

RURAL BROADBAND: ACCESSIBILITY, AFFORDABILITY AND ADOPTION

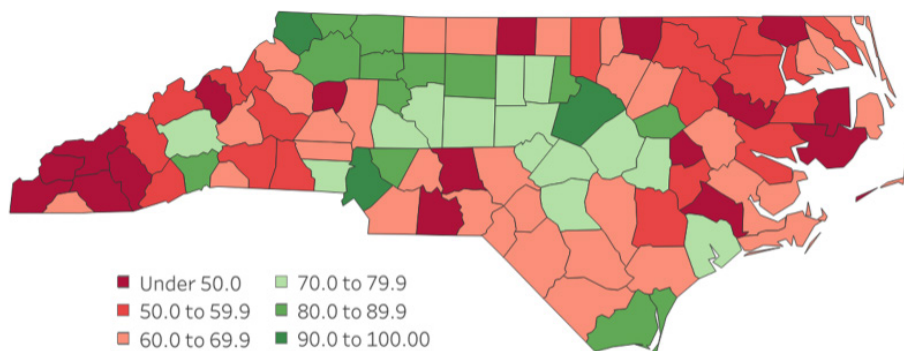


The COVID-19 pandemic shined a brighter light on the economic and technological disparities in rural communities across North Carolina. Limited, inefficient, or non-existent broadband access is a barrier on many fronts - from students and teachers struggling to access online learning platforms, to people in need of telehealth services, and even small businesses looking to carve out a space in the digital marketplace. The question of broadband accessibility looms so large that the NC Rural Center believes the economic vitality of rural communities hinges on whether reliable, future-proof, last-mile broadband access can be established from the mountains to the coast.

To put this into perspective, the broadband availability index is used to measure access to quality broadband¹. An ideal score is 95 or higher. As of 2019, urban areas of North Carolina have an average score of 91. Rural areas have an average score of 58, about two-thirds that of urban areas¹.

With higher speeds becoming increasingly necessary for everyday broadband use, these numbers present a significant threat to rural populations. Adoption and affordability rates in rural areas also lag behind urban and suburban areas¹, leading to scores of opportunities missed by rural areas to participate in virtual marketplaces, classrooms, employment spaces, and more.

BROADBAND AVAILABILITY AND QUALITY INDEX



Nearly all residents in urban counties have access to high speed internet, defined as 100 upload MPS and 20 download MPS, while **an estimated 20% of residents rural counties** still do not have access.

Average Availability
Index Scores

91
URBAN
COUNTIES

72
SUBURBAN
COUNTIES

58
RURAL
COUNTIES

¹NC Broadband. (2019). NC broadband availability index. NC broadband availability index.

State and federal policymakers are keenly aware of these long-standing issues and have committed monumental resources to address the problem. More than \$1 billion in federal and state funding has been invested into broadband in recent years (with more to come) and multiple initiatives tackling broadband accessibility, affordability, and adoption have been developed. Still, broadband will continue to be a top priority by policymakers and advocates across the state.

THERE ARE AN ESTIMATED
209,688 CHILDREN (UNDER 18 YEARS OLD) IN NORTH CAROLINA DO NOT HAVE ACCESS TO INTERNET

LOCATION OF CHILDREN WITHOUT INTERNET ACCESS

28%
URBAN
COUNTIES

24%
SUBURBAN
COUNTIES

48%
RURAL
COUNTIES

Nearly half (48%) of North Carolina children with no internet access **live in a rural county.**

Source: 2020 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

POLICY SOLUTIONS

The following outlines the policies and initiatives the NC Rural Center proposes to connect the workforce, small business owners, students, healthcare providers, and residents of rural North Carolina with opportunities made possible by modern technology and innovation.

- Establish a revised broadband definition that creates a minimum service threshold of 100:20 Mbps to ensure equitable access to reliable, high-quality broadband in all areas of the state.
- Encourage public-private partnerships that clarify and enhance the ability of local governments to raise and spend funds for broadband infrastructure and lease existing assets to private and nonprofit partners to help expand broadband to the last mile.
- Leverage and coordinate federal and state funds to address broadband adoption and affordability rates, and fund technology access programs to ensure equitable access for low-to-moderate income households.
- Convene regional stakeholders, partners, and broadband service providers to effectuate universal last mile broadband accessibility and adoption goals in unserved and underserved areas of the state.
- Support viable infrastructure technologies, such as fiber and fixed wireless, to increase access to reliable high speed broadband services and efforts to accurately map broadband accessibility and adoption across the state to best identify needs in underserved and unserved areas.
- Support the state's goal to equitably close the digital divide through increased access to high speed internet and subscriptions and increased adoption rates for every household by 2025.



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