INVESTING IN RURAL RECOVERY:
KEY FINDINGS AROUND BROADBAND

Regional Rural Development Centers

Introduction

The overarching purpose of this initiative was to identify the critical investments needed for building capacity and improving quality of life in rural America. This was done using a stakeholder survey combined with virtual listening sessions. This report is focused on findings from the national data surrounding broadband access and adoption.

Summary Survey Findings
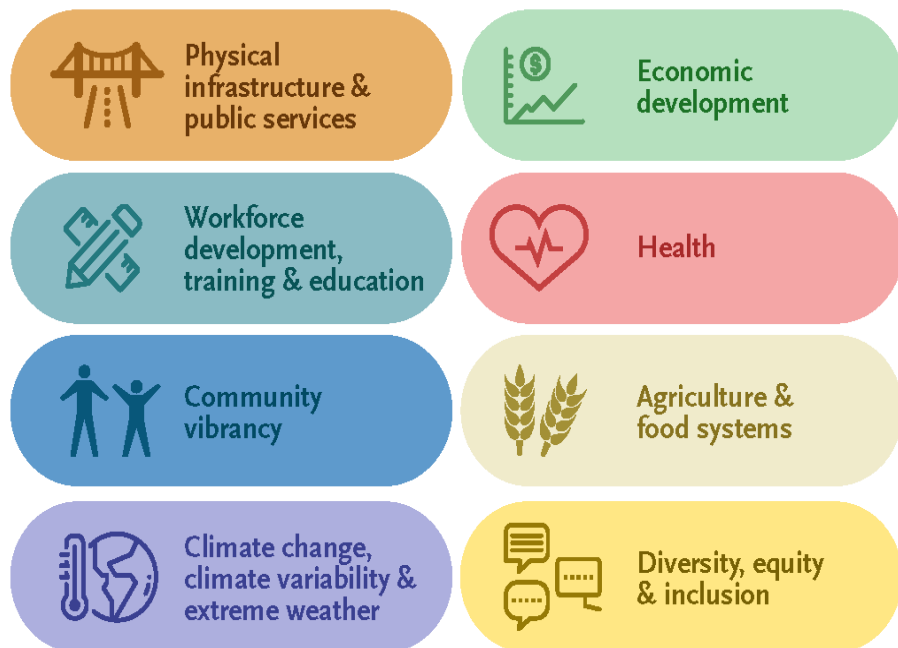
Selecting National Topics

The initial stakeholder survey that shaped the subsequent listening sessions focused on eight topical areas that often impact rural recovery. These are depicted in the image to the right. As respondents weighed in on these important issues in fall 2021, several cross-cutting themes emerged, one of which was the significant need for broadband access and related digital skills. The image on the next page provides a brief snapshot of those connections, which drew comments from over 38% of infrastructure and public service respondents concerning challenges (most frequent intersections) and 25% 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%). Given this crosswalk, broadband was chosen as one of the areas to explore more deeply in one of the four national listening sessions, which was held virtually on March 23, 2022.

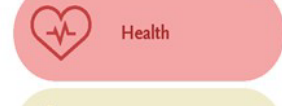| Physical infrastructure & public services | Broadband was the most frequently noted infrastructure and service to support rural resilience |
Workforce development, training & education	Remote working opportunities and online sales for small businesses require broadband access and skills
Community vibrancy	Broadband access and skills provide remote work and educational opportunities for youth and adults, giving opportunities to stay in the community
Climate change, climate variability & extreme weather	Broadband access can provide timely disaster information and allows for wider adoption of sustainable technologies
Economic development	1/5 of respondents saw broadband access as a significant factor in economic growth, innovation, and entrepreneurship
Health	Telehealth and other online health resources can bridge challenges in limited health care access for rural places
Agriculture & food systems	Broadband access and skills can support e-commerce expansion for food-related businesses
Diversity, equity & inclusion	Broadband access is a place where divides exist between rural/urban and among racial groups

