U.S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

250

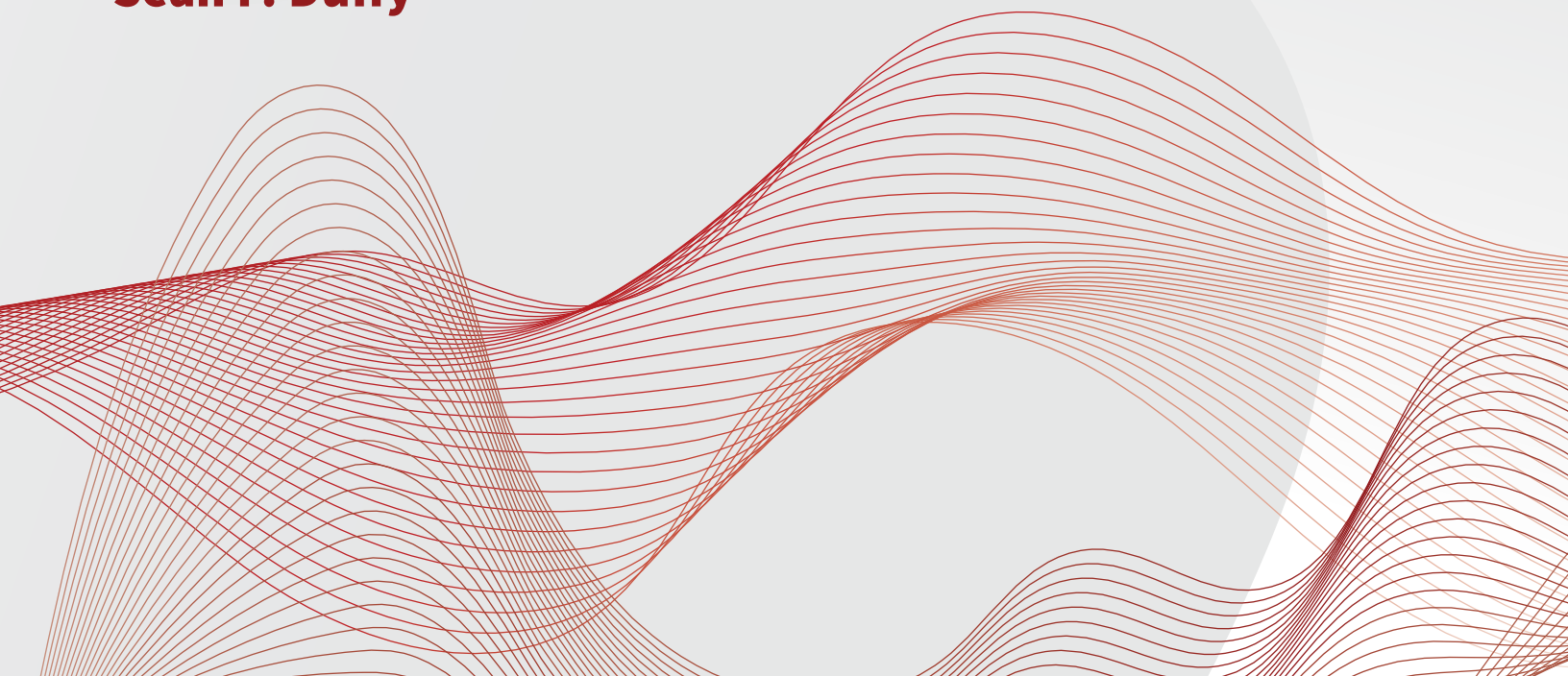
Fiscal Year **2026**

CAPACITY ASSESSMENT

for Statistics, Evaluation, Research, and Analysis

Secretary of Transportation

Sean P. Duffy



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Executive Summary

Decisions that are based on evidence are critical to the efforts of the U.S. Department of Transportation (Department or DOT) to improve safety, increase efficiency, drive innovation, and reduce costs. In accordance with the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018, DOT is publishing its *FY 2026 Capacity Assessment for Statistics, Evaluations, Research, and Analysis* (or *Capacity Assessment*). This assessment reveals important findings about how DOT can build upon its efforts to rigorously develop evidence to inform decision making.

Key Findings

1. The Department is well positioned to accomplish its evidence-building commitments to a high standard.

2. The Department uses evidence in day-to-day operations to support improvements to programs and inform decision making.

3. Facilitating collaboration through formal and informal channels contributes to the effectiveness and efficiency of DOT's evidence-building activities.

4. Teams across different Operating Administrations continue to face some hurdles to building evidence.

These findings come from a survey and focus groups that included staff from across the Department's Operating Administrations during calendar year 2025. DOT can use the findings gathered for the *Capacity Assessment* to inform actions that promote the use and availability of evidence for decision making and to provide a benchmark to support future assessments. The *Capacity Assessment* will also support the Department's implementation of its S*trategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2026-2030, Annual Evidence Plan, Annual Agency Performance Plan and Report,* and *Open Data Plan* by understanding DOT's strengths and ways to continue improving its evidence-building practice.[1]

1 These documents are available at **https://www.transportation.gov/dot-strategic-plan**, **https://www.transportation.gov/mission/budget/dot-budget-and-performance-documents**, and **https://www.transportation.gov/data/plan**.

Background

The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policy-Making Act of 2018 (Public Law 115-435) requires that the 24 federal agencies specified in the Chief Financial Officers Act of 1990 (Public Law 101-576) conduct and publish "an assessment on the coverage, quality, methods, effectiveness, and independence of [their] statistics, evaluations, research, and analysis efforts."[2]

Known as a capacity assessment, it must:

1. Measure the extent to which the agency's evidence-building activities are appropriate in terms of:
    - » Meeting the agency's needs
    - » Balancing the agency's needs for learning with other operational needs
    - » Using methods that are appropriate to the agency divisions' context and its research questions
    - » Integrating with agency processes
    - » Applying evidence to day-to-day operations
2. Provide a list of activities and operations that the agency is currently evaluating or analyzing.

The law stipulates that agencies must publish a capacity assessment every four years as a component of their strategic plan.[3]

DOT's Evaluation Officer oversaw the development of the Department's *FY 2026 Capacity Assessment for Statistics, Evaluations, Research, and Analysis*. The Evaluation Officer is statutorily required to "continuously assess the coverage, quality, methods, consistency, effectiveness, independence, and balance of the portfolio of evaluations, policy research, and ongoing evaluation activities of the agency" and lead the development of the agency's evidence-building plans.[4]

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2 5 U.S.C. § 306(a)(9); 31 U.S.C. § 901.

3 5 U.S.C. § 306(a)(9).

4 5 U.S.C. § 313(d). Also see Office of Management and Budget (2019), "Memorandum M-19-23," **https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/m-19-23.pdf**.

Approach

DOT's Evaluation Officer used a mixed methods approach to gather data for the *Capacity Assessment*. It included a survey that gathered both quantitative and qualitative data, followed by a series of focus group discussions with a subset of survey participants. This approach of complementing the survey with focus groups helped to build a comprehensive understanding of DOT's current capacity for evidence-building. The data collection took place between June and December 2025. The Evaluation Officer did not independently verify the veracity or accuracy of survey respondents' or focus group participants' perceptions.

DOT employees were selected or referred to the survey and focus groups primarily because of their subject matter expertise in statistics, evaluation, research, and/or analysis. A total of 109 individuals responded to the survey, resulting in a response rate of 64 percent. The data reported herein are aggregated from across the Department's Operating Administrations (OAs).

