



Investing in Rural Capacity:

Key Findings Around Broadband and the Digital Divide

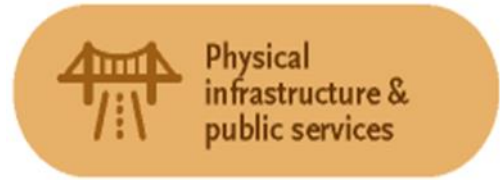
A Comprehensive
Summary of Findings
from the National
Rural Development
Stakeholder Listening
Sessions

February 2023

KEY FINDINGS AROUND BROADBAND and THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Summary of Survey Findings

The significant need for **broadband access and related digital skills** was one of the cross-cutting themes that emerged from the initial stakeholder survey. The image below provides a brief snapshot of the ways in which this topic connects across all the priority areas on which the survey focused. This topic drew comments from over 38% of infrastructure and public service respondents concerning challenges (most frequent intersections) and one-quarter concerning opportunities (second most frequent intersections). The most notable other intersections concerned economic development challenges (nearly 15% of economic development respondents) and opportunities (close to 12%).



Broadband was the most frequently noted infrastructure and public service to support rural resilience.



Remote working opportunities and online sales for small businesses require broadband access and skills.



Broadband access and skills provide remote work and educational opportunities for youth and adults, giving opportunities to stay in the community.



Broadband access can provide timely disaster information and allows for wider adoption of sustainable technologies.



1/5 of respondents saw broadband access as a significant factor in economic growth, innovation, and entrepreneurship.



Telehealth and other online health resources can bridge challenges in limited health care access for rural places.



Broadband access and skills can support e-commerce expansion for food related businesses.



Broadband access is an area where divides exist between rural/urban and among racial groups.

Findings across Survey Topics Related to Broadband

Assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Broadband is seen as a tremendous asset where available, encouraging rural vibrancy• Several remote work trainings exist (such as Utah’s Rural Online Initiative)• Gives an opportunity for rural residents who want to stay in the community to access educational opportunities, obtain employment, and have viable incomes• Provides timely access to disaster information where available
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Broadband services, adoption, and skills tend to lag in rural areas• Adults and youth may need to leave the community for jobs and education if broadband is not available• Lack of broadband inhibits economic growth, including business expansion• Affordability and reliability in rural areas is challenging• Black communities are disproportionately underserved
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Invest in access, affordability, and reliability• Advance digital adoption, literacy, and ability to use to improve quality of life• Connect broadband access/adoption with education, workforce development, economic development, and telehealth• Explore how remote work opportunities could support population retention• Disseminate information and strategies for sustainability in context of climate change• Address equity concerns

Broadband Listening Session at a Glance

- Held virtually on March 23, 2022
- Hosted by Southern Rural Development Center
- Number of registrants: 64
- Number of participants: 40

Recommendations for Future Investments from the Listening Session

After presentation of findings from the stakeholder survey, listening session participants were asked to identify, discuss, and prioritize future investments around broadband access and adoption. Their insights are listed below by key themes.

Infrastructure Policy and Financing

- Address limited competition between providers serving rural communities
- Provide more funding to support broadband expansion, access, and adoption
- Make broadband services more affordable at the individual/household level
- Offer planning grants for communities
- Increase opportunities for community-level free Wi-Fi
- Dedicate funding lines for Extension specialists to focus on broadband issues

Research

- Map broadband service availability, speeds, and costs
- Identify places and groups that are underserved
- Inform the development of decision tools
- Explore the relationship between broadband access and health outcomes
- Investigate the impacts of broadband access and adoption on families and communities

Extension

- Expand and enhance the digital literacy and skills training capacity of Extension
- Develop outreach and training tools for potential/new/non-traditional broadband users who live in rural areas
- Educate people on how broadband can be used to benefit families and communities
- Engage in planning for limited resource and underserved communities to stimulate more equitable infrastructure investments
- Create and deliver research-based and data-driven decision tools that communities can use for broadband access and adoption planning

“One of the most commonly reoccurring issues in my state is broadband access, which in turn, creates limited access to economic/educational opportunities and health care. I believe initiatives and research focused on improving our understanding of how limited broadband access affects individual/community outcomes and the potential impact that expanding broadband may have would be beneficial.”

