

MPO Safety Target Setting Survey

Prepared By:



USF Center for Urban Transportation Research

Chanyoung Lee, Ph.D., AICP

Jeff Kramer, AICP

Savana Wright

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Disclaimer

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Survey Population

The 2019 Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) Safety Targets Survey was sent by email to 404 MPOs across the United States. Contact information was pulled from the FHWA MPO database,¹ with four email invites returning as undeliverable. Of the 400 emails delivered successfully, 150 complete or partially complete survey responses were recorded. Thirteen of these respondents represented a Florida MPO. The most common job title held by respondents could be categorized as “director” (43.9%), followed by “planner” (33.8%) (Figure 1). Three respondents had the word “safety” explicitly in their job titles, and twelve mentioned safety as part of their role.

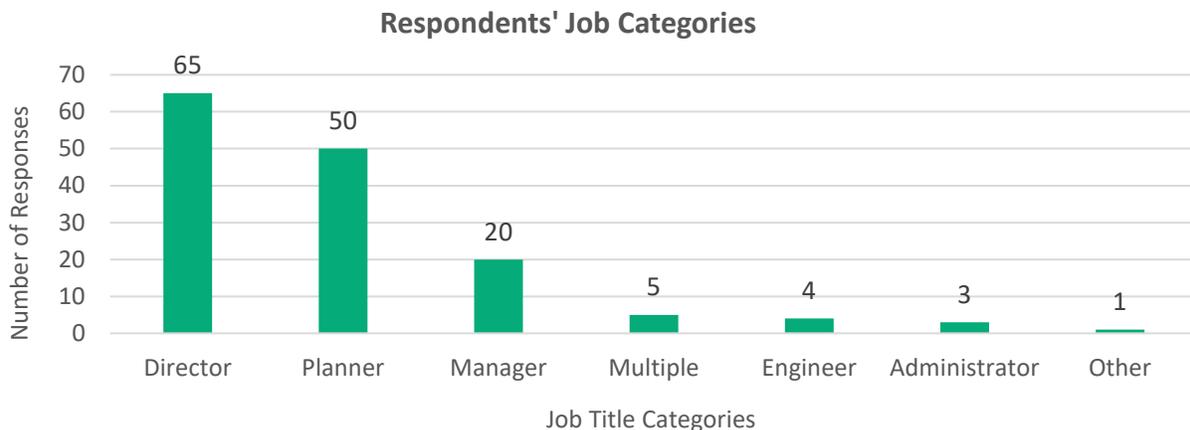


Figure 1. “Please provide your job title and briefly describe your role within your agency.”

Half of respondents (51%) stated their agency served a population size of less than 200,000 people. The remaining MPOs were somewhat evenly distributed among population size groups (Figure 2). It should be noted that population size was self-reported, meaning it is unclear whether agencies provided the population of their MPO’s urbanized area or population of their planning area.

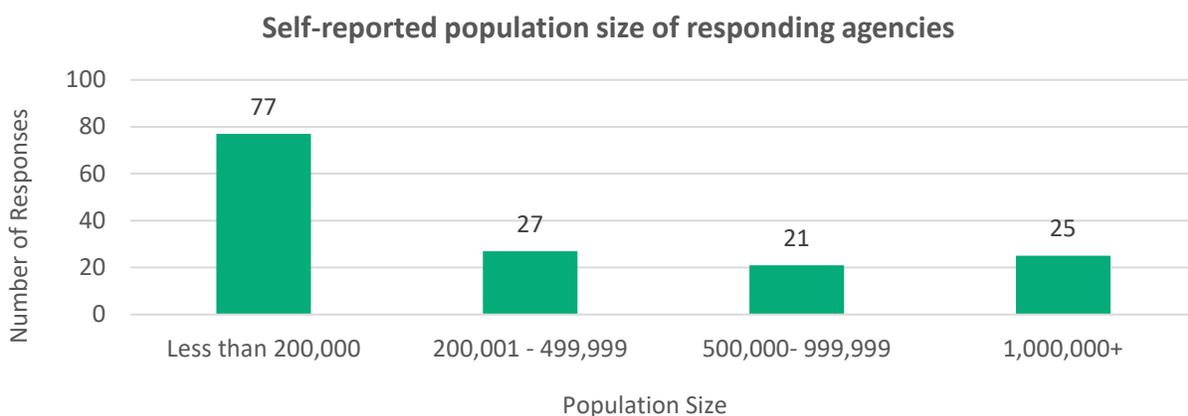


Figure 2. “What population size does your agency serve?”