The survey gathered data about the respondents' perceptions regarding the Department's capacity to conduct evidence-building activities that cover a substantial portion of its programs and policies. Respondents reflected on the degree to which these activities meet high standards of quality and rigor, produce relevant information for stakeholders, and maintain independence. As part of the survey, respondents used a maturity model to self-assess both their unit's and their own evidence-building capabilities on a scale from one (underdeveloped) to four (exemplary). A maturity model is a framework that helps establish a rating, or level of maturity for the activities being measured based on a set of defined characteristics. It is a useful structure for holistically assessing DOT's current evidence-building capacity and monitoring changes over time.

The focus groups were an opportunity for the Evaluation Officer to pose additional open-ended questions, gain more insight into the survey results, and uncover examples of promising evidence-building practices happening across the Department. A total of 36 staff members participated in the six focus groups.

DOT will use the data as a baseline from which it will measure its progress in evidence building and data use every four years. These quadrennial assessments can show changes over time and reveal insights on which approaches are most effective at growing DOT's evidence-building capacity.[5]

More details about the methods for collecting survey and focus group data, the maturity model, and the limitations of these findings can be found in the Methods section.

5 DOT published its first capacity assessment in FY 2022, available here: **https://www.transportation.gov/mission/budget/capacity-assessment-fy-2022**.

Findings

This section discusses the key findings of the *Capacity Assessment* on the coverage, quality, methods, effectiveness, and independence of DOT's statistics, evaluations, research, and analysis efforts. These findings identify the Department's strengths and areas for improvement.

The assessment revealed four key findings:

1. The Department is well positioned to accomplish its evidence-building commitments to a high standard.

2. The Department uses evidence in day-to-day operations to support improvements to programs and inform decision making.

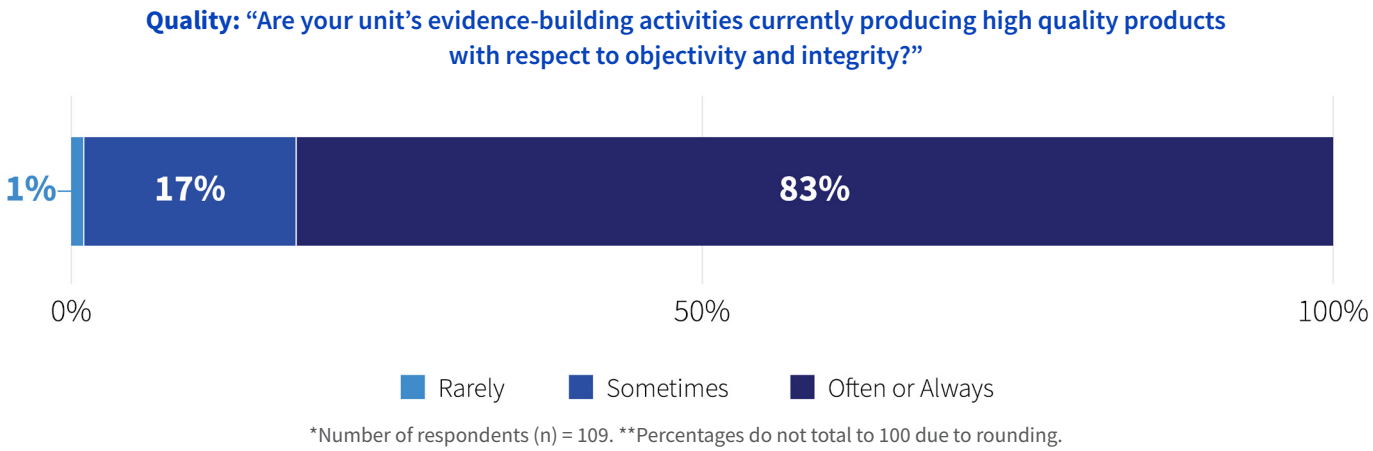
3. Facilitating collaboration through formal and informal channels contributes to the effectiveness and efficiency of DOT's evidence-building activities.

4. Teams across different Operating Administrations continue to face some hurdles to building evidence.

Key Finding #1: The Department is well positioned to accomplish its evidence-building commitments to a high standard.

DOT has highly skilled teams who have implemented innovative tools to produce actionable evidence. The feedback DOT staff provided demonstrates that the Department has the ability and potential to build evidence that meets the high standards established for the federal government and is responsive to stakeholders' needs. This means that the Department has processes to ensure relevance, rigor, objectivity, transparency, and ethics for its evidence-building activities.

Figure 1: Quality of Unit's Evidence-Building Products



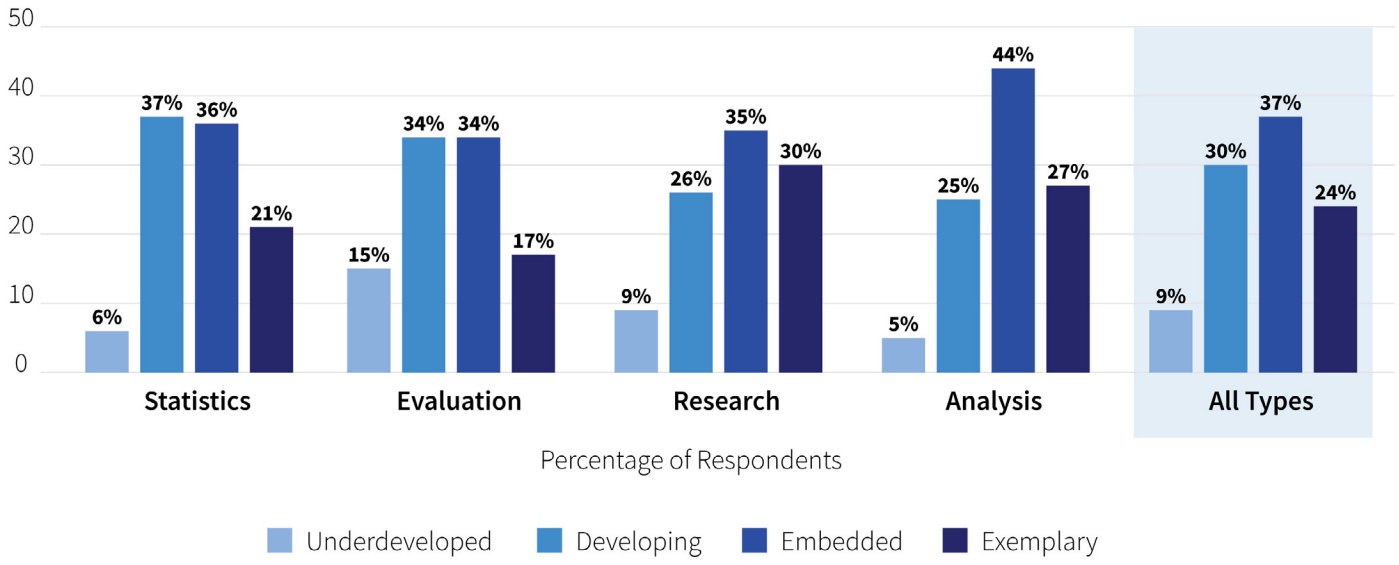
*Number of respondents (n) = 109. **Percentages do not total to 100 due to rounding.

The majority (83 percent) of respondents said that the evidence-building activities that their unit produces are "often" or "always" high quality in terms of their objectivity and integrity (**Figure 1**). When asked about the overall maturity of their units' evidence work, 61 percent of respondents said that their evidence-building activities were either "embedded" or "exemplary" (**Figure 2**). Twenty-four percent of respondents described their unit's evidence practices as "exemplary," meaning that they demonstrate advanced techniques and produce superior evidence outcomes that directly inform programs and policy in furthering mission goals. Another 37 percent rated their unit's practices as "embedded" to show that core evidence activities are effectively and consistently integrated into their team's work.

