

Rural Broadband Investment Urgently Needed in the COVID-19 Crisis

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Rural areas still struggling to recover from the 2008 Great Recession are now hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic and its related economic fallout. Lack of access to broadband remains a major barrier to economic opportunity and educational success in many rural places. The Pew Research Center estimates that 25% of all Americans lack access, but the share in rural areas is even higher – more than one third of rural residents lack a broadband connection at home (2019 data). Four in ten schools nationally and 60% of non-metropolitan health care facilities lack reliable broadband access.¹ And, this likely underestimates the lack of access, as researchers at Penn State found that actual access and internet speeds in rural Pennsylvania and elsewhere are significantly lower than the data suggest.²

While broadband access was critical to the pre-COVID-19 economy – associated with higher income and educational attainment³ as well as more economic activity⁴ – the current crisis dramatically highlights the implications of this digital divide in rural areas. Lack of access to broadband affects the ability of individuals to file for unemployment benefits or apply for new jobs; of businesses to sell their goods and services online or apply for CARES programs; of communities to apply for CARES funds; of the sick to obtain online prescriptions or telehealth services, including mental health care; of the elderly to apply for benefits; and of homebound students to keep up with their school curriculum. Even workers encouraged to “work from home” may not be able to do so without an adequate internet connection. Farmers without broadband whose markets have disappeared when restaurants, schools and related local institutions shut down have an even smaller chance of finding alternative and new outlets for their perishable products through online sales. Along with other rural business owners and community leaders, farmers also have difficulty accessing the research-based Extension programs and information provided by Land Grant Universities. In addition, rural people without internet access are unable to respond to the Census online which could affect the future distribution of resources to rural communities.

The Regional Rural Development Centers, working in tandem with the Land-Grant University system, welcome engagement from both Cooperative Extension and research on this important topic. Here are two opportunities to become involved:

- Join the National Digital Education Extension Team (NDEET), a national team with expertise across the spectrum of the digital divide noted in the model above. To learn more visit: <http://srdc.msstate.edu/ecommerce/about.html>
- The RRDCs also manage a listserv for people interested in following the conversation but who do not currently wish to work on the national level. To join the listserv, contact Rachel Welborn, rachel.welborn@msstate.edu

¹ <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2019/07/21-million-americans-still-lack-broadband-connectivity>

² https://www.rural.palegislature.us/broadband/Broadband_Availability_and_Access_in_Rural_Pennsylvania_2019_Report.pdf

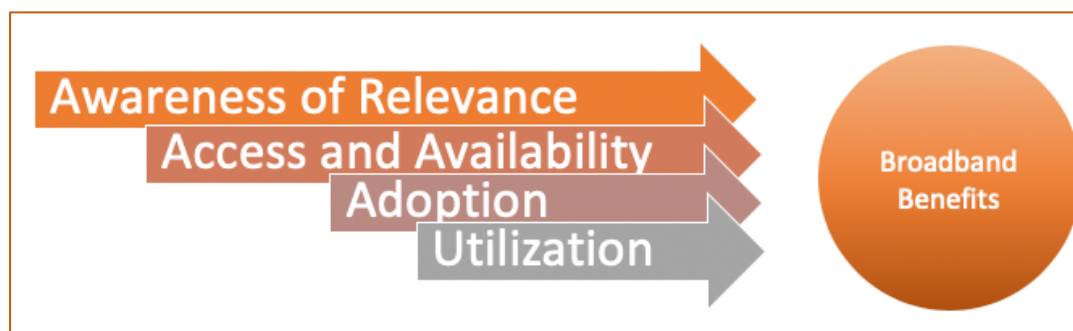
³ <https://cced.ces.uwex.edu/files/2020/04/Windicator-v3i2.pdf>; also see the Pew Institute for national data.

⁴ <https://www.dailyyonder.com/rural-counties-that-are-active-online-have-higher-incomes/2020/04/24/>

Over 50 million students are currently unable to attend their schools, many of which have shifted the curriculum online. This creates profound challenges on its own, but as many as 4.6 million school age children are estimated not to have a broadband connection at home (2019 data),⁵ and the Center on Rural Innovation estimates that of these children 2.3 million are in rural areas and 1.1 million are in small towns. This means that crucial learning may not be taking place – and rural students are especially disadvantaged, threatening to further widen the education gap between rural and urban areas as well as opportunities for economic advancement and growth.

As we emerge from this crisis, the post-COVID-19 economy will likely rely even more heavily on broadband access than before, as many public and private services will be provided online, along with many goods and products. Many jobs likely will continue to be carried out remotely. Being able to engage in e-commerce, book travel arrangements, sell agricultural products, seek medical help, and participate fully in the modern economy will all require high-quality wired and cellular broadband access.

Along with building broadband infrastructure, the importance of building public and consumer awareness and developing digital skills for adoption and utilization – as outlined in the graphic below – are all critical. Supporting awareness and digital skills development of users of all age groups will in turn raise the benefits to broadband investment and return on investment in rural areas significantly.



Source: National Digital Extension Education Team

In summary, without twin investments in both physical broadband infrastructure and in the human skills needed to use the infrastructure, rural areas will not be able to compete in the post-COVID-19 economy, and rural-urban differences and inequities are likely to become even pronounced.

About the Authors:

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Opinions expressed here are strictly those of the authors.



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⁵ <https://maps.ruralopportunitymap.us/broadband-access-map>