¹ <https://www.planning.dot.gov/mpo/>

Target Setting Methodology

The vast majority of responding agencies (N=136; 90.7%) stated that their MPO agreed to support their state’s safety targets, with fourteen (9.3%) respondents stating they established their own targets.

MPO Supported State Targets

Agencies that said they agreed to support the state target were then asked to select the two most influential factors in their MPO’s decision. When respondents’ first and second choices were combined, the most common reason selected was the MPO wanted to “support their state’s safety target and/or felt the state targets made sense for the MPO” (83 participants). The second most selected factor “not enough staff, resources and/or time to set own targets” was selected by 52 participants. When responses were viewed concurrently by each individual, almost a quarter (22%) of respondents selected both of these choices (Table 1).

*Table 1. Cross Tab of responses to “Please select the two statements that were the most influential factors in your MPO’s decision to adopt the **state’s** safety targets.”*

		<i>Second Choice Text</i>				First Choice Total (N)
		Easier to adopt the state’s	Not enough staff/ resources/ time	Wanted to support state/ felt state targets made sense for MPO	Other (Please explain)	
<i>First Choice Text</i>	Easier to adopt the state’s target			9% (12)	3% (4)	12% (16)
	Inadequate or inaccurate data specific to our planning area	4% (5)	8% (11)	5% (7)	2% (2)	20% (27)
	Not enough staff/ resources/ time	15% (20)		22% (29)	2% (3)	39% (52)
	No direct assessment for MPO’s progress toward meeting targets	2% (2)	5% (6)	9% (12)		15% (20)
	Wanted to support state / felt state targets made sense for MPO				15% (20)	15% (20)
	2nd Choice Total (N)	20% (27)	13% (17)	45% (60)	22% (29)	100% (133) *

* A total of 133 participants responded to this question, therefore there were 266 responses overall (2 choices per respondent). This cell shows the total for each choice.

Respondents were then asked to elaborate on the thought process behind adopting their state's targets. A total of 134 written responses were received.

Challenges associated with inadequate resources and/or inadequate funding were again cited the most frequently by respondents. More than a quarter of respondents also stated that adopting their state's target "made sense" for their MPO, often meaning it aligned well with their local goals or visions for safety.

Inadequate data was also a common theme across responses, with more than a quarter of agencies mentioning data issues as a reason for adopting their state's targets. In addition to lacking local data or data analysis capabilities entirely, several MPOs indicated feeling that their data and analysis capabilities were inferior to their states', and as such, felt it would be futile to create their own targets. Relating to data issues, one respondent explained:

Our average traffic-related fatalities per year is in the single digits. When you have numbers that small, any quantitative analysis you conduct has no meaning. You cannot derive any legitimate outcomes based on year-by-year trends due to wild fluctuations in variance and an insignificant sample size.

A variety of implementation issues were also mentioned by respondents, giving the impression that some MPOs did not set safety targets because they did not feel they had the means to address safety issues. In regards to this matter, one respondent said: "Since the MPO does not own, maintain, or operate any transportation facilities, it has limited ability to address safety deficiencies. Additionally, one bad crash can skew the results for a region..."

Finally, the themes of "consistency" and "collaboration" were common among written responses. Responses that fell under the theme of consistency often expressed their agency's desire to support their state or "do what other MPOs were doing." Some respondents in this category indicated that they were encouraged by their state to adopt state targets and in one instance, said they felt supporting their state was "...the best course of action for all of us to work together to solve or at least improve our safety issues." The same respondent said, "we are trying to speak with a consistent voice... and if it looks like we don't agree, that doesn't help send that message." A distinction was made between the theme of "consistency" and the theme of "collaboration," since many respondents decided to adopt state targets **as a result of** their involvement in their state's decision-making process. In these cases, the respondents felt ownership of their state's target and adopted it for this reason. On this matter, one respondent said:

Our MPO staff were involved in these planning efforts as well as the formulation of the target setting process. A collaborative series of meetings was held in the summer with state DOT, our State Transit Provider, and the MPO staff to discuss the safety target trends and analysis used to set the new annual safety targets. We support the state DOT targets because we are involved throughout the process in a collaborative effort.