The remaining 39 percent of respondents assessed their unit's evidence-building practices as "developing" or "underdeveloped" (**Figure 2**). While this finding highlights areas for improvement, it also reflects the Department's commitment to integrating evidence into daily operations and research. Thirty percent of respondents applied the rating of "developing" to refer to evidence practices that are growing but may be inconsistently applied. Only nine percent of respondents rated their unit as "underdeveloped." Respondents were directed to rate their evidence practices as "underdeveloped" if activities produce evidence that is of limited use or conducted in an ad-hoc manner. They were more likely to rate their unit's evaluation practices as "underdeveloped" compared with their unit's statistics, research, or analysis practices.

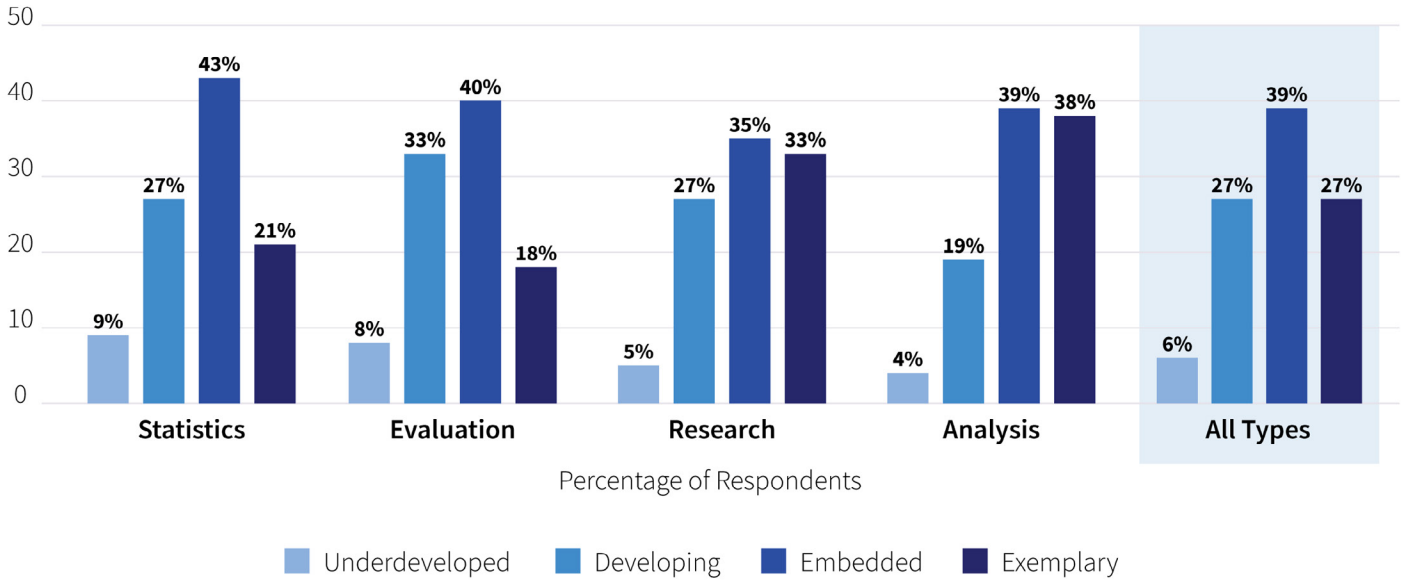
The survey asked respondents to reflect on the maturity of their own technical skills in building evidence in the areas of statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis (**Figure 3**). Respondents self-rated their own technical skills similarly to how they rated the maturity of their overall unit's evidence-building practices, with 39 percent of individuals rating their own skills as "embedded" and 27 percent rating their own skills as "exemplary." They were more likely to perceive their own technical skills in the areas of research or analysis as "exemplary" as compared to their skills in statistics or evaluation.

Figure 2: Maturity of Unit's Evidence-Building Practices



*Statistics, n = 81; Evaluation, n = 108; Research, n = 109; Analysis, n = 108. **Percentages may not total to 100 due to rounding.

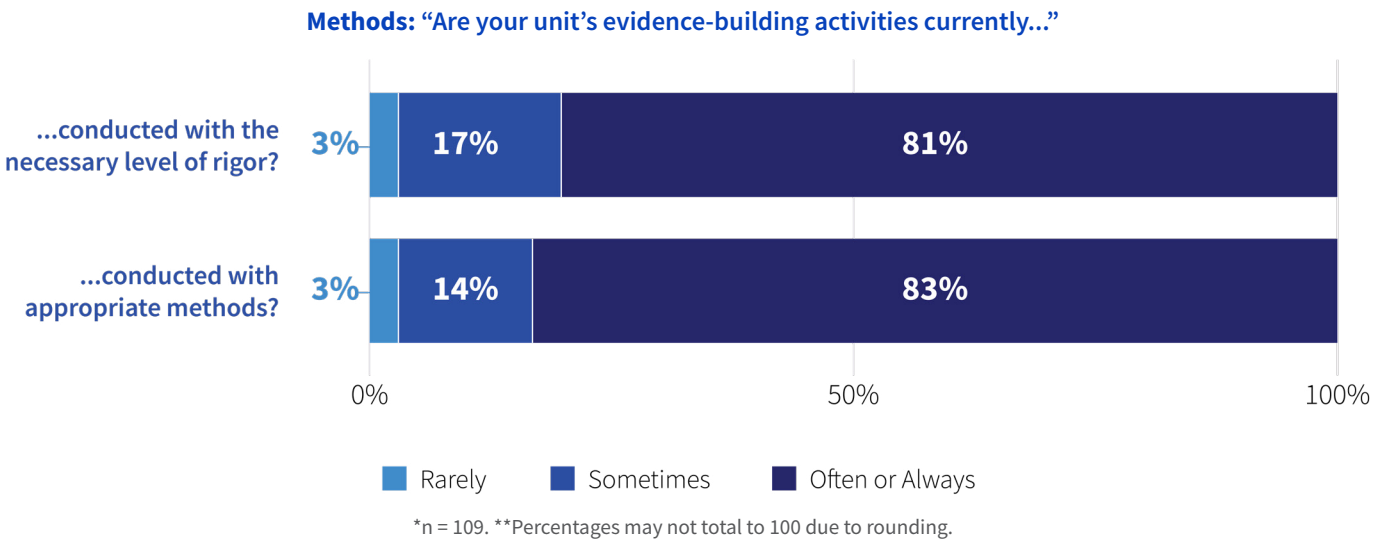
Figure 3: Maturity of Respondent's Own Evidence-Building Skills



*Statistics, n = 81; Evaluation, n = 108; Research, n = 108; Analysis, n = 108. **Percentages may not total to 100 due to rounding.

As shown in **Figure 4**, most staff who responded to the survey reported that the methods for their evidence-building activities "often" or "always" have the necessary levels of rigor (81 percent) and are conducted with appropriate methods (83 percent). The focus groups uncovered examples of teams applying rigorous and appropriate methods to their evidence-building work. OAs described using experimental or quasi-experimental designs to evaluate key program outcomes. These highly rigorous designs attempt to establish a counterfactual and thereby estimate the impacts of a program or policy that are distinct from general trends. Teams across the Department also reported developing cost-benefit analysis and cost-effectiveness analysis to model the impacts of a change in policy, especially regarding impacts on safety.

