticians as well as other staff with technical backgrounds, most of whom hold doctorates. Our projects are designed to address evaluation and methodological questions that require complex evaluation approaches and extensive data analyses.

To address these questions, research methods are used to design the evaluations, collect and analyze data, and interpret the analytical results. These evaluations are conducted across a number of substantive areas. They include defense, education, agriculture, aging, environment, health, public management, transportation, and welfare. Consequently, the program evaluation and methodological work crosscuts other substantive work areas within the agency.

The work emphasizes three issues:

1. The program effectiveness and quality issue focuses on executive branch programs, including research work conducted by or for federal agencies.
2. The government evaluation capability and performance issue focuses on state and federal agencies.
3. The methodological review and development issue focuses on three areas: the soundness of statistical and measurement methods used within the executive branch; the soundness of agencies' testing and assessment methods; the contributions of new and innovative evaluation and analytical approaches to evaluating program effectiveness.

Our issue area planning process is used to develop preliminary ideas concerning the focus of our work, and then identify high-priority projects. In order to accomplish this, we consult with Members of Congress and their staffs as well as key industry and agency officials. In addition, we convene an advisory panel of nationally recognized technical experts to review our project proposals and provide recommendations concerning the focus and scope of the evaluation methods we plan to use. In the sections that follow, we characterize the work we plan to conduct for fiscal years 1995, 1996, and 1997. If you have any questions or suggestions concerning this plan, please call me at (202) 512-2900.



Terry E. Hedrick
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Program Evaluation and Methodology

Contents

Foreword	1
Table I: Key Issues	4
Table II: Planned Major Work	6
Table III: GAO Contacts	7

Table I: Key Issues

Issue	Significance
Program effectiveness and quality: What is the effectiveness or quality of executive branch programs?	It is important to understand how much executive branch programs, including research programs, are actually achieving their desired results, especially if there are questions about whether they are cost-effective. It is also important to understand whether these programs are having unintended effects, both positive and negative. In some cases, studies focus on assessing the quality of a program rather than its results.
Government evaluation capability and performance: What is the evaluation capability and performance of state and federal agencies?	Title VII of the GAO authorizing legislation mandates the assessment of the executive branch's program evaluation capability and performance. The Government Performance and Results Act emphasizes that executive branch agencies should measure performance. State governments currently implement most social programs, and they may take over even more programs. Assessing these agencies' capability to conduct evaluations and examining the quality of that work will help ensure that programs are being designed and implemented in a cost-effective and efficient manner.
Methodology review and development: Are analytical methods used within the executive branch sound and can new and innovative methods contribute to an understanding of program effectiveness?	Increasingly, federal agencies are required to use sophisticated analytical methods in conducting their work. This includes statistical, measurement, indicator, testing, and assessment methods. The application of these methods and the analytical results they produce influence both policy and program decisions. Consequently, it is important to determine whether these analytical methods are sound. In addition, new and innovative methods are being developed that may have applications for a broad range of evaluations or analytical assessments. It is therefore important to examine their potential, especially if they could be applied to programs that have not been assessed because of the shortcomings of traditional methods.

Table I: Key Issues

Objectives	Focus of work
<ul style="list-style-type: none">—Identify key executive branch programs, including research programs, that are not effective.—Identify executive branch programs where unintended effects occur that are unacceptable.—Identify executive branch programs, including research programs, whose quality is unacceptable.—Determine whether the effectiveness or quality of the programs can be improved and, if not, whether the program is viable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">—The effectiveness of federal regulatory health protection programs.—The effectiveness of cost containment approaches in health care.—Cost-effectiveness and resource allocations in defense systems.—Effectiveness of medical training, technologies, and clinical research.—The effectiveness of productivity and quality-enhancing programs in the federal government.—Viability of technologies for immigration control and for transportation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">—Ensure that state and federal agencies either have or are developing the capability to evaluate their programs.—Ensure that program evaluations are unbiased and technically sound.—Establish program evaluation within the state and federal sectors as an important component of reforming government.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">—Identification of information and methods required to evaluate legislatively mandated federal programs.—The adequacy of evaluations assessing immigration issues and programs.—Capability of federal and state agencies to conduct program evaluations.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">—Evaluate the methodological soundness of statistical, measurement, testing, and assessment methods used by executive branch agencies to support major policy and program decisions.—Identify policies or programs that are based upon flawed analyses and identify the consequences of these programs.—Determine whether the methodological problems can be corrected and, if not, whether the affected policies or programs are viable.—Determine whether new and innovative methods can be applied to programs to determine their effectiveness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">—Adequacy of models and measurement methods applied in the agricultural and environmental protection areas.—The quality of measures used to assess social conditions.—The acceptability of methods used to design and implement defense programs.—The feasibility of using innovative applications of analytical methods to assess medical technologies.

Table II: Planned Major Work

Issue	Planned major job starts
Program effectiveness or quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Federal responses to environmental health risks —Nutritional training requirements for primary care physicians —Government support of super-car development —Cost-effectiveness of alternative fuels —Cost-effectiveness of focused medical review —Effects of drug utilization review on Medicaid drug prescription —Utilization and effectiveness of expert systems —Cost-effectiveness of defense sensor technologies —Impact of structural variation in managed care on health care systems —The effects of regulatory requirements on clinical research —Alzheimer’s disease research —Medicare Part B prescreening effectiveness —The accuracy and cost-effectiveness of medical tests —Effectiveness of Immigration and Naturalization Service border control
Government evaluation capability and performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Information necessary and available for evaluating the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act —The use of program evaluation in implementing the Government Performance and Results Act —Immigration and Naturalization Service evaluation of worker identity systems —Federal and state government program evaluation capabilities
Methodology review and development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Adequacy of models and indicators for measuring agricultural sustainability —Validity of alternative measures for welfare dependency —Methodological foundations of the DOD science technology program —Biases in the armed forces selection testing —Factors that contribute to poor performance on educational assessment —The application of spatial analysis to environmental equity issues —Assessment of hormone replacement therapy for menopause —Meta-analysis of data supporting applications for drug approval by the Food and Drug Administration

Table III: GAO Contacts

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