



Highlights of [GAO-05-1](#), a report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Science, Technology, and Space, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate.

Why GAO Did This Study

There has been growing activity and interest in developing a system of key national indicators that would provide an independent, trusted, reliable, widely available, and usable source of information. Such a system would facilitate fact-based assessments of the position and progress of the United States, on both an absolute and relative basis. This interest emerges from the following perspectives.

- The nation's complex challenges and decisions require more sophisticated information resources than are now available.
- Large investments have been made in indicators on a variety of topics ranging from health and education to the economy and the environment that could be aggregated and disseminated in ways to better inform the nation.
- The United States does not have a national system that assembles key information on economic, environmental, and social and cultural issues.

Congressional and other leaders recognized that they could benefit from the experiences of others who have already developed and implemented such key indicator systems. GAO was asked to conduct a study on: (1) The state of the practice in these systems in the United States and around the world, (2) Lessons learned and implications for the nation, and (3) Observations, options, and next steps to be considered if further action is taken.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-1.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Christopher Hoenig at (202) 512-6779 or hoenigc@gao.gov.

INFORMING OUR NATION

Improving How to Understand and Assess the USA's Position and Progress

What GAO Found

GAO studied a diverse set of key indicator systems that provide economic, environmental, social and cultural information for local, state, or regional jurisdictions covering about 25 percent of the U.S. population—as well as several systems outside of the United States. GAO found opportunities to improve how our nation understands and assesses its position and progress.

Citizens in diverse locations and at all levels of society have key indicator systems. Building on a wide array of topical bodies of knowledge in areas such as the economy, education, health, and the environment, GAO found that individuals and institutions across the United States, other nations, and international organizations have key indicator systems to better inform themselves. These systems focus on providing a public good: a single, freely available source for key indicators of a jurisdiction's position and progress that is disseminated to broad audiences. A broad consortium of public and private leaders has begun to develop such a system for our nation as a whole.

These systems are a noteworthy development with potentially broad applicability. Although indicator systems are diverse, GAO identified important similarities. For example, they faced common challenges in areas such as agreeing on the types and number of indicators to include and securing and maintaining adequate funding. Further, they showed evidence of positive effects, such as enhancing collaboration to address public issues, and helping to inform decision making and improve research. Because these systems exist throughout the United States, in other nations, and at the supranational level, the potential for broad applicability exists, although the extent of applicability has yet to be determined.

Congress and the nation have options to consider for further action. GAO identified nine key design features to help guide the development and implementation of an indicator system. For instance, these features include establishing a clear purpose, defining target audiences and their needs, and ensuring independence and accountability. Customized factors will be crucial in adapting such features to any particular level of society or location. Also, there are several alternative options for a lead entity to initiate and sustain an indicator system: publicly led, privately led, or a public-private partnership in either a new or existing organization.

Observations, Options, and Next Steps

Key indicator systems merit serious discussion at all levels of society, including the national level, and clear implementation options exist from which to choose. Hence, Congress and the nation should consider how to

- improve awareness of these systems and their implications for the nation,
- support and pursue further research,
- help to catalyze discussion on further activity at subnational levels, and
- begin a broader dialogue on the potential for a U.S. key indicator system.