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## Is U.S. broadband access truly lagging?

Posted by [Anne Broache](#)

An [ever-popular lament among U.S. politicians and regulators](#) in recent years is that the nation is falling behind its foreign counterparts in delivering widespread broadband access to its citizens.

For instance, the latest oft-quoted statistics compiled by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) ranked [the United States 15th](#) out of 30 as of last December, with 19.6 broadband subscribers per 100 inhabitants and more than 58 million total subscribers.

But [a new paper \(PDF\)](#) by a Washington think tank challenges the assertion that the United States is doing so poorly.

Unlike the OECD and the International Telecommunication Union, which rely on raw numbers of per capita broadband subscribers to derive their rankings, the Phoenix Center for Advanced Legal and Economic Public Policy Studies is proposing a new method that assigns a numerical score--they call it the "Broadband Performance Index"--to the relationship between broadband penetration and factors like broadband subscription prices and a population's income, education levels, age and density.

By that measure, "we find that the United States generally meets expectations in its conversion of its national endowments into broadband subscriptions," concluded co-authors [Lawrence Spiwak](#), George Ford and Thomas Koutsky. The Phoenix Center bills itself as a non-partisan organization that "seeks to demonstrate that consumer welfare is best maximized by promoting free markets, competition, and individual freedom and liberty."

The group said it's not enough to look at broadband subscription rates in a vacuum. That's because "broadband adoption is not a race--broadband is instead a service purchased by households and businesses, and it is reasonable to expect that households and businesses in different societies with different conditions will make different purchasing decisions," the paper's authors argue.

By that logic, the report concluded that countries like Turkey and Portugal, which fall behind the United States in the OECD rankings, are actually making better use of what it calls "national endowments." Countries like Denmark and Norway, which top the United States on the OECD charts, are "underperforming" considering their demographic and economic realities, and nations such as Japan and Korea hailed as broadband "miracles" are really pretty average, the report said.

Their calculations determined age and income are the two most significant factors influencing broadband subscription levels. Overall, Finland, Iceland and Portugal were the best at "transforming their nation's endowments into broadband subscriptions," while New Zealand, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Luxembourg, Ireland and Greece were the worst, the report said.

The findings aren't meant to suggest that broadband penetration in the United States need not be improved, the group wrote, but to suggest that "the typical rhetoric surrounding broadband rankings can be misleading and misguided."

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