

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-423](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives.

Why GAO Did This Study

Roads on tribal lands are of particular importance for connecting people to essential services, such as schools, because of the remote location of some tribes. These roads are often unpaved and may not be well maintained. The federal government funds two programs to improve and maintain roads on tribal lands. BIA maintains the NTTFI and DMR databases to support these programs.

GAO was asked to review condition and school-access issues related to roads on tribal lands. This report examines: (1) the extent to which the NTTFI and DMR systems provide useful data on these roads; (2) any challenges to improving and maintaining these roads; and (3) what is known about the connection between road condition and school attendance as well as other aspects of school transportation. GAO reviewed documents and relevant literature; analyzed road-inventory and student-attendance data; and interviewed federal, state, local, and tribal transportation and education officials. GAO visited three selected tribes, based on road mileage and presence of BIE schools, among other factors.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making eight recommendations including that BIA, in coordination with stakeholders, reexamine the need for NTTFI data and improve the quality of DMR data, and that BIE provide guidance to collect transportation-related absence data. Interior agreed with five of the recommendations, did not take a position on two, and disagreed with one. GAO continues to believe its recommendations are valid, as discussed further in this report.

View [GAO-17-423](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Shea at (202) 512-2834 or SheaR@gao.gov.

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TRIBAL TRANSPORTATION

Better Data Could Improve Road Management and Inform Indian Student Attendance Strategies

What GAO Found

The two databases maintained by the Department of the Interior's (Interior) Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) include some data fields useful for identifying tribal roads eligible for federal funding, but other fields may be too inaccurate to be useful for performance reporting and oversight. Specifically, the National Tribal Transportation Facility Inventory (NTTFI) provides useful data for identifying the roughly 161,000 miles of roads on tribal lands that are eligible for federal funding. However, the purpose for which these data are used has changed, and GAO found incomplete and inconsistent road-description and condition data, raising questions about the continued value of collecting these data. Similarly, BIA's Deferred Maintenance Reporting (DMR) system provides useful data on roughly 29,000 miles of BIA-owned roads eligible for federal funding, but GAO found inaccuracies in fields related to road-condition and road-maintenance needs. BIA does not document its road-maintenance cost estimates, and some tribes under-report performed maintenance. As a result, budget justification and performance reporting using these fields may not accurately reflect maintenance costs and needs. Federal standards for internal control suggest agencies design information systems and use quality information to achieve objectives.

Funding constraints, overlapping jurisdictions, and adverse weather make improving and maintaining roads on tribal lands challenging. However, intergovernmental partnerships have helped mitigate challenges in some cases. For example, in 2013, federal, state, and tribal agencies partnered on a \$35-million project to pave a BIA earth road on the Navajo Nation when the main U.S. highway was closed due to a landslide. By partnering, the agencies completed the project in about 3 months and prior to the start of the school year, eliminating a 45-mile detour.

GAO's literature review and interviews with education officials indicate that road conditions can be a barrier to attendance, and Department of Education data show that Indian students have a higher chronic absence rate than other students (see fig.). At Interior, the Bureau of Indian Education's (BIE) schools generally do not collect data on transportation-related causes for absences, despite broader federal guidance that recommends doing so. BIE's attendance system lists causes, but transportation-related causes are currently not among them. Thus, BIE cannot quantify the effect of road conditions and target appropriate interventions. Rough road conditions in some areas also contribute to greater wear on school vehicles and associated higher maintenance costs.

School Bus on the Navajo Nation (Utah) and the National Rate of Students Chronically Absent, School Year 2013–14



In a national census of public school districts and schools, chronic absence was defined as students who were absent 15 days or more during the school year.



Sources: San Juan School District (photo) and GAO analysis of Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection. | GAO-17-423