Findings across Survey Topics Related to Broadband

Assets	• Broadband is seen as a major asset where available, encouraging rural vibrancy • Several remote work trainings exist (such as Utah's Rural Online Initiative) • Gives an opportunity for rural residents that 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	• 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	• Investing in access, affordability, and reliability • Advancing digital adoption, literacy, and ability to use to improve quality of life • Connecting broadband access/adoption with education, workforce development, economic development, and telehealth • Exploring how remote work opportunities could support population retention • Disseminating information and strategies for sustainability in context of climate change • Addressing equity concerns

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

> "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

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
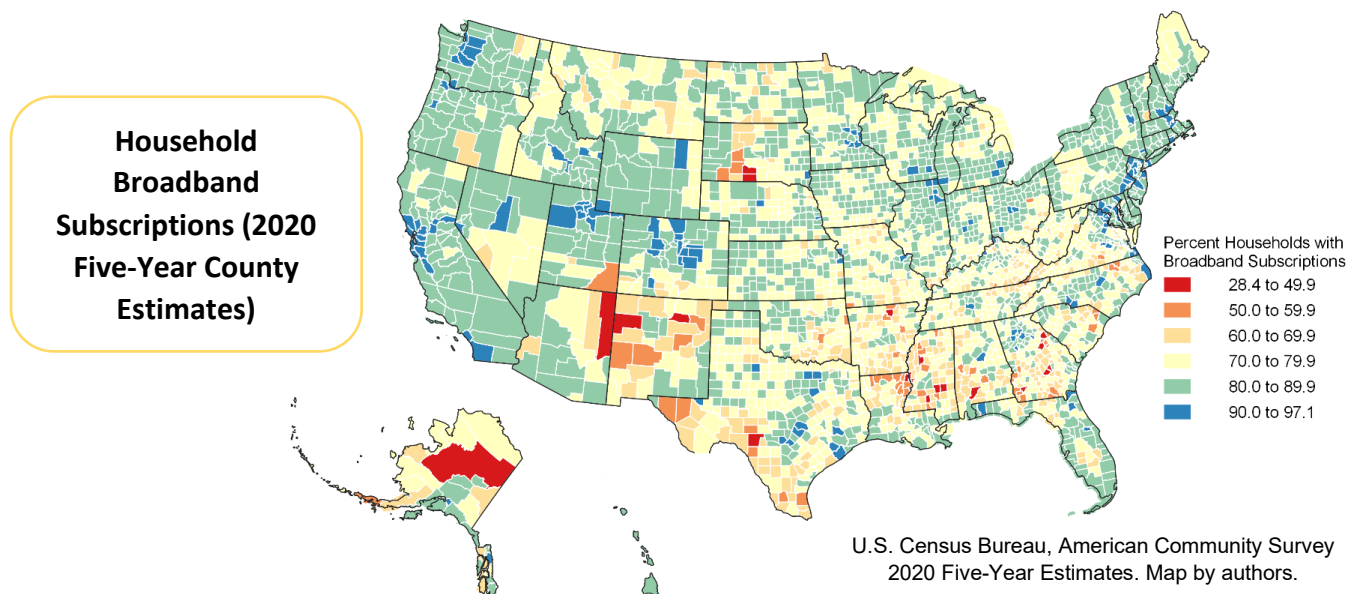
Intersections with Equity and Sustainability

- 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)

Percent Households with Broadband Subscriptions
- 28.4 to 49.9
- 50.0 to 59.9
- 60.0 to 69.9
- 70.0 to 79.9
- 80.0 to 89.9
- 90.0 to 97.1

U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2020 Five-Year Estimates. Map by authors.

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 advancements 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

Methods and Participants

The stakeholder survey was conducted in fall 2021. There were 680 participants from across the country who completed the questionnaire at least through the priority rankings. Participants included people coming from Land-Grant Universities, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and businesses.

Building from the stakeholder survey, the virtual listening sessions held in spring 2022 focused on identifying what is needed to fill the gaps between assets and opportunities. Facilitated dialogue with interactive technologies asked participants to think about Extension/education, research, and other investments. Each of the four Regional Rural Development Centers hosted two listening session – one on a national topic and one regional session. This report covers the national broadband topic which had 40 participants.

Notes

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For More Information

Explore the findings related to this project more closely via our interactive data dashboard: https://bit.ly/RuralRecoveryDashboard

Learn more about the Regional Rural Development Centers by visiting: https://www.usu.edu/rrdc/