

Evaluation of U.S. Federal Programs

**United States Government Accountability Office
Presentation to the European Court of Auditors**

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June 25, 2019

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Outline

1. Defining evaluation
2. GAOs evaluation of agency-wide and individual program evaluation efforts
3. GAO-led evaluations
4. Example of GAO Evaluation(s)

Note: all cited and linked GAO work is available at www.GAO.gov

Defining Evaluation

- GAO's Definition:
 - Systematic study using research methods to collect and analyze data to assess how well a program is working and why
- Used for both accountability and program improvement
- Studies tailored to address customer questions credibly within available resources

Types of Evaluation

- [Performance Measurement and Evaluation: Definitions and Relationships \(GAO-11-646SP\)](#)
 - Process (or implementation) evaluation
 - Outcome Evaluation
 - Impact Evaluations
 - Cost-Benefit and Cost-Effectiveness Analyses
- Also See: [Designing Evaluations \(GAO-12-208G\)](#)

GAO Evaluation Work

- GAO study types
 - Performance Audits
 - Financial Audits
 - Routine Non-Audits
- Range of Quantitative and Qualitative Methods
 - Surveys, Focus Groups, Interviews, and other collection of testimonial evidence
 - Reviews of documentary and physical evidence
 - Use of primary and secondary data in descriptive and statistical analyses

Agency Evaluation Systems

- GAO reviews other agencies in terms of:
 - Evaluation Capacity and Resources
 - (GAO-03-454) [Program Evaluation: An Evaluation Culture and Collaborative Partnerships Help Build Agency Capacity](#)
 - Agency Plans, Agendas, and Learning Goals
 - (GAO-17-743) [Program Evaluation: Annual Agency-Wide Plans Could Enhance Leadership Support for Program Evaluations](#)
 - Agency Processes, Implementation, and Use
 - (GAO-17-775) [Managing for Results: Further Progress Made in Implementing the GPRA Modernization Act, but Additional Actions Needed to Address Pressing Governance Challenges](#)

Agency Program Evaluations

GAO Assesses Evaluations performed by agencies (or via agency contracts)

- Specification of research objectives/goals
 - [\(GAO-12-673\) President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief: Agencies Can Enhance Evaluation Quality, Planning, and Dissemination](#)
- Appropriate design and methodology
 - [\(GAO-17-316\) Foreign Assistance: Agencies Can Improve the Quality and Dissemination of Program Evaluations](#)
- Reliable data and accurate analysis
 - [\(GAO-18-220\) Medicaid Demonstrations: Evaluations Yielded Limited Results, Underscoring Need for Changes to Federal Policies and Procedures](#)
- Contextually sophisticated findings, conclusions, and recommendations
 - [\(GAO-13-570\) Program Evaluation: Strategies to Facilitate Agencies' Use of Evaluation in Program Management and Policy Making](#)

GAO-led evaluation efforts

- Congressional Requests
- Research Design and Methodologies
- Resource Considerations
- Types of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations
- Financial and Non-Financial Accomplishments

GAO-led Impact Evaluations

- Typically intended for prospective decision making
- May utilize a variety of approaches, including quasi-experimental designs, multivariate analysis, and simulation
- Staff and financial resources needs vary
- Results may focus on considerations, options, and tradeoffs, rather than assessment of evidence against particular criteria
- Less likely to have recommendations/accomplishments



Effect of Broadband on Rural Economic Development

- In May 2014, GAO issued
- **Telecommunications: USDA Should Evaluate the Performance of the Rural Broadband Loan Program**



United States Government Accountability Office
Report to Congressional Requesters

