

*US Department of Commerce
Evidence/Evaluation Capacity Assessment
FY 22/26*

What is a Capacity Assessment?

The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (the Evidence Act), [Public Law 115-435](#), requires that agencies publish a Learning Agenda, with their Strategic Plan, in the first year of the Presidential election cycle. The Learning Agenda lists the evidence and evaluations the agency will develop to support implementation of the Strategic Plan. A third document, the Capacity Assessment, reports on the agency's resources to carry out the Learning Agenda.

The Capacity Assessment reviews and appraises the statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis efforts of the agency. Assessment criteria include:

- Coverage: in each bureau, what evidence and evaluation activities are taking place and/or are planned? What departmental operations and activities are the subject of this work?
- Quality: are the data used of high quality with respect to utility, objectivity, and integrity?
- Methods: what are the methods being used for these activities, do these methods incorporate the necessary level of rigor, and are those methods appropriate for the questions to which they are being applied?
- Effectiveness: are the activities meeting their intended outcomes, including serving the needs of stakeholders? How are the findings of analyses being disseminated?
- Independence: to what extent are the activities being carried out free from bias and inappropriate influence?

Department of Commerce Approach to the Capacity Assessment

The Department of Commerce (DOC) Capacity Assessment was conducted in June of 2021, in order to inform DOC bureau budget submissions for FY 2023. The assessment was led by the Department Evaluation Officer in collaboration with the bureau Evaluation Leads. To complete the assessment, each bureau listed evidence/evaluation projects in the FY 22 and FY 23 Annual Evaluation Plans and

anticipated in the five-year Department Learning Agenda. For each project a rating was provided for the quality, rigor, effectiveness, and independence of the research project, given the anticipated approach. The bureau Evaluation Leads consulted with their internal stakeholders on ratings. Lastly, the template called for a summary assessment of the bureau's coverage of topics that should be a priority for evidence and evaluation.

The completed templates and interviews with the bureau Evaluation Leads on capacity are summarized in the following sections of this document. The sections correspond to the questions in [OMB A-11, Part 6, section 290.13](#).

Summary of Findings

Programs and Initiatives being evaluated and analyzed –

The DOC Learning Agenda for FY 22/26 and the Department Annual Evaluation Plans for FY 22 and FY 23 list all the significant evidence development and evaluations currently planned. The Learning Agenda will be revisited/refreshed each year and may change because new issues and/or evidence needs have emerged. The research projects listed engage in “evidence building,” both through the evaluation of a project or program, as well as through foundational fact-finding needed to effectively administer a program or to create baseline data essential to a future evaluation.

Impact, output, process, or formative evaluations are planned on the following topics:

Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) – Indicators of Income Distribution

Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) – Effectiveness and Agility of Export Controls on New Technologies

Census Bureau - 2020 Decennial

Economic Development Administration (EDA) – CARES and American Rescue Plan Programming; Economic Development Revolving Loan Program; Scaling New Technology

International Trade Administration (ITA) - SelectUSA Promotion of Foreign Direct Investment; Export Assistance for Businesses

Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA) - Interventions to Promote Minority Business Participation in Manufacturing

National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) - Commercialization of New Technologies; Program Review by the National Academy of Science, Engineering and Medicine; Manufacturing Extension Partnership Program

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) - Process Fidelity of NOAA's Impact-Based Decision Support Services; Equitable Climate Service Delivery; Assessments of Planned Offshore Energy Activities

National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) - Expansion of Broadband Access

Office of the Chief Financial Officer and Assistant Secretary for Administration (CFO/ASA) - Leadership Development Programming; Processes for Recruitment and Hiring

United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) - Customer Experience; Minority and Women Participation in Intellectual Property Protection

Extent to which the needs of various divisions (e.g., bureaus, offices, programs) are supported? –

Many research projects will be carried out with the help of contractors and academics. A resource guide to instruments and programs that can be used to engage academics in Department research is being created.