MPO Established Own Target

Conversely, for the fourteen MPOs who set their own safety targets, most indicated that they wanted to create their own targets and/or felt that the state’s target did not make sense for the MPO. The second most influential factor indicated by respondents was having the capability to set their own target, in the form of adequate staff power, resources, and/or time to establish MPO-specific targets (Table 2).

Table 2. “Please select the two statements that were the most influential factors in your MPO’s decision to establish its own safety targets?”

Most Influential Factors in Establishing Own Targets	Total (N)
Wanted to create own target/ felt state targets did not make sense for MPO	34.6% (9)
Had enough staff/ resources/ time to set own targets	26.9% (7)
Possessed adequate data specific to our planning area	19.2% (5)
Other (Please explain)	15.4% (4)
There is no direct assessment for MPO’s progress toward meeting targets	3.9% (1)
Difficult to work or collaborate effectively with state	0.0% (0)
Total	100% (26)

When asked to expand upon the reasoning behind setting their own targets, four out of the fourteen respondents felt that their MPO was too dissimilar from the state to adopt their targets. On this matter, one respondent said, “our state is very rural, with really only our MPOs being the urban centers. We felt that setting our own target would better serve our region. We wanted to be more stringent than what the state is.”

Correspondingly, four respondents indicated that the targets set by their state were unattainable for the MPO, three of which specifically mentioned “vision zero” targets. Inversely, one MPO diverged from their state because their working group wanted to adopt a Vision Zero Target.

The remaining responses were not easily categorized, with one MPO choosing to establish their own targets in line with their local plan, and another MPO using a tool provided by their State to establish region-specific targets. Finally, one MPO felt that supporting their state’s targets would not help the MPO reduce fatalities and injuries, stating:

It wouldn't make sense to support state's target of 300+ fatalities per year, if our MPO area has an average of 8 per year. If our fatalities per year went from 8 to 20 but we supported the state’s target and the state achieved their target, how does that help our agency or our jurisdictions?

Methodology

Next, each MPO was asked to select the methodology used to establish safety targets for each of the five performance measures including: (1) number of fatalities, (2) fatality rate per million VMT, (3) number of serious injuries, (4) serious injuries per million VMT, and (5) the number of non-motorized fatalities and serious injuries. It should be understood that MPOs who adopted their state targets would have an understanding of how these targets were established. However, due to varied interpretations of the survey question across participants, some agencies selected “other,” stating their methodology was adopting their state’s target. (See Appendix for table of target-setting methodologies).

- 1. Number of Fatalities.** Over one-third of all respondents indicated that their fatality targets were based on a projected trend, whereby the target should not exceed the projected number of fatalities for a given year. The second most frequent response was “other” (24.3%). When asked to expand upon their “other” responses, 45.5% of respondents said they adopted their state’s target.
- 2. Rate of Fatalities per Million VMT.** One-third of all respondents indicated that their fatality rate targets were based on a projected trend, whereby the target should not exceed the projected rate of fatalities for a given year. The second most frequent response was “other” (21.5%), followed by “target was based on a decrease of a baseline” (18.5%).
- 3. Number of Serious Injuries.** More than one-third of all respondents indicated that their serious injury targets were based on a projected trend, whereby the target should not exceed the projected number of serious injuries for a given year. The second most frequent response was “other” (24.1%), followed by “target was based on a decrease of a baseline” (16.1%).
- 4. Rate of Serious Injuries per Million VMT.** Over one-third of all respondents indicated that their rate of serious injuries target was based on a projected trend, whereby the target should not exceed the projected rate of fatalities for a given year. The second most frequent response was “other” (22.8%), followed by “target was based on a decrease of a baseline” (16.9%).
- 5. Number of Non-Motorized Fatalities and Serious Injuries.** Slightly less than one-third of all respondents indicated that their non-motorized fatalities and serious injury targets were based on a projected trend, whereby the target should not exceed the projected number of non-motorized fatalities and serious injuries for a given year. The second most frequent response was “other” (22.6%), followed by “target was based on a decrease of a baseline” (17.5%).

Inter-Agency Coordination

The majority of respondents (66%) said that their MPO coordinated with the State to support the State’s safety targets, as opposed to 18.8% who adopted their state’s targets without significant input or changes from the MPO or “limited coordination.” Of the remaining respondents, 6.9% set their own targets and also described their coordination with the state as limited (Table 3).

Table 3. “Which of the following best describes the coordination efforts between your agency and the State to establish safety targets?”