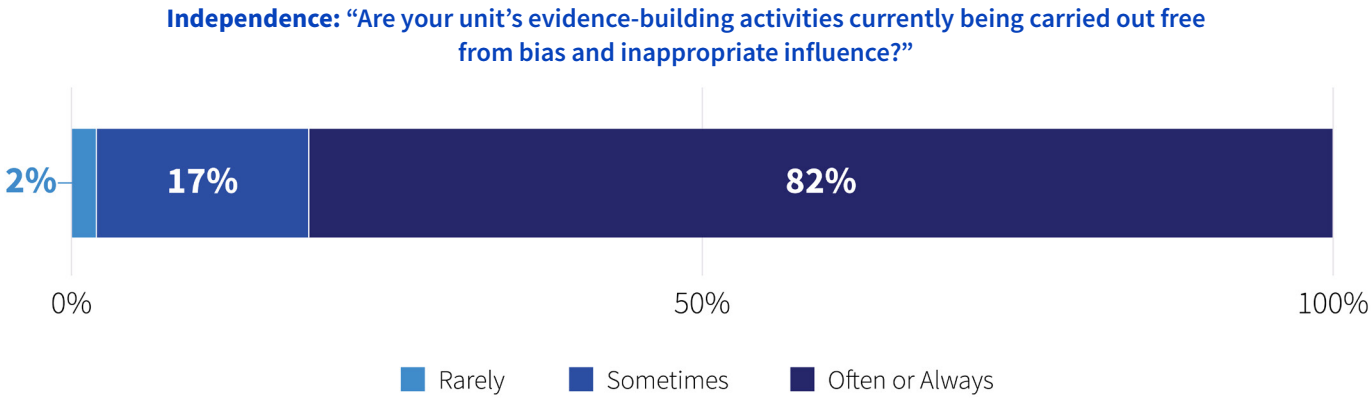
Figure 4: Appropriateness of Methods of Unit's Evidence-Building Activities



*n = 109. **Percentages may not total to 100 due to rounding.

The majority (82 percent) of respondents reported that their unit "often" or "always" conducts their evidence-building activities free from bias and inappropriate influence (**Figure 5**). Some OAs reported that they have internal research boards that vet evaluations and other studies. This practice provides insight into why some survey responses rated their unit's evidence work as highly independent, since working groups such as research or review boards can provide quality assurance and enable an OA to build evidence that is free from intentional bias.

Figure 5: Independence of Unit's Evidence-Building Activities

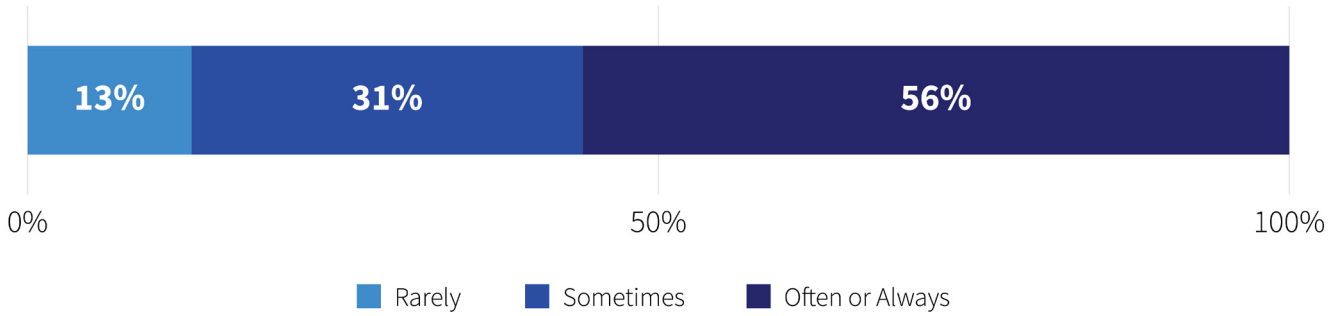


*n = 109. **Percentages do not total to 100 due to rounding.

Key Finding #2: The Department uses evidence in day-to-day operations to support improvements to programs and inform decision making.

The assessment revealed that the Department routinely uses evidence to deliver on its mission, develop evidence on key priorities, and build a culture of learning. The majority (56 percent) of respondents reflected that their unit's evidence-building activities often or always cover the required thematic areas and programs (**Figure 6**). Most respondents also said that their unit's evidence-building activities support the Department's FY 2026-2030 Strategic Goals of Safety, Efficiency, and Innovation, while roughly 4 in every 10 respondents said that their unit's work supported the Strategic Goal of Infrastructure (**Figure 7**).[6] Moreover, 78 percent said that their unit "often" or "always" uses evidence to inform decision making, while 67 percent said their unit "often" or "always" uses it to support improvements to their OA. Sixty-eight percent respondents also reported that their unit "often" or "always" uses evidence to support learning in their OA (**Figure 8**).

Figure 6: Coverage of Unit's Evidence-Building Activities



*n = 109. **Percentages do not total to 100 due to rounding.

6 DOT (2026) *U.S. Department of Transportation Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2026-2030*, **https://www.transportation.gov/dot-strategic-plan**.

