Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States
Policy Brief

While the majority of Americans take high-quality drinking water and wastewater services for granted, millions of the most vulnerable people in the country—rural residents, low-income people in rural areas, communities of color, tribal communities, immigrants—have fallen through the cracks. Today, more than two million people across all 50 states lack access to running water, indoor plumbing, or wastewater services in their homes. This water access gap threatens public health, economic development, and quality of life—and in some parts of the country, it’s growing. Through targeted investment, policy change, and better coordination among policymakers and communities, we can close this gap in our lifetimes.

Data on the Water Access Gap

Quantitative analysis of nationwide census data, supported by qualitative research in six regions—California’s Central Valley, the Navajo Nation, the Texas colonias, rural areas in the South, Appalachia, and Puerto Rico—demonstrate the scope of the problem:

- Federal data doesn’t accurately measure the water access gap. National-level data collection undercounts vulnerable populations, such as communities of color and immigrants. Federal data is also insufficient to truly understand the full scope of the challenge. For example, the Census Bureau measures access to indoor plumbing, but not whether households have access to wastewater services. The Census removed questions about wastewater treatment after 1990 and eliminated a question on toilets in 2016.

- Race is the strongest predictor of the lack of water access. Communities of color are more likely to lack water access than white areas, and the disparity is particularly extreme for Native Americans. Native American households are 19 times more likely than white households to lack indoor plumbing; African-American and Latinx households are nearly twice as likely.

- Poverty is a key obstacle to water access. Access to indoor plumbing is correlated with household income, educational attainment (shown to correlate to poverty), and unemployment rates.

- Water access challenges affect communities around the nation. Communities living without water access exist in every state. Alaska, New Mexico, Maine, and Arizona are especially hard hit.

- Progress is uneven, and some communities are backsliding. While there has been gradual progress on water access overall, Delaware, Idaho, Kansas, New Hampshire, Nevada, South Dakota, and Puerto Rico all saw increases in their populations without access between 2000 and 2014.
Policy Recommendations

- **Revamp Census questions on water access and centralize federal data.** The Census Bureau should expand its American Community Survey question on complete plumbing access in occupied households to again include toilets (removed in 2016), and add questions on wastewater services, water quality, and cost. Federal agencies should streamline water access data collection and designate one agency as the lead clearinghouse. Centralized data would make it easier to identify communities most at risk of water access issues, by analyzing factors like wells that are at risk of failing, contamination threats, and persistent Safe Drinking Water Act or Clean Water Act violations. This would create an early warning system to inform a targeted response. Existing data sources like the United States Geological Survey and the American Housing Survey should be made more relevant to water access issues; for example, by releasing datasets more frequently or sampling more extensively in rural areas.

- **Expand and refocus federal funding programs.** The federal government should expand funding sources like State Revolving Funds, Community Development Block Grants, and USDA-Rural Development funding. The funds can be made more accessible by offering larger proportions of grants (versus loans), and including operations and maintenance funding. Federal agencies can co-fund projects to make more grant money available, and lower barriers for small systems by streamlining application processes and making them uniform across state lines. Technical Assistance providers also need increased funding. They are instrumental in helping understaffed systems navigate funding applications, manage operations, become financially sustainable, and meet regulations. The need for technical assistance among water systems outpaces existing capacity.

- **Support water and wastewater system consolidation that benefits communities.** Some small water and wastewater systems lack the capacity to provide quality services, due to declining funding, shrinking tax bases, and understaffing. Other communities lack any infrastructure at all, but may be located in proximity to functioning water systems. In these cases, consolidating systems or building knowledge- and resource-sharing partnerships can improve access and build economies of scale. Consolidation is a spectrum that can encompass multiple utilities merging to form a single system; areas that lack service connecting to a nearby system; or systems partnering on management or pooling resources. The federal government should remove obstacles and lower transaction costs to make system consolidation a more feasible option. Policymakers should utilize State Revolving Funds for consolidation projects. Applicants should be required to assess the viability of consolidation and whether it would result in cost-savings or significant health benefits for customers. Additionally, the federal government should subsidize consolidation through principal forgiveness, grants, and interest rate reduction.

This policy brief is drawn from the report *Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States: A National Action Plan.* Visit [www.closethewatergap.org](http://www.closethewatergap.org) to read the full report.