Which statement best describes your coordination efforts?	Total (N)
Coordinated with State to support the State safety targets	66.0% (95)
MPO’s targets were determined by the state and adopted without significant input or changes from the MPO (limited coordination)	18.8% (27)
MPO’s targets were set independently from the state, through an internal decision-making process (limited coordination)	6.9% (10)
Coordinated with State to establish our own safety targets	4.2% (6)
Other (Please explain)	4.2% (6)
Total	100% (144)

MPOs were also asked to select a statement that best described their state’s coordination efforts. Almost half of respondents (47.2%) said their state discussed priorities with them and worked closely with them both before and after the target was set. However, almost a third (32.6%) said their state only shared information about its safety targets after they had already been established (Table 4).

Table 4. “Which of the following describe the State’s coordination efforts with your agency, relating specifically to the establishment/adoption of the state safety targets?”

Which statement best describes your state’s coordination efforts?	Total (N)
State discussed priorities with MPO and worked closely with our MPO both before and after the target was set.	47.2% (68)
State only shared information about its safety targets with MPO after they had been established	32.6% (47)
State surveyed MPO and/or discussed safety priorities with MPO prior to setting the State target. Once State target was established, coordination related to safety targets ceased.	15.3% (22)
Other (Please explain)	4.9% (7)
Total	100% (144)

Target Achievement

More than half of respondents said their MPO had made specific efforts to meet its safety targets, with 42% stating they had not made any specific efforts (Figure 3).

Effort made by MPO to meet safety targets

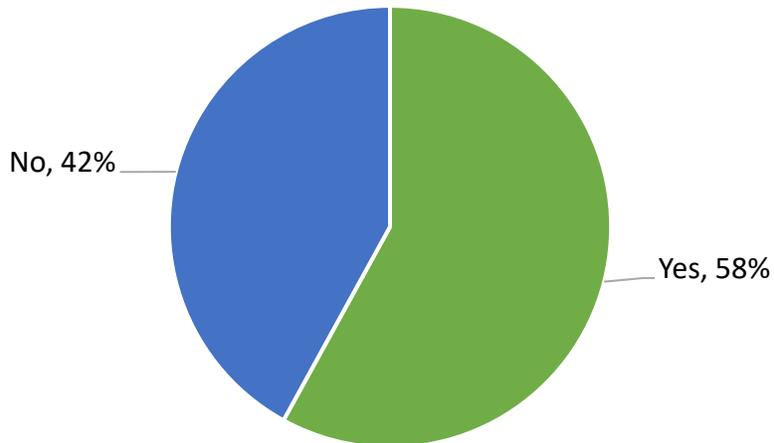


Figure 3. "Has your MPO made any specific efforts to meet its safety targets?"

When asked "Did your MPO meet its targets for the previous year?" almost half of all respondents were unsure whether their MPO met its targets, with almost one out of six agencies stating that their MPO met all of its targets in the year prior (Figure 4).

"Did your MPO meet its targets for the previous year?"

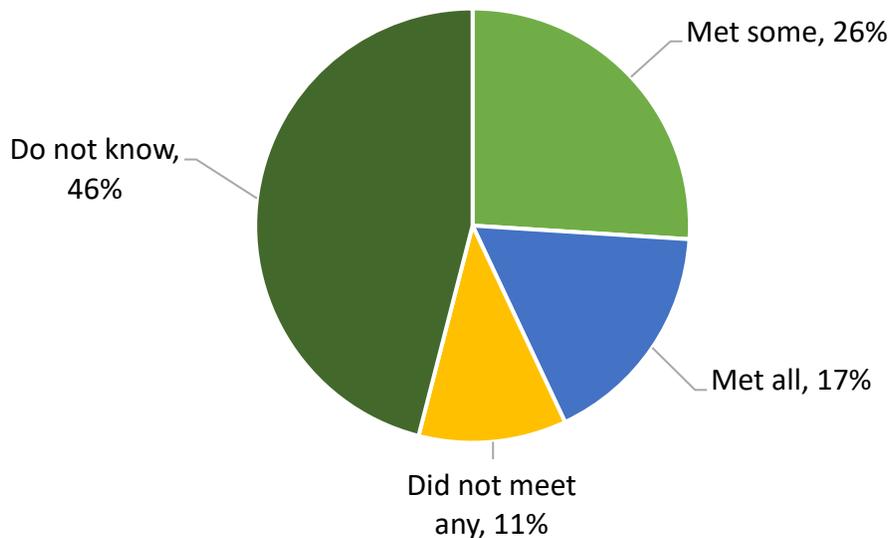


Figure 4. Number of MPOs who met their targets for the previous year.