Figure 7: Evidence-Building Advances DOT's Strategic Goals

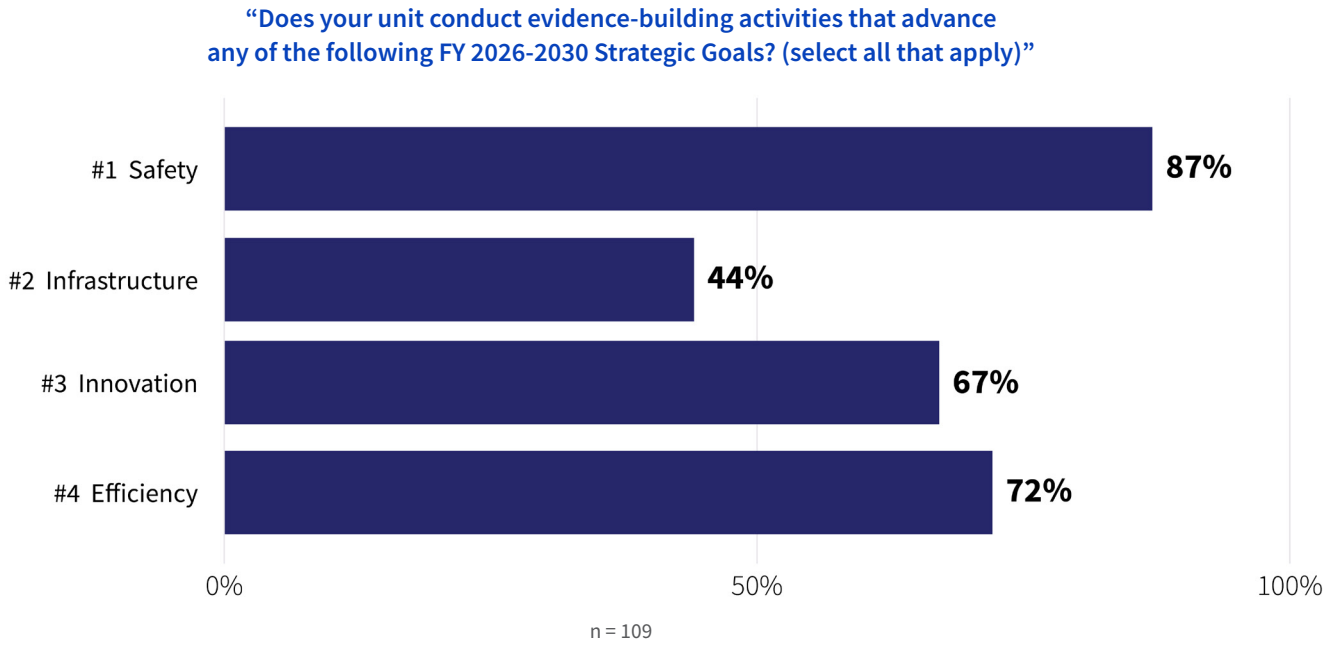
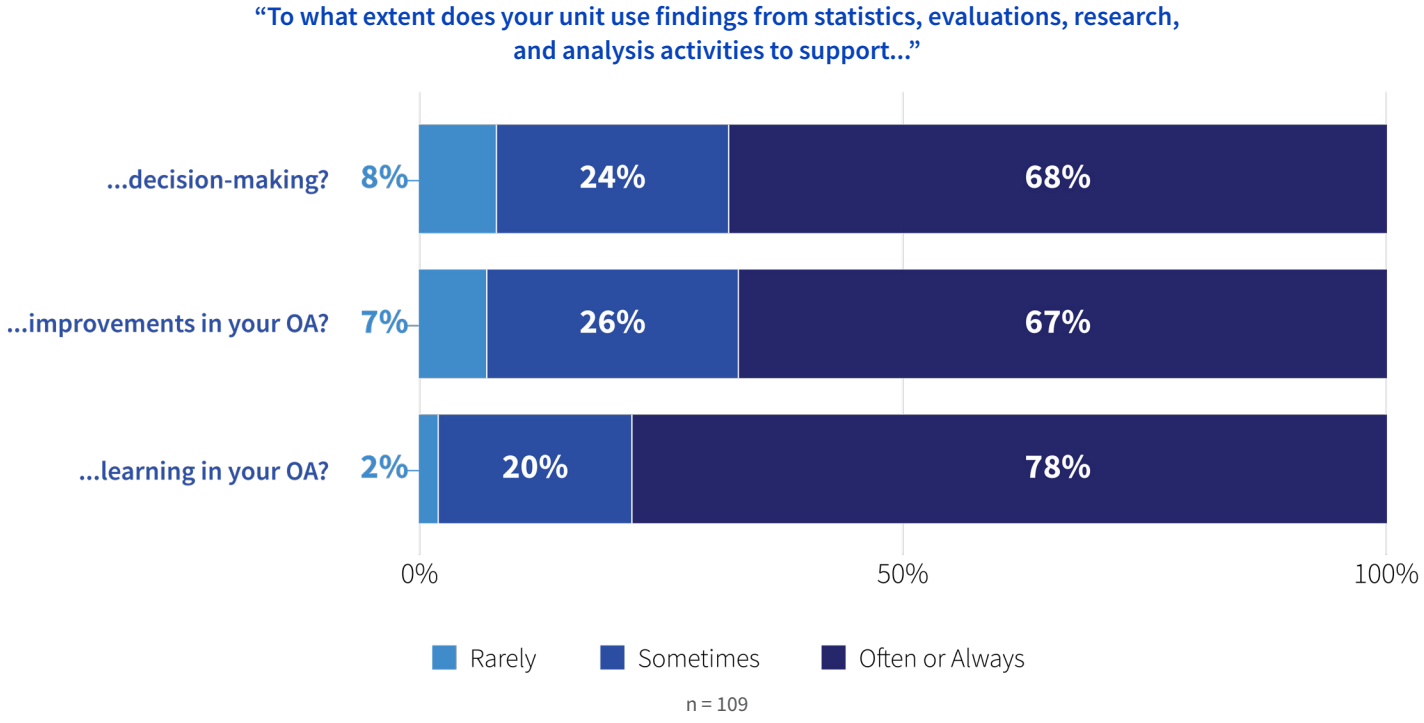


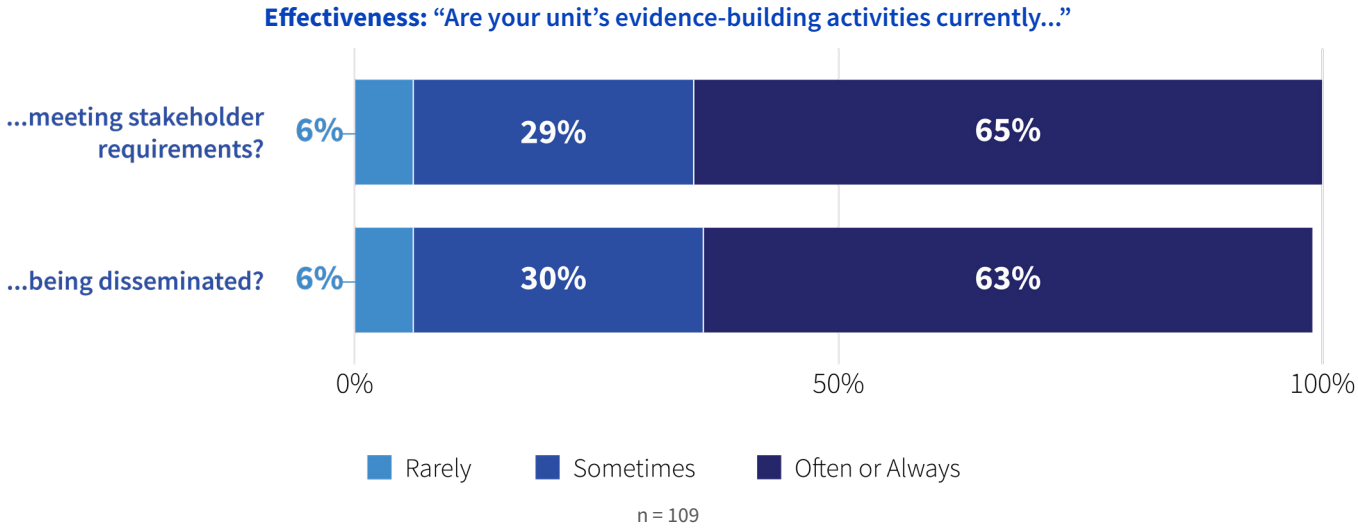
Figure 8: Unit's Use of Evidence



During focus group conversations, participants shared examples of when the Department has used findings from their evidence-building activities to inform improved monitoring frameworks for investments, programming, and oversight. For instance, respondents from the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) shared that they have been able to analyze their existing grade crossing data in new ways that have allowed them to identify safety risks, communicate these risks to outside partners, and ultimately enable decision makers both within and outside the agency to make programmatic changes and infrastructure investments that improve safety. In another discussion, a staff member reported that by analyzing their existing data sets, they realized that their agency could maintain robust safety standards for the traveling public while reducing the number of required inspections of privately-owned transportation equipment.

Meanwhile, all demonstration projects that receive support from the Public Transportation Innovation Program are statutorily required to be evaluated per 49 U.S.C. § 5312(e)(4). The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has a data management plan for each of these projects to help ensure that they meet performance targets. Finally, participants from one OA mentioned that their organization routinely conducts retrospective reviews of their grant programs and their regulatory actions to measure whether they are having the intended effects.

Figure 9: Effectiveness of Unit's Evidence-Building Activities



The assessment revealed that staff across the Department are taking steps to ensure that agencies develop evidence that effectively responds to stakeholder needs and that they appropriately share their findings. In fact, 65 percent of those surveyed believed their unit's evidence-building activities "often" or "always" meets stakeholder requirements, and 63 percent reported that they "often" or "always" disseminate findings to all interested parties and stakeholders (**Figure 9**). OAs are also exploring ways to further improve their strategies for communicating findings from their evidence-building activities. For instance, several OAs are testing out evidence dissemination templates that distill information into short, policy-relevant memos to ensure that the evidence reaches decision makers in a format that is tailored to their needs.

Key Finding #3: Facilitating collaboration through formal and informal channels contributes to the effectiveness and efficiency of DOT's evidence-building activities.

