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June 1996

# Program Evaluation And Methodology Issue Area Plan

## Fiscal Years 1996-98





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# Foreword

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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 efficient and cost-effective government; expose waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement in federal programs; help Congress target areas for budget reductions; assess financial 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 32 issue areas develops a strategic plan that describes the significance of the issues it addresses, its objectives, and the focus of its work. In developing its strategic plan, each issue area relies heavily on input from congressional committees, agency officials, and subject-matter experts.

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 results and effects of federal programs, this issue area was developed to use and assess innovative research methodologies for evaluating federal and related programs and activities. Consequently, the work is characterized by its interdisciplinary approach. Our projects are designed to address evaluation and methodological questions that require complex evaluation approaches and extensive data analysis.

To address these questions, we use sophisticated research methods to design the evaluations, collect and analyze the data, and interpret the analytical results. We conduct these evaluations across a number of substantive areas. They include defense, health, environment, and public management. Consequently, the program evaluation and methodological work cuts across other substantive work areas within the agency.

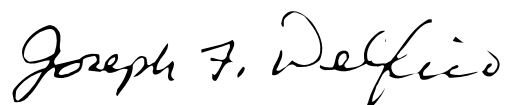
The work emphasizes three issues:

1. The program effectiveness and quality issue focuses on the examination of federal programs using evaluation research methods.

2. The methodological bases for decision-making issue focuses on assessing the analytical and empirical bases for data used to inform public policy.

3. The methodological development issue addresses how to foster the application of standardized designs and methods used in program evaluation.

In our issue area planning process, we 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 consult with nationally recognized experts to develop project proposals and provide recommendations on the methods we use. In the sections that follow, we characterize the work we plan to conduct for fiscal years 1996, 1997, and 1998. If you have any questions or suggestions concerning this plan, please call me at (202) 512-2900.



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Program Evaluation and Methodology

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# Table I: Key Issues

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Issue	Significance
<b>Program effectiveness and quality:</b> Examining the outcomes of federal programs using evaluation research methods.	Title VII of the Congressional Budget Act of 1974 mandates GAO's assessment of the programmatic performance of the executive branch. The Government Performance and Results Act emphasizes that executive branch agencies should measure performance and should use evaluation results to develop their strategic plans and determine program direction. State and local governments currently implement most social programs and they may do this even more if Congress increases block grants. It is therefore critical to examine the outcomes of complex federally funded programs by applying evaluation research methods to ensure that these outcomes are acceptable and cost-effective. In some cases, it may be important to determine whether the cost-effectiveness of the programs can be improved.
<b>Methodological bases for decision-making:</b> Assessing the analytical and empirical bases for data used to inform public policy.	It is important to assess the quality of the analytical methods government employs to develop the information and data that are used in policy decision-making. This is especially important when the ability to develop information and data may be curtailed because of budget cuts and when the use of faulty data may result in federal funds being spent ineffectively on a program. Quality assessment may include the validity of the methods as they are used, the policy relevance of the information or data produced, and the efficiency and cost-effectiveness in which data are collected and analyzed.
<b>Methodology development:</b> Fostering the application of standardized designs and methods used in program evaluation.	Federal agencies, including GAO, are required to use sophisticated evaluation methods in conducting their work. At the same time, budgets are being reduced and agencies downsized. As a result, agencies are trying to meet their requirements with fewer resources. Determining ways in which evaluation requirements can be met by means of standardized, low-cost approaches without compromising evaluation quality is important. It is also critical to explore ways to facilitate and support the transfer of these approaches from one agency to another. Additionally, the continued development of evaluation standards compatible with audit standards is essential.

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**Table I: Key Issues**

<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Focus of Work</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure that evaluations at the federal and state level are adequate to allow Congress to determine the effectiveness, quality, and results of federally funded programs.</li><li>• Demonstrate the use of program evaluation research methods to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, and quality of major federal programs.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The outcomes of major federal programs, including health and DOD's procurement programs</li><li>• Approaches that can strengthen the evaluative potential of information reported to Congress under the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA)</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identify key program areas in which the science and analytical methodologies that underlie public policy decision-making are being challenged.</li><li>• Evaluate the underlying scientific assumptions and analytical bases in key program areas in terms of their validity and application, the quality of the information and data they produce, and the efficiency and appropriateness of the production of information and data.</li><li>• Identify cost-effective alternatives for improving these methodologies and strengthening the resulting information and data.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The reliability and applicability of the principal analytical methods used in the federal regulatory process, especially risk assessment</li><li>• The efficiency and effectiveness of the drug development and review process, including the research done in the clinical phase and the evaluations conducted by FDA</li><li>• The quality of information and data and cost-effective alternatives for developing data in the criminal justice area</li><li>• Methods for assessing waste, fraud, and abuse in entitlement programs</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Develop approaches to help GAO and other federal agencies perform effective program evaluations without increasing costs or staff.</li><li>• Develop and apply standard program evaluation methods.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The use of cross-design synthesis to incorporate different disciplinary approaches into individual evaluations</li><li>• The identification of methods to help analysts perform program evaluations more efficiently and still adhere to program evaluation standards</li><li>• Evaluation standards that can be used across government programs and levels</li></ul>

# Table II: Planned Major Work

Issue	Planned Major Job Starts
<b>Program effectiveness and quality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Adequacy of performance data submitted under GPRA to support conclusions about agency and program effectiveness</li> <li>•Relative strength of techniques for evaluating the performance of and results from block grants and similar programs</li> <li>•Assessment of strategies for examining performance and results in science and technology programs</li> <li>•Effectiveness of the Early and Periodic Screening Diagnosis and Treatment (EPSDT) Program</li> <li>•Development and application of methods to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of DOD's process for acquiring major new weapon systems</li> <li>•Determine the effects of efforts to support long-term defense industry vitality and competitiveness</li> </ul>
<b>Methodological bases for decision-making</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Adequacy of scientific information for Environmental Protection Agency regulatory decision-making</li> <li>•Adequacy and cost-effectiveness of alternatives to risk-assessment approaches to achieve regulatory goals</li> <li>•Opportunities to make research more efficient during the clinical phase of drug development</li> <li>•Improve the effectiveness of drug evaluation through the application of meta-analysis</li> <li>•Assessment of the quality of information and data used in the criminal justice area</li> <li>• Methods for assessing waste, fraud, and abuse in Medicare programs</li> </ul>
<b>Methodology development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and demonstrate an approach for combining program evaluation and auditing techniques for use on GAO jobs</li> <li>•Develop methods to perform evaluations quickly that meet or exceed quality standards</li> <li>•Develop and apply a set of standards for program evaluation that can help guide evaluation efforts at all levels of government</li> </ul>



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# Table III: GAO Contacts

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