Of the respondents who met some but not all of their targets, the “number of non-motorized fatalities and injuries” target was missed most frequently (26.4%) and the “rate of serious injuries” target was missed the least frequently (11.1%).

Respondents were then asked, “how does your MPO plan to use its safety targets in the future to address safety issues within your planning area?” Out of 129 written responses, 61.2% of participants’ answers could be categorized as “continuing current practices,” and 31% indicated they would adjust their current approach to safety targets in some way. One respondent said they would adjust their decision-making process “...to help prioritize capital projects, seek grant funding for capital projects, and seek grant funding to non-infrastructure programs.” Furthermore, the respondent expressed that in the future their MPO “...would also like to use the targets to engage in a much broader discussion with the public about safety and creating a safety minded local culture.”

The remaining responses (7.8%) indicated that they would work with their state. Looking towards how they might use safety targets in the future, one respondent said:

We may use [safety targets] in the future if a funding source can be identified and flexibility to make safety improvements in an expedited manner can be implemented, including education. At this time, they have very little meaning. Our strategy is to be more aggressive through our programs, projects and initiatives irrespective of the targets.

Respondents were then asked to rate their MPO’s overall level of concern about meeting their safety targets. Slightly more than half (54.2%) of respondents said their MPO had some to no concern at all about meeting safety targets (Figure 5).

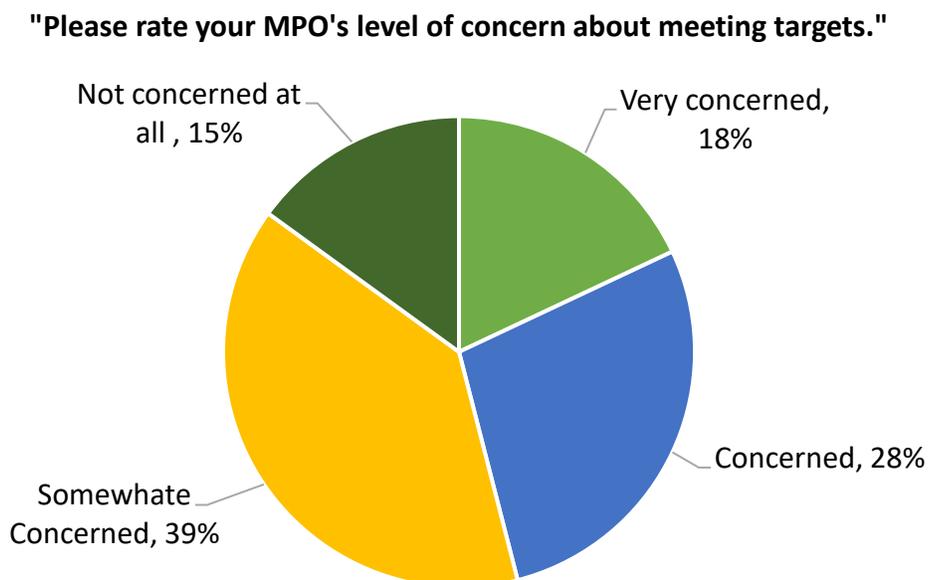


Figure 5. Agency's Level of Concern for Meeting Targets.

Contrastingly, the majority of respondents (70.2%) felt that their state was concerned to very concerned about meeting its targets (Figure 6).

"In your opinion, how concerned is the State with meeting its safety targets?"