DOT's efforts to facilitate collaboration through formal and informal channels has contributed to the effectiveness and efficiency of its evidence-building activities. This assessment uncovered examples of collaboration happening on a routine basis at a Department-wide level, between OAs, within OAs, and between OAs and their external stakeholders. Focus group participants reflected on the importance of a collaborative culture to accomplishing their work, advancing the Department's mission, and ensuring that evidence-building activities are carried out in an efficient manner.

Department-wide collaboration on evidence-building priorities happens through strategic planning. For example, every five years DOT publishes the *Research, Development, and Technology Strategic Plan* that outlines a national transportation research vision to guide research priorities while improving coordination of transportation research. It also develops an *Annual Evidence Plan* that identifies the Department's most important evidence-building needs and makes commitments to build evidence on those topics within one fiscal year. Further, OAs release annual modal research plans, which promote sharing of information and prevents against potential duplication of research efforts.[7]

Collaboration also happens among subsets of OAs that are building evidence to tackle shared goals. For example, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) works with the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) to scale its approach to crash data collection. Together they collect reliable data on crashes and create vital datasets that are available for both DOT analysis and the research of other partners.

At times, collaboration within OAs is facilitated through formal structures. FMCSA's Research Executive Board brings together leaders from across the OA to make the final determination on which evidence-building activities the agency should pursue. As part of its deliberations, the Research Executive Board considers what information and evidence is the most critical for informing motor carrier safety and if other federal, private sector, or local government activities are already implementing similar studies. Initiatives like the Research Executive Board ensure that DOT's evidence-building activities cover important thematic areas and priority programs and avoid duplication of efforts.

7 DOT publishes these documents to **https://www.transportation.gov/rdtstrategicplan**, **https://www.transportation.gov/mission/budget/dot-budget-and-performance-documents**, and **https://www.transportation.gov/administrations/assistant-secretary-research-and-technology/rdt-annual-modal-research-plans**.

Some focus group participants reported that their individual team's culture fosters informal collaboration by purposefully recruiting staff from a wide range of technical backgrounds. Because of this cross-sectoral approach to building evidence, teams can generate interdisciplinary knowledge, increase their effectiveness, and innovative solutions. Respondents reflected that exchanging ideas with other team members and partners who have different expertise from themselves increased their team's overall effectiveness in building high quality evidence materials. For example, one team that works on automation in the transportation sector benefits from having staff members who have prior experience in automation from other sectors including defense and agriculture. They explained that their multi-sectoral team helped them shape evidence building activities that were more comprehensive because they tackled problems from different perspectives.

OAs also advance their evidence-building work by engaging with outside stakeholders. For instance, NHTSA helps ensure the timeliness, reliability, and regional comparability of its crash data by maintaining close relationships and collaborations with State and local partners who collect the data. These partners include law enforcement agencies, hospitals, physicians, medical examiners, coroners, insurance companies, salvage facilities, tow yard operators, repair shops, and the people involved in crashes. NHTSA has emphasized these relationships in recent years to ensure that local data collection practices meet NHTSA's technical standards. Likewise, FMCSA's Research and Technology program reports that they regularly coordinate closely with States, independent committees, and industry stakeholders to discuss shared research priorities.

However, some teams report that they face structural barriers to collaboration. For example, some respondents reported that they must receive management approval before consulting with a technical expert in another part of their organization. Others reported that siloed data management systems limit cross-team collaboration and hinder the development of data-driven insights.

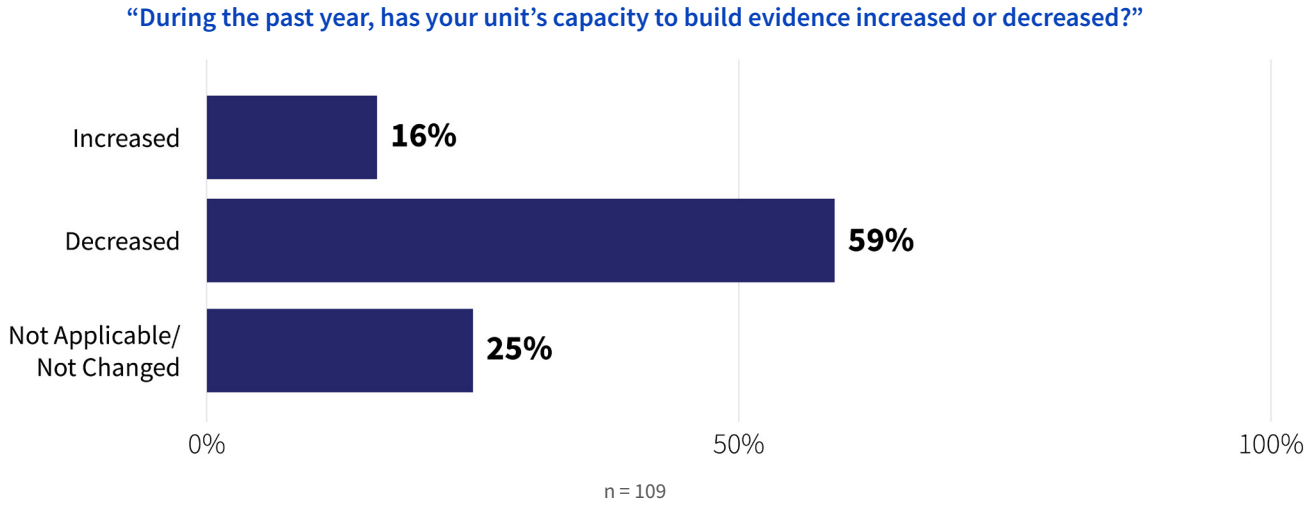
Still, respondents shared that they see the value in increasing collaboration and are striving to improve how they work together to build evidence for decision making. Some reported optimism that they will be able to apply artificial intelligence (AI) tools to advance system integration that will foster cross-team collaboration.

Key Finding #4: Teams across different Operating Administrations continue to face some hurdles to building evidence.

The survey and focus groups identified several headwinds that DOT's evidence-building systems and practices face, including examples of work being hindered by resource constraints, lack of training, inconsistent data standards, reporting lags, or competing priorities. Nevertheless, staff also pointed to novel ways that they are overcoming these challenges and becoming more efficient in the process.