May 2014

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

USDA Should Evaluate
the Performance of the
Rural Broadband Loan
Program

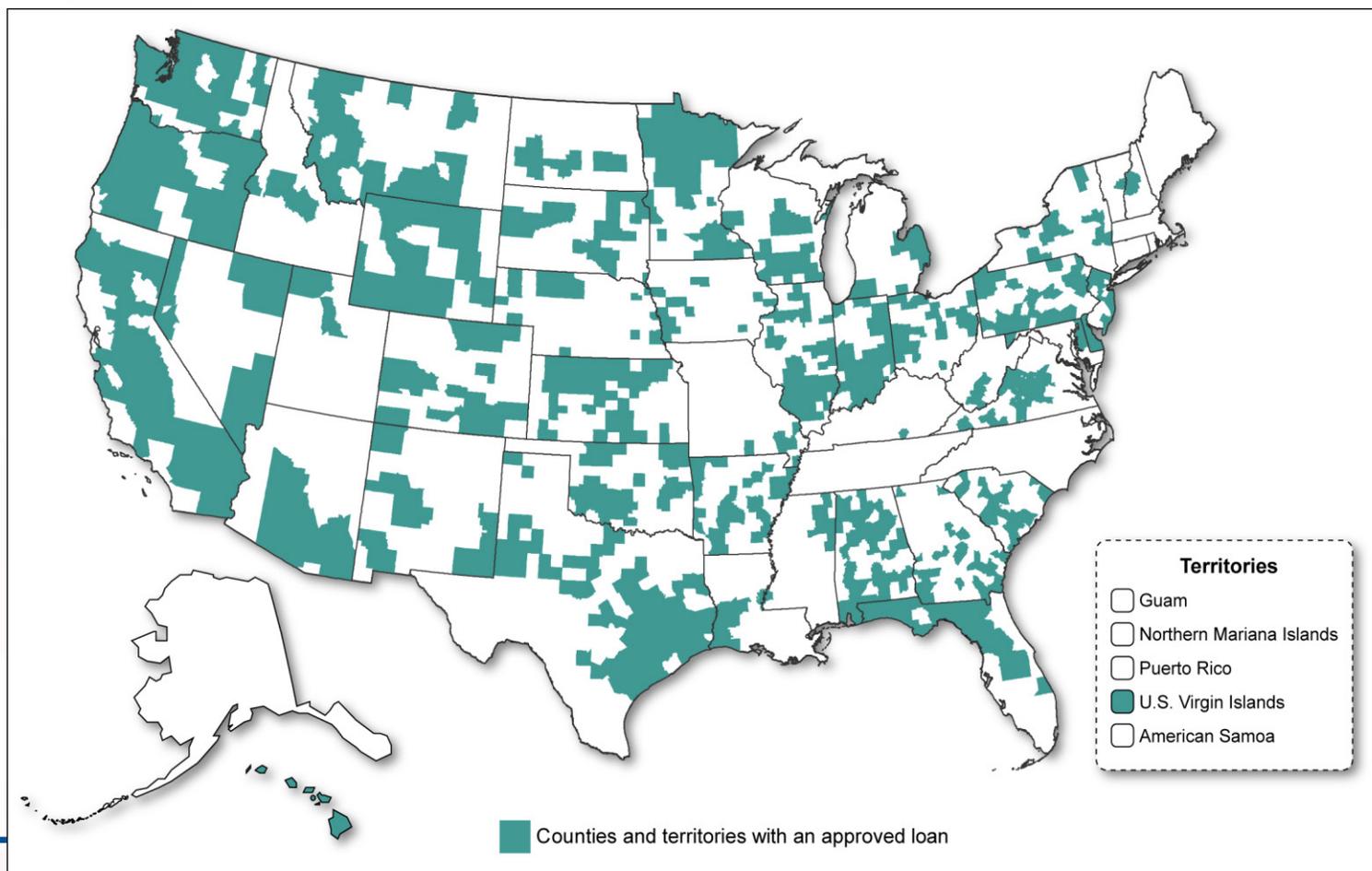
GAO-14-471

Effect of Broadband on Economic Development: Objective

- “Does federal support for broadband access in rural areas increase economic performance?”
 - Some challenges to estimating impact:
 - Many factors influence economic development;
 - Geographic boundaries of affected areas did not correspond to political jurisdictions (e.g., counties); and
 - Broadband *access* does not necessarily mean broadband *use*.
-

Effect of Broadband on Economic Development: Objective

U.S. Counties with One or More Approved RUS Broadband Loans, 2002—2013



Quasi-Experimental Design

- Compared counties that received broadband loans with three sets of similarly situated counties, including:
 - Counties with projects that were rejected for loans;
 - Counties that were similar based on observable characteristics; and
 - Counties that were geographically adjacent.
 - Compared these counties based on annual measures of economic performance, including:
 - Employment;
 - Payroll; and
 - Number of business establishments.
-

Data and Analytic Methods

- Two sources of data:
 - USDA Rural Utilities Service rural broadband loan program application information; and
 - Census, County Business Patterns, annual performance information.
 - Methods:
 - Proximity scoring regressions to select (some) control groups.
 - Created a panel dataset of 9 annual observations for each county.
 - Fixed effects regression.
 - Binary loan indicator, 1 after year of loan approval in approved counties, and 0 in counties before loan approval and in control group counties.
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Key Findings

- We found that areas affected by at least one approved broadband loan were associated with modestly higher levels of employment and payroll (1 to 4 percent) after the year of loan approval and in all subsequent years, as compared to areas that did not receive RUS loans.
 - Our findings were robust across all control groups.
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Center for Evaluation and Methods Issues

- Within GAO, the Applied Research and Methods Team houses the Center for Evaluation and Methods Issues (CEMI), which:
 - Consults with mission teams across GAO in the design and execution of performance audits and other evaluations
 - Leads work on guidance and good practices for various evaluation and methodological topics
 - Manages the FedEval listerv – a community of over 1,500 federal evaluation experts and practitioners
 - www.fedeval.net



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