—Survey respondent

Intersections with Equity and Sustainability

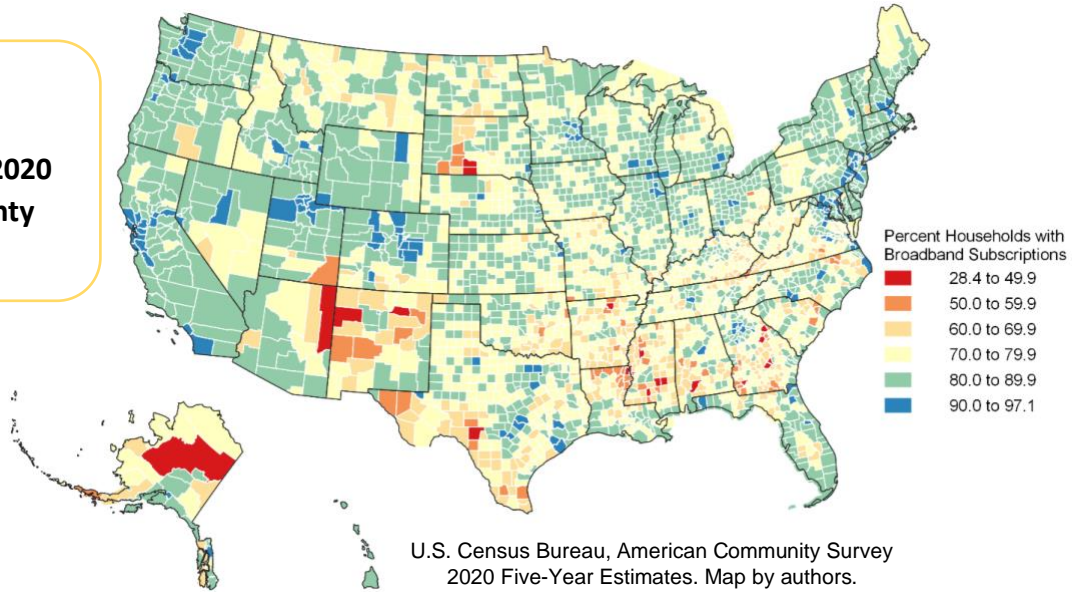
- Build and strengthen partnerships to address broadband concerns across organizational, county, and state lines
- Address equity concerns with focus on often underserved groups (including those based on race/ethnicity, age, poverty) and places
- Recognize that even in counties and states with relatively higher rates of broadband access and adoption, there are still people and places that are underserved
- Attend to broadband infrastructure problems associated with adverse weather events that can knock out service
- Pursue more climate friendly energy used for massive data centers

“High-speed internet would help too, but there's not as much thinking being done about the end of the wire. Without education and training for those technologies, they're just bricks in the wall between haves and have nots.”

—Survey respondent

These recommendations will be key to addressing the wide variation in broadband subscriptions across the United States, a key indicator of access and adoption, as demonstrated in the map below.

**Household
Broadband
Subscriptions (2020
Five-Year County
Estimates)**



Roles for the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs)

The listening sessions were intended to inform a broad range of rural development partners, including leaders with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Land-Grant Universities, among others. Given their focus on building capacity across organizational and state lines, the RRDCs may play several roles in advancing the strategic investments addressed in this report. These include the following themes.



Reaching across 1862, 1890, and 1994 Land-Grant University systems to collaborate on priority issues.



Conducting, translating, and disseminating research through journal articles, special issues, briefs, and presentations.



Scaling Extension outreach through curriculum development, training, gauging impacts, and showcasing promising practices.



Helping to acquire and leverage funding for research, Extension, and scholarship.



Actively encouraging the integration of research and Extension on key issue areas.



Facilitating workshops, listening sessions, and dialogues for innovative problem solving.



Convening researchers, Extension practitioners, and rural development stakeholders on high priority issues.



Building and coordinating multi-state teams.

Notes

Information in this report is excerpted from a report titled “*Investing in Rural Capacity: Comprehensive Summary of the National Rural Development Stakeholder Listening Sessions.*” The report shares findings from a national initiative conducted through the Regional Rural Development Centers (RRDCs).

For a comprehensive description of methods and participants, download the full report at:

<https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/listening-sessions#reports>

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For More Information

More information, including the comprehensive listening session report, survey report, supplementary materials, and an interactive data dashboard, is available at:

<https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/listening-sessions>

Learn more about the Regional Rural Development Centers at: <https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/index>