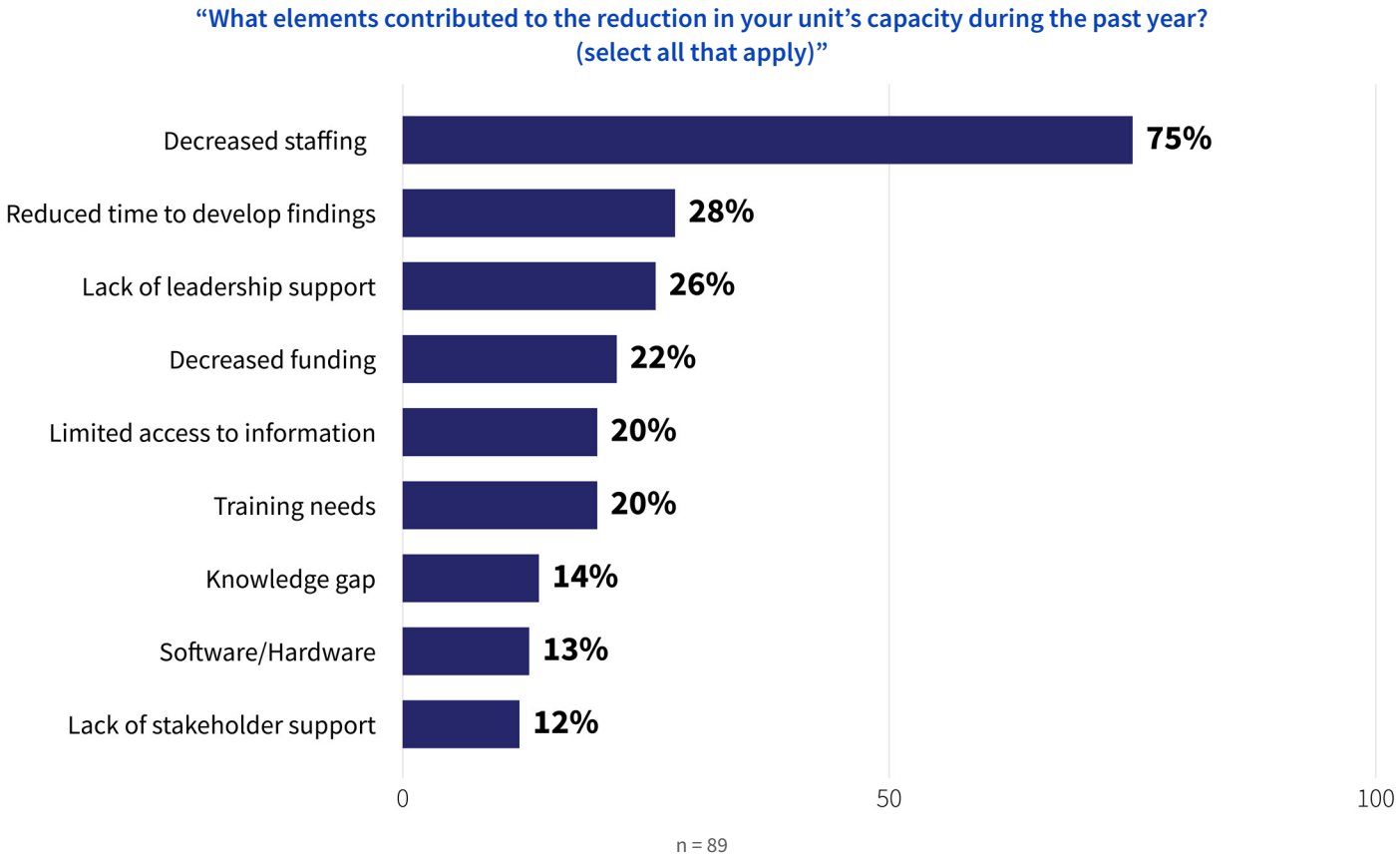
DOT staff cited personnel constraints as a barrier to conducting or expanding their evidence-building activities. Most survey respondents reported that their capacity for all types of evidence-building had decreased in the past year; and, of the reasons listed for the reduction in capacity, respondents most often mentioned reduced staffing (**Figures 10** and **11**). Likewise, some focus group participants shared that their remaining staff do not always have the bandwidth to take on additional work, including managing evaluations. Further, teams may be constrained by a dearth of specific skill sets, such as attorneys, geospatial analysts, or economists. Several participants noted that staffing shortages can lead to bottlenecks that hinder completion of their evidence-building work. For example, they may not have enough team members that can complete critical tasks or offer certain types of technical advice.

Figure 10: Trends in Evidence-Building Capacity



Despite human capital constraints, teams within the Department have leveraged their existing staff and resources to operate more efficiently. As an example, one team in FMSCA conducted a human capital assessment to better understand their resources and leverage in-house expertise. Such exercises have helped teams understand how they can utilize internal staff to build high-quality evidence and reduce reliance on external contractors. Another notable example of an innovative method of prioritizing evidence-building resources comes from the FTA. This OA has begun to implement evaluability assessments, which are project appraisal tools that help determine whether a project or program is ready to be evaluated and whether it is designed in a way that will produce valuable learning.

Figure 11: Reasons Cited for Decrease in Evidence-Building Capacity



While access to necessary technology was only cited as a cause for decreased capacity by 13 percent of survey respondents, it came up repeatedly during focus group discussions (**Figure 11**). Discussants explained that sometimes there are too few software licenses available within the Department or OA, preventing access to specialized software or new technologies. For example, inadequate access to software for data management makes it difficult for teams to manage large data submissions that are foundational for evidence work.

Focus group participants also cited inconsistent data collection standards and reporting lags as constraints to building trustworthy evidence on high priority topics. Some participants expressed concern that DOT's data-driven decision making is hampered by such inconsistencies and barriers. Several respondents noted that, at times, data collection practices are not standardized or vary between data products; and that there may be variations in data collection based on state or local practices. At other times, the only available data is less timely than desired.

In addition, several OAs pointed out that some of their data are collected by staff and outside partners that lack formal or ongoing data collection training. Others spoke about outside entities reporting data in formats that are non-standardized or not machine readable. In some of these cases DOT is prohibited by statute or regulation from imposing standard reporting requirements, and elsewhere it is not feasible because it would be overly burdensome on their data reporters.

Teams are exploring innovative solutions to address data challenges. For example, FRA developed a bot that extracts information from documents in a Portable Document Format (PDF) and populates it into a machine-readable format. Some OAs have also begun to explore use cases for AI and large language models (LLMs) to leverage data and information in more efficient ways. Staff report that they need training to better understand how they can these use new technologies but are cautiously optimistic. Focus group participants from FRA reflected that their OA manages vast amounts of data from multiple sources, and AI tools could potentially find insights by merging datasets faster than a human could. This is an example of the kinds of opportunities that need to be explored and tested. Other technological solutions are also being applied.

The focus group conversations also revealed that competing priorities or lack of leadership awareness sometimes hinders progress. Others noted that under pressure to get a program or project off the ground, the evidence building work sometimes gets deferred. Consequently, opportunities for efficiency gains may be overlooked or delayed. Participants reflected that at times they have been successful in overcoming these barriers by building relationships with colleagues, communicating the value of the evidence that is being developed, creating interdisciplinary teams, and seeking buy-in from leadership.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The *Capacity Assessment* shows that many staff at the U.S. Department of Transportation are actively engaged in learning about and promoting evidence-based decision making. Through this assessment, the Department has identified how it can improve its evidence building by addressing challenges such as human capital and software resources. It is clear from the assessment that teams are motivated to improve their own skills and collaborate. In addition, a substantial part of the Department's data is being used to advance DOT's mission, support its Strategic Goals, and inform its policies and programming.

The Department will repeat this assessment in four years (FY 2030) to track progress in building capacity for evidence generation and use. This is an important exercise that supports the Department's work delivering on its *Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2026-2030, Annual Evidence Plan, Annual Agency Performance Plan and Report*, and *Open Data Plan*.[8] The challenges and successes identified through this assessment will help the Department improve its evidence practices and thereby more effectively and efficiently pursue its mission: Advance safety. Move people and goods. Build big and beautiful infrastructure.

8 These documents are available at **https://www.transportation.gov/dot-strategic-plan**, **https://www.transportation.gov/mission/budget/dot-budget-and-performance-documents**, and **https://www.transportation.gov/data/plan**.

Methods

The *Capacity Assessment* was developed with input from staff across the Department. DOT's Evaluation Officer in the Office of the Secretary for Transportation's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Budget and Programs and Chief Financial Officer led the development of the *Capacity Assessment*. Working closely with DOT's Chief Data Officer, DOT's Chief Statistician, DOT's Chief Economist, and partners in DOT's Operating Administrations, the Evaluation Officer built and administered a survey and held focus groups with a subset of DOT employees.