Collaboration across the DOC will also support evaluation and evidence-building activities. The Census Bureau's *Center for Economic Studies* is supporting evidence/evaluation efforts of other bureaus, and Census is collaborating with the Economic Development Administration (EDA) on new economic indicators and data tools that will be useful in both project selection and monitoring. Census has

provided technical assistance in support of International Trade Administration (ITA) survey research. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is collaborating with the General Services Administration's (GSA) *Office of Evaluation Sciences* on research supporting improved communication of weather and climate information to underserved communities.

Extent to which activities address balance among learning, management, and oversight? –

The Department Learning Agenda includes “foundational fact finding,” formative evaluations, output evaluations, impact evaluations, and process evaluation/improvement projects. Projects are prescribed for all bureaus and in support of all the Strategic Objectives in the FY 22/26 Strategic Plan. Most initiatives will be tools for learning, management, and oversight. Several projects use qualitative research approaches (interviews, focus groups, surveys) to develop evidence on stakeholder needs and service gaps. This information will inform further research and management decisions on policies and priorities.

The Department's quantitative projects will leverage the Department's administrative and statistical data, including but not limited to data from Customer Relationship Management systems, grants management systems, the Census Business Register, and the Longitudinal Foreign Trade Transaction database, to learn what interventions work under what circumstances. The *Census Opportunity Atlas*, *Community Resilience Estimates*, and *Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates* will support the identification of communities and populations that have been historically underserved. The Department will hold itself accountable for achieving equity in program benefits.

The creation and refinement of rigorous evidence, relied upon by millions of people, is a core function of several of DOC's bureaus including the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), and NOAA. These agencies are in the “evidence business.” Census and BEA create data sets and statistics that are fundamental to economic and demographic research and monitoring change (i.e., learning, management, and oversight). NOAA and NIST create data sets and conduct

research essential to economic progress, public safety and monitoring the effects of their conservation work (i.e., learning, management, and oversight).

Learning is also supported by the Census Bureau's "The Opportunity Project" which uses the wisdom of the crowd to solve problems. The Project asks the American community to provide their proposed solutions to pressing problems. For example, in Fall 2021, technology development sprints brought together 10+ organizations to improve minority businesses' access to capital and tackle the climate crisis through climate-smart communities. Participants included large companies, startups, minority owned businesses, city governments, and national advocacy organizations.

Most of the process evaluation/improvement work is prescribed under Goal Area 5 of the Strategic Plan, which pertains to customer service and mission support. "Lean" process improvement methods will be applied to improve service for both internal and external customers and implement [Executive Order 13571](#) on Transforming the Federal Customer Experience.

Extent to which the agency uses appropriate methods? –

Data quality is a preeminent value of the Department's scientific and statistical bureaus. Maintaining and improving data quality is supported by regimens that are assessed and upgraded as new methods and technology emerge. In support of the Evidence Act, data sets are being catalogued for the "Commerce Data Hub" that will facilitate use of this high-quality data by public and private organizations and individuals.

Census and BEA adhere to the [Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency](#) and [OMB Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys](#) and contribute to the content and evolution of this guidance. The bureaus refine and evolve data collections and statistics to meet the needs of data analysts and decision makers as the economy changes and new technology emerges. During the pandemic, Census created the **weekly** [Household Pulse Survey](#) and the [Small Business Pulse Survey](#) to monitor the effects of COVID 19 and the resulting quarantine. Census and BEA are investigating ways to provide more geographically granular and frequent data on the economy to help track recovery and the effectiveness of

recovery programming. BEA is also refining indicators of income distribution. Advisory committees, that include preeminent academics and business leaders, guide the development of new and improved data sets and statistics.

NOAA and NIST are responsible for research that is essential to economic vitality (e.g., new materials, information technology) and reducing and mitigating climate change (e.g., ocean levels and extreme weather trends). They invent and test new ways to collect data and methodologies for interpreting the data. Their science is published in peer-reviewed journals and is available to the general public on their websites.