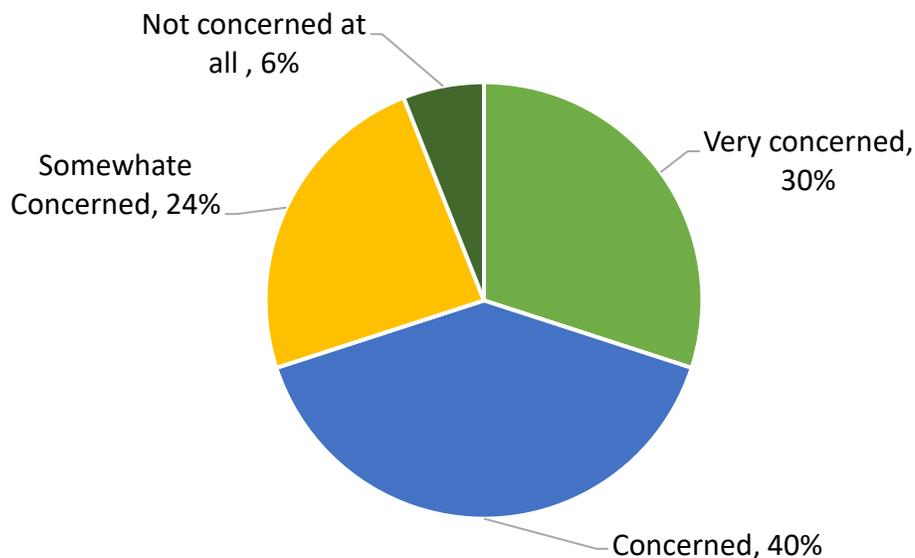


Figure 6. Perception of State's Level of Concern for Meeting Targets.

Finally, respondents were given an opportunity to provide any additional feedback, relating to safety performance measures and targets. Thirty-eight written responses were provided and where possible, categorized into several key themes. A common thread among almost a quarter (24%) of written responses was an observed disconnect between target setting and achievement of safety targets. On this matter, one respondent said, "there is only so much the state and MPOs can do to regulate human behavior. People are more aggressive, in a hurry, distracted, and don't want to slow down." Another said:

There's a disconnect between frequency of target setting and the ability to implement / construct projects that can make a difference. There are serious limitations in data accuracy, especially when performing hot spot analysis. Since a large proportion of crashes are a result of human error, the best designed roadways in the world can have only so much benefit. We seem to have many policies that are contrary to our safety efforts, e.g. ever-increasing speed limits.

Lack of resources or funding was another common thread. In particular, three respondents mentioned a need for training resources or workshops. One respondent said, "further training and expectations are needed for smaller MPOs to effectively meet safety targets." Other responses indicated inadequate funding as a barrier to implementing safety targets:

It is difficult to meet the various performance measure targets with limited funding. Safety, bridge and pavement assets, system reliability, and transit assets are all critical

components of the transportation system and with limited funding, it is difficult to meet all of these obligations.

Some respondents (13%) also shared a concern that safety targets were unrealistic or overly-aspirational:

The State's safety targets are completely unrealistic. As such, there appears to be very little emphasis placed on achieving those goals. Safety is of great concern to our MPO; however, given our limited staffing, we are not able to take a very systematic/analytical approach. Reaction to feedback from law enforcement and other public safety agencies is most common.

In contrast, one respondent felt their safety targets were unambitious, stating: "While I understand, respect and agree that targets should be realistic (vision zero is not appropriate for target setting); unless we are aggressive about deaths and serious injury the designs will continue to favor speed and thru put over multi-modal safety."

Although the majority of all responses expressed specific challenges or issues with target-setting, four respondents indicated that safety targets improved their MPO's communication with the state. Remaining responses were not easily categorized, however several provided clarifications for their responses in other sections of the survey.

Appendix: Target Setting Methodology

Table 5. For the current calendar year, how did your MPO set/adopt a target for each performance measure?

	Number of fatalities target	Rate of fatalities per million VMT	Number of serious injuries target	Rate of serious injuries per million VMT	Non-motorized fatality/serious injury target
Methodology	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)
Target based on projected numbers for the target years - utilized trend line analysis to make projection (i.e. Target should not exceed the projected number)	34.6% (47)	33.3% (45)	35.8% (49)	36.0% (49)	31.4% (43)
Target was based on increase of projected number for target years - utilized trend line analysis to make projection, then added a determined amount or percentage to the projection	6.6% (9)	5.9% (8)	5.1% (7)	5.9% (8)	7.3% (10)
Target was based on decrease of the projected number for target years - subtracted a determined amount or percentage from projection	11.0% (15)	12.6% (17)	11.0% (15)	10.3% (14)	11.0% (15)
Target was based on no change of a baseline (rolling average or selected year)	6.6% (9)	8.2% (11)	8.0% (11)	8.1% (11)	10.2% (14)
Target based on a decrease of a baseline (rolling average or a selected year)	16.9% (23)	18.5% (25)	16.1% (22)	16.9% (23)	17.5% (24)
Other (Please explain)	24.3% (33)	21.5% (29)	24.1 (33)	22.8% (31)	22.6% (31)
Total	100% (136)	100% (135)	100% (137)	100% (136)	100% (137)