

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-313](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Indian Affairs is responsible for ensuring safe and healthy learning environments for over 47,000 Indian students at 180 BIE school locations. About two-thirds of these schools are operated by tribes, primarily through federal grants, and about one-third are operated directly by BIE. Over a third of schools include dormitories. GAO was asked to examine the safety and health conditions at these schools.

GAO reviewed the extent to which Indian Affairs has (1) information on the safety and health conditions at BIE school facilities and (2) supported schools in addressing any safety and health deficiencies at school facilities. GAO analyzed agency data for fiscal years 2012 through 2015—the most recent data available—to determine the frequency of school safety and health inspections; visited 16 BIE schools, which were selected based on geographic diversity, condition, and other factors; examined Indian Affairs practices against its policies and safety standards; and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that Indian Affairs conduct required annual inspections at all BIE schools and ensure it collects complete information on school safety and health conditions nationwide, and that it develop a plan to build schools' capacity to promptly address safety and health deficiencies. Interior agreed with all four recommendations and noted several actions it plans to take to address them.

View [GAO-16-313](#). For more information, contact Melissa Emrey-Arras at (617) 788-0534 or emreyarrasm@gao.gov.

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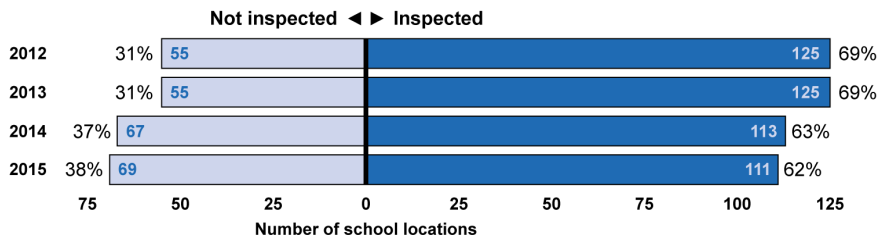
INDIAN AFFAIRS

Key Actions Needed to Ensure Safety and Health at Indian School Facilities

What GAO Found

The Department of the Interior's (Interior) Office of the Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs (Indian Affairs) lacks sound information on safety and health conditions of all Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school facilities. Specifically, GAO found that Indian Affairs' national information on safety and health deficiencies at schools is not complete and accurate because of key weaknesses in its inspection program, which prevented GAO from conducting a broader analysis of schools' safety and health conditions. Indian Affairs' policy requires its regional safety inspectors to conduct inspections of all BIE schools annually to identify facility deficiencies that may pose a threat to the safety and health of students and staff. However, GAO found that 69 out of 180 BIE school locations were not inspected in fiscal year 2015, an increase from 55 locations in fiscal year 2012. Agency officials told GAO that vacancies among regional staff contributed to this trend. As a result, Indian Affairs lacks complete information on the frequency and severity of health and safety deficiencies at BIE schools nationwide and cannot be certain all school facilities are currently meeting safety requirements.

Number of Bureau of Indian Education School Locations That Were Inspected for Safety and Health, Fiscal Years 2012-2015



Source: GAO analysis of Indian Affairs data and documentation. | GAO-16-313

Indian Affairs is responsible for assisting schools on safety issues, but it is not taking needed steps to support schools in addressing safety and health deficiencies. While national information is not available, officials at several schools GAO visited said they faced significant difficulties addressing deficiencies identified in annual safety and health and boiler inspections. Inspection documents for two schools GAO visited showed numerous high-risk safety and health deficiencies—such as missing fire extinguishers—that were identified in the prior year's inspection report, but had not been addressed. At another school, four aging boilers in a dormitory failed inspection due to elevated levels of carbon monoxide, which can cause poisoning where there is exposure, and a natural gas leak, which can pose an explosion hazard. Interior's policy in this case calls for action within days of the inspection to protect students and staff, but the school continued to use the dormitory, and repairs were not made for about 8 months. Indian Affairs and school officials across several regions said that limited staff capacity, among other factors, impedes schools' ability to address safety deficiencies. Interior issued an order in 2014 that emphasizes building tribes' capacity to operate schools. However, it has not developed a plan to build BIE school staff capacity to promptly address deficiencies. Without Indian Affairs' support of BIE schools to address these deficiencies, unsafe conditions at schools will persist and may endanger students and staff.