

U.S. Government Accountability Office

CNSTAT-AAPSS Symposium on Federal Statistics GAO and Congressional Uses of Federal Statistics

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GAO and the Congress

- GAO is the audit and evaluation agency for Congress
 - Core values: accountability, integrity, reliability
 - *Government Auditing Standards* (GAO-07-731G)
 - Institutional independence
- GAO's work largely responds to requests and mandates
- 1,200 reports a year
- Relies considerably on data from statistical agencies

GAO's Use of Statistical Agencies' Data

- Census Bureau data used widely
 - § Census
 - § American Community Survey
 - § Current Population Survey
 - Bureau of Economic Analyses
 - § National Income and Product Accounts central to work on state and local government fiscal challenges (GAO-09-320R, GAO-08-317)
 - § Data on multinational corporations used to estimate effective tax rates (GAO-08-950)
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GAO's Use of Statistical Agencies' Data (cont'd)

- Bureau of Labor Statistics
 - § Employer Costs for Employee Compensation used to demonstrate employer costs for benefits are growing faster than employer costs for wages (GAO-06-285)
 - § Current Population Survey data on occupational injury and Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries used to report on improving safety in meat and poultry industries (GAO-05-96)
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GAO's Use of Statistical Agencies' Data (cont'd)

- National Center for Education Statistics

- § Common Core of Data used to evaluate states' use of No Child Left Behind school improvement funds (GAO-08-380)

- National Agricultural Statistics Service

- § Census of Agriculture used to evaluate landowners' decisions to convert grassland to cropland (GAO-07-1054)

GAO's Use of Statistical Agencies' Data (cont'd)

- Bureau of Justice Statistics
 - § Several surveys used to estimate denial of federal benefits to former drug offenders (GAO-05-238)
- Many other statistical agencies' data

GAO's Review of Statistical Agencies

- Census Bureau
 - § Congress' interest in the decennial census grounded in the constitution and congressional representation
 - § Many requests arise about census operations
 - § 2010 census added to GAO's high-risk list in March 2008
 - § 40 reports issued FY 2005-2009

GAO's Review of Statistical Agencies (cont'd)

- Evaluation of other statistical agencies' operations is rare
 - § Congress occasionally asks about centralizing statistical agencies (last in mid-1990s)
 - § GAO-07-02 recommended reexamining duplication in major household surveys
 - § Some congressional interest arose when the administration proposed eliminating the Survey of Income and Program Participation
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Importance of Data Reliability in GAO's Work

- Under *Government Auditing Standards*, auditors are to assess the reliability of data used, including statistical agencies' data
 - Information on statistical agencies' Web sites about data quality required under the Information Quality Act is very helpful in GAO's data reliability assessment of their data
 - Auditing Standards also require reporting limitations of data; may be indicators of statistical agencies' user issues
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GAO's Role Regarding Key National Indicators

- GAO participated with executive branch agencies in conceptualizing Key National Indicators
 - Progress on Key National Indicators is necessarily an executive branch responsibility
 - Leadership appropriately remains with others for the U.S. system
 - Congress would be an important user
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INTOSAI's Key National Indicators Initiative

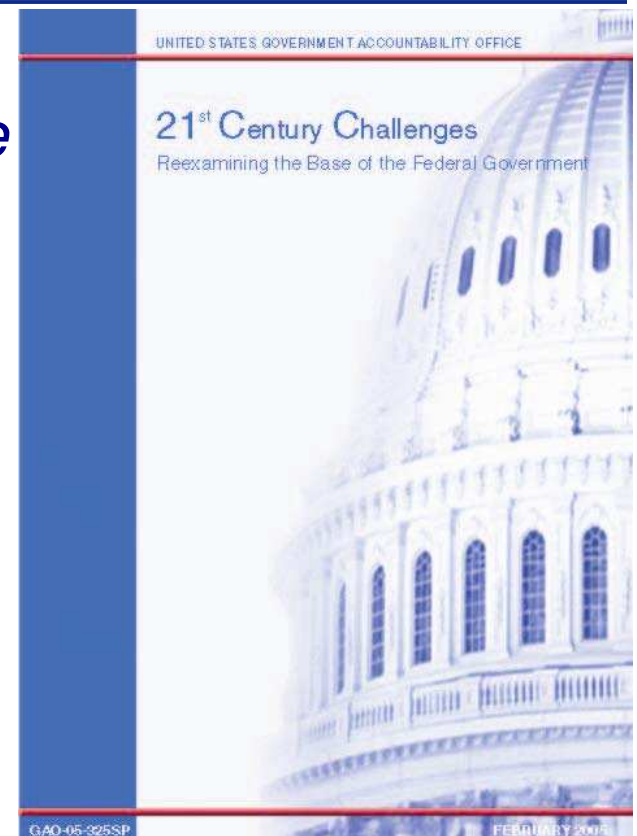
- INTOSAI, International Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions, represents 184 countries
- Focused on Key National Indicators at 2007 triennial meeting in Mexico City
 - § 23 countries reported performing some role in national indicator systems
 - § Concerns about capacity, independence, mandate