The Census Bureau consults on survey research for other bureaus and their [Center for Economic Studies](#) (CES) is available to advise on methodologies for building evidence and conducting evaluations. The methodologies for some of the research, presented in the Learning Agenda, is notional. CES and/or qualified academics and contractors will be engaged to conduct the work or collaborate on it. These experts will refine methodologies. Further, the Office of the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs, which includes the Department Chief Economist, Evaluation Officer, Chief Data Officer, and Statistical Official, is establishing a system of internal peer review to bring additional expertise to evaluation methods. The General Services Administration's *Office of Evaluation Sciences* has provided expert input on statistical methods and will continue to be consulted as the Learning Agenda is executed.

Finally, the Department Administrative Order [\(DAO\) 216-21](#) on Program Evaluation sets standards for the relevance, rigor, independence, ethics, and transparency of evaluations and has reporting requirements to monitor implementation of annual Evaluation Plans and the standards.

Extent to which capacity is present for planning and implementing evaluation, disseminating findings, incorporating employee views, and using research and analysis in day-to-day operations? –

Bureaus fall along a spectrum of experience with, and staff dedicated to, employing evidence/evaluation research. Planning and transitioning research to operations is part of well-established protocols of the Department's larger bureaus and statistical organizations (NIST, NOAA, Census, BEA, US Patent and Trademark Office). The Economic Development Administration and the Minority Business Development Agency have had research as part of their portfolios for decades but have added capacity to meet the evidence/evaluation needs of their recently expanded programming. MBDA's Office of Policy Analysis and Development (OPAD) will lead the agency's evidence and evaluation efforts and assist other Federal agencies with data-based approaches to increasing program benefits to historically underserved communities.

ITA has considerable capacity for research on industry trends, and their Global Markets directorate has data and evaluation expertise. In recent years, ITA has collaborated with Census's Center for Economic Studies on an evaluation with a quasi-experimental design that leverages ITA's Customer Relations Management database and Census statistical data. The Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) will rely on contract support for evaluation and have great evidence building capabilities in their disciplines.

The Evaluation Officer and Chief Data Officer are housed in the Office of the Under Secretary for Economic Affairs (OUSEA). They collaborate together and with the Department's Statistical Official (a function that rotates between the Directors of BEA and the Census Bureau every two years). Currently, they are supported primarily by contractors and details and through collaboration with bureaus and staff from other offices.

The Department is making investments in OUSEA to increase the capacity to improve data accessibility, evidence/evaluation planning, and integrate findings into operations. The increased capabilities will provide methodological expertise, training programs, an internal peer review program, and support "data analysis on demand" for the Office of the Secretary.

The Evaluation Officer and staff are also responsible for administering [DAO 216-21](#) on Program Evaluation. This Department Administrative Order requires that bureaus report research findings to the Deputy Secretary and explain how the findings will be used in operations. The Evaluation Officer will report to the Deputy Secretary twice a year on the status of the Annual Evaluation Plan and the Learning Agenda.

Dissemination and Deployment of Evidence and Evaluations

Stakeholders will be consulted when research methodologies are designed and at significant milestones during the study process. Drafts and preliminary findings will be shared with internal stakeholders and staff of collaborating organizations. When projects are complete, the reports will be posted on the public-facing websites of the relevant bureaus. Care will be taken to ensure that legal restrictions on access to the information, e.g., for security or privacy reasons, are adhered to.

Significant evidence/evaluation findings are often presented at conferences and workshops to the appropriate communities of practices. NOAA, NIST, Census, and BEA research is often published in peer-reviewed journals as an objective measure of quality and to make the results more accessible.

Stakeholder engagement in the research process will primarily be the responsibility of the bureau/office sponsoring the development of the evidence/evaluation. However, the Evaluation Officer, MBDA, the Office of Business Liaison, the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, and the Office of Public Affairs will support stakeholder engagement through their networks of organizations and communities. The Evaluation Officer, the Office of Business Liaison, MBDA and the Office of the Secretary recently sponsored a “listening session” on the Department’s Learning Agenda and invited comments through a Dec. 3 notice in the Federal Register.

Conclusion

The Department of Commerce is a national resource for evidence on demographics, the economy, climate, weather, materials science, and other vital scientific research. The Department is making critical investments to promote

synergy from the deep and varied evidence and evaluation expertise of the bureaus and to get maximum value from Commerce's world-class data.