

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-630](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Broadband furthers economic development, educational attainment, and public health and safety; however, residents of tribal lands have lower levels of broadband access relative to the U.S. population. Congress has prioritized identifying and targeting funds to unserved areas. FCC uses data from broadband providers to develop maps and reports depicting broadband availability in the United States, with specific information on tribal lands. GAO was asked to review FCC's efforts to collect broadband data for tribal lands.

This report examines the extent to which: (1) FCC's approach to collecting broadband data accurately captures broadband access on tribal lands and (2) FCC obtains tribal input on the data. GAO interviewed stakeholders from 25 tribal governments or tribally owned providers, and visited nine tribal lands. The selected tribes varied geographically and in levels of broadband availability, among other characteristics. GAO also reviewed FCC's rulemakings on broadband data and interviewed other tribal stakeholders, FCC officials, and 13 non-tribal broadband providers selected to include a diversity of technologies. Provider and tribal interviews were based on non-generalizable samples.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to FCC, including that it collect and report data that accurately measure tribal broadband access as well as develop a process to obtain tribal input on the accuracy of the data. FCC agreed with the recommendations.

View [GAO-18-630](#). For more information, contact Mark L. Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

September 2018

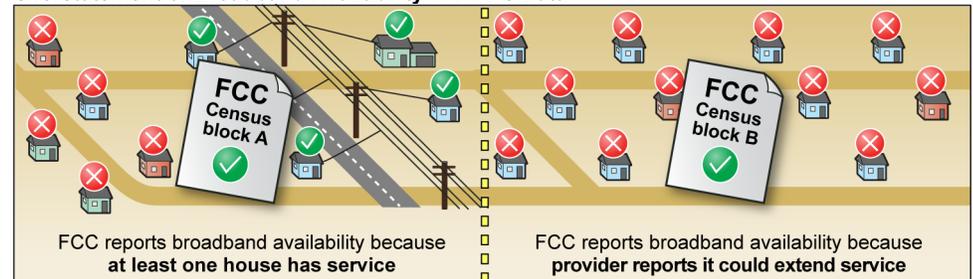
BROADBAND INTERNET

FCC's Data Overstate Access on Tribal Lands

What GAO Found

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) collects data on broadband availability from providers, but these data do not accurately or completely capture broadband access on tribal lands. Specifically, FCC collects data on broadband availability; these data capture where providers may have broadband infrastructure. However, FCC considers broadband to be "available" for an entire census block if the provider *could* serve *at least one* location in the census block. This leads to overstatements of service for specific locations like tribal lands (see figure). FCC, tribal stakeholders, and providers have noted that this approach leads to overstatements of broadband availability. Because FCC uses these data to measure broadband access, it also overstates broadband access—the ability to obtain service—on tribal lands.

Overstatement of Broadband Availability in FCC's Data



Source: GAO analysis of Federal Communications Commission (FCC) documents. | GAO-18-630

Additionally, FCC does not collect information on several factors—such as affordability, quality, and denials of service—that FCC and tribal stakeholders stated can affect the extent to which Americans living on tribal lands can access broadband services. FCC provides broadband funding for unserved areas based on its broadband data. Overstatements of access limit FCC's and tribal stakeholders' abilities to target broadband funding to such areas. For example, some tribal officials stated that inaccurate data have affected their ability to plan their own broadband networks and obtain funding to address broadband gaps on their lands. By developing and implementing methods for collecting and reporting accurate and complete data on broadband access specific to tribal lands, FCC would be better able to target federal broadband funding to tribal areas that need it the most and to more accurately assess FCC's progress toward its goal of increasing all Americans' access to affordable broadband.

FCC does not have a formal process to obtain tribal input on the accuracy of provider-submitted broadband data. In the *National Broadband Plan*, FCC highlighted the need for a targeted approach to improve broadband availability data for tribal lands. As outlined in the plan, such an approach would include working with tribes to ensure that information is accurate and useful. About half of the tribal stakeholders GAO interviewed raised concerns that FCC relies solely on data from providers, and most stated FCC should work with tribes to improve the accuracy of FCC's data. Establishing a formal process to obtain input from tribal governments on the accuracy of provider-submitted broadband data could help improve the accuracy of FCC's broadband data for tribal lands.