INTOSAI's Key National Indicators Initiative (cont'd)

- The 20 nations of the Working Group on Key National Indicators agreed at their initial meeting in Moscow in May 2008 to develop a guide to indicator terms and concepts
 - Memorandum of Understanding for cooperation between INTOSAI and OECD in the area of Measurement of the Progress of Societies was signed in June 2008
 - 14 member SAIs were to participate in the Working Group's second meeting in Beijing, April 21-23, 2009
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Opportunities for the Future

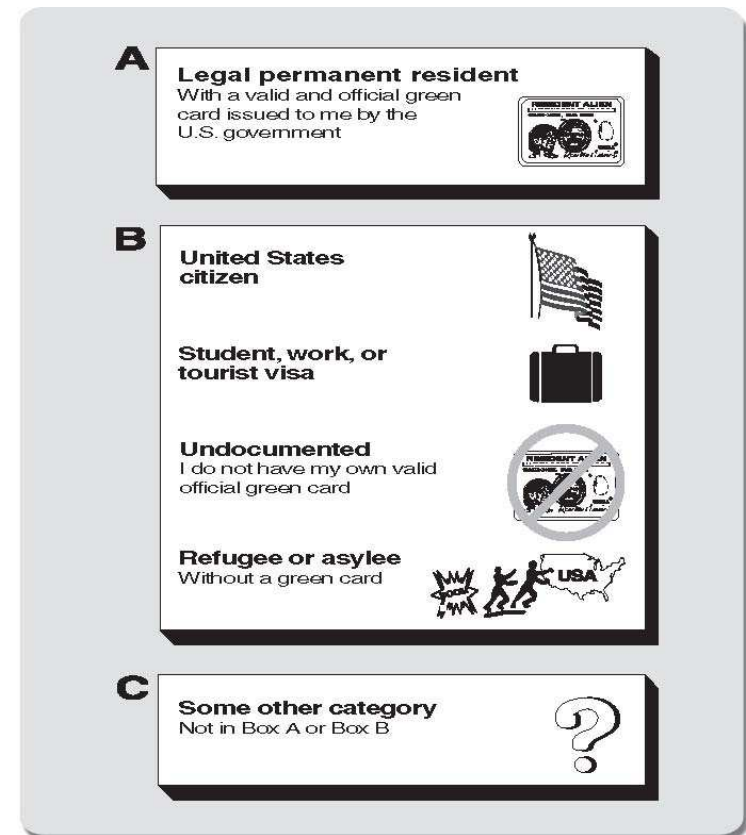
- A question asked in *21st Century Challenges: Reexamining the Base of the Federal Government* (GAO-05-325SP)
 - § Is the federal statistical system adapting successfully to the nation's needs for information?
- The assessment is important for making data for critical program and policy decisions available



Opportunities for the Future (cont'd)

To collect better data on immigration and the foreign-born

- Congress keeps asking GAO to estimate the impact of illegal immigration (GAO-04-82; GAO-04-733)
- GAO's effort to innovate survey design to estimate sensitive populations could help (GAO-06-775; GAO-01-126SP; GAO/GGD-00-30)



Sources: GAO; Corel Draw (flag and suitcase); DHS (resident alien cards). (The actual size of the card is 8-1/2" by 11.")

Opportunities for the Future (cont'd)

- To reconsider, after 2010 decennial census, census design so as to achieve improved population count at lower cost
- To create more uniform interfaces to public data across agencies so users do not have to learn a new interface for each agency or survey

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