The Evaluation Officer selected participants to take the survey or join a focus group primarily because of their subject matter expertise in statistics, evaluation, research, analysis, and/or data. Participants selected by the Evaluation Officer for a survey or focus group had the option of referring other employees. The selected and referred DOT employees' responsibilities reflect the wide range of evidence-building and related work that DOT accomplishes, including grant programs, regulatory analysis, program evaluation, statistical analysis, data management, and research. The participants included staff from the Federal Aviation Administration, the Federal Highway Administration, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, the Federal Railroad Administration, the Federal Transit Administration, the Maritime Administration, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Office of the Secretary of Transportation, and the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration.

Survey

The Evaluation Officer invited 170 DOT employees to participate in the survey via email communications. One-hundred and nine employees completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 64 percent.

Prior to distributing the survey, the Evaluation Officer raised awareness by reaching out to stakeholders individually, speaking at meetings hosted by committees and working groups convened around similar topic areas, and inviting stakeholders to collaborate on the survey instrument's development.

The Evaluation Officer provided survey participants with three weeks to complete the survey, between June 23 and July 15, 2025. It was a self-paced survey that was administered exclusively online. Its 32 questions included six different question structures: multiple choice, rating scale, matrix, ranking, dropdown, and open-ended. It took participants an estimated 15 minutes to complete.

The survey posed questions on employees' perceptions of the coverage, quality, methods, effectiveness, and independence of the Department's statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis. It collected both quantitative and qualitative information from the respondents. The Evaluation Officer did not independently verify the veracity or accuracy of survey responses.

Focus Groups

As a follow up to the survey, the Evaluation Officer hosted focus group meetings with staff from six of DOT's OAs between October and December 2025. DOT employees who received an invitation to a focus group had the option of referring colleagues in their OA to participate.

The focus groups provided an opportunity for those who took the survey to expand on their responses, as well as for anyone who could not respond to the survey to contribute. The focus group questions sought details of participants' strengths in developing evidence, the barriers they face, and how the evidence they develop gets used. The Evaluation Officer also used these focus groups to discuss recommendations for maturing DOT's evidence-building across the organization.

Each of the focus group sessions brought together three to twelve participants from relevant teams within an Operating Administration. These targeted groups maximized time for participants to respond to a set of questions. A total of 36 staff members participated in the six focus groups. The focus group discussions were led by the Evaluation Officer's staff. Each focus group lasted 60 minutes. Five of the focus groups were hosted via a virtual meeting platform, and one of the focus groups was hosted in a hybrid setting. The Evaluation Officer did not independently verify the veracity or accuracy of focus group participants' comments.

Definitions of Maturity Model Ratings

To examine its current evidence-building capacity, DOT adopted the evaluation maturity model developed by the Australian Government's Department of Industry, Sciences, and Resources, while tailoring it to meet DOT's unique needs.[9] For each type of evidence-building activity (statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis), DOT's modified maturity model describes characteristics related to the execution of each type of activity and categorizes those characteristics into the following maturity rating levels: underdeveloped, developing, embedded, or exemplary (**Figure 11**).

Figure 12: Maturity Model Ratings

Statistics, Evaluation, Research, or Analysis are…

Underdeveloped	Developing	Embedded	Exemplary
Practices are not well understood	There is a general understanding of the role of these activities	Practices are largely integrated in business functions	Activities present evidence and insights on impact and change
Activities are ad hoc and not planned	Practices are growing, but inconsistent	Practices are established and consistent	Others regard the department as a leader in this field
Activities deliver limited benefit to the department or its stakeholders	There are examples of good practice, but the department and its stakeholders do not get the full benefit of these activities	The department commissions and conducts evidence-building activities well and strategically builds and uses its evidence base	The department and its stakeholders derive great benefit from our evidence-building activity

9 Australian Government, Department of Industry, Science and Resources (2024) "Evaluation Maturity Matrix," *Evaluation Strategy 2024-2028*, **https://www.industry.gov.au/publications/evaluation-strategy-2024-2028/evaluation-maturity-matrix**.

Limitations

The *Capacity Assessment* has four main limitations. First, because the assessment is conducted every four years, it provides a benchmark of data from one point in time every four years and will not pick up on changes occurring between the four-year intervals. As a result, it may be difficult to observe distinct trends. Similarly, data for the *Capacity Assessment* was collected during a period of significant organizational change both within DOT and across the federal government. Some of these data points may have become outdated before publication.

Second, the survey and focus groups may be subject to measurement error. There are several terms related to evidence-building and capacity that do not have a universal definitions and are, therefore, subject to different interpretations. For example, the dimensions of capacity that are specified in 5 U.S.C. § 306(a)(9) do not have definitions in the law (coverage, quality, methods, effectiveness, independence). Further, the statute does not provide definitions for the four types of evidence that it covers (statistics, evaluation, research, and analysis). In many cases these types of evidence have overlapping activities. For instance, while conducting a research project or completing a program evaluation, the researchers and evaluators will often employ statistical techniques. And yet they are described in the law and implementation guidance as if they could be four separate and distinct activities. This may have created confusion for staff who provided input for the *Capacity Assessment* and introduces risks of measurement errors in which the responses comingle ratings across sections. Likewise, it can be difficult to consistently define a personnel unit within the Department because of varying organization structures across OAs. Thus, when participants reflected on the maturity of their unit's evidence-building activities, their responses may have reflected significant differences in the size and scope of the components referenced. These hurdles make it difficult to disaggregate the data and compare capacity strengths and challenges specific to each area.

Third, the survey and focus groups captured staff members' perceptions of their unit and their own evidence-building activities, and the Evaluation Officer did not independently verify responses for accuracy or bias.

Fourth, the data may be subject to errors of non-observation. For instance, the survey and focus group participants may not be reflective of the Department's entire evidence-building staff. Further, a non-response bias could have happened if the staff who chose to participate in the survey or focus group were substantially different or unrepresentative of the evidence-building staff who declined to participate.

Appendix: List of Priority Evidence-Building Activities

The list below shows DOT's current priority evidence-building activities. It fulfills the Department's obligation under 5 U.S.C. § 306(9)(a) that its capacity assessment includes "a list of activities and operations of the agency that are currently being evaluated and analyzed."

FY 2026 Evaluation Plan and FY 2027 Evidence Plan's Activities[10]

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)

- Airspace Modernization
- Electric Vertical Takeoff and Landing and Advanced Air Mobility Integration Pilot Program

Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)

- Bridge Investment Program

Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA)

- Commercial Motor Vehicle Driver Detention Time

Federal Railroad Administration (FRA)

- Railroad Crossing Elimination Grant Program

Federal Transit Administration (FTA)

- Innovative Coordinated Access and Mobility (ICAM) Pilot Program Activity

Maritime Administration (MARAD)

- Port Infrastructure Development Grant Program
- State Maritime Academy Direct Payment Program

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA)

- High Visibility Enforcement (HVE) Media Campaign

10 DOT (2026) *FY 2027 Evidence Plan*, **https://www.transportation.gov/mission/budget/fy27-evidence-plan**; DOT (2025) *FY 2026 Evaluation Plan*, **https://www.transportation.gov/mission/budget/fy26-evaluation-plan**.

Other Analytical Activities

- For the inventory of DOT's current regulatory analyses, please refer to the *Federal Register*: **https://www.federalregister.gov/agencies/transportation-department**
- The findings of statistical analysis can be found on the US DOT Repository & Open Science Access Portal (ROSAP): **https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/**
- Each Operating Administration's Annual Modal Research Plans can be viewed here: **https://www.transportation.gov/administrations/assistant-secretary-research-and-technology/rdt-annual-modal-research-plans**
- Results from prior evidence-building activities and related datasets can be found at **www.data.gov**

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