

Pandemic exacerbates internet access crisis in Midwestern US

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The US is experiencing a crisis of internet access in rural and urban communities. The continued lack of high-speed internet for millions of people well into the 21st century is called the “digital divide.” This divide was starkly exposed this year as school districts nationwide were forced to implement online instruction programs some or all of the time, and a significant portion of routine health evaluations were also moved online as a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic.

Nationwide, around 95 percent of urban areas have broadband access, but less than 60 percent of rural areas do. The Pew Research Center published that nationwide, one in four residents in rural areas does not have access to high-speed internet.

The U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) estimates that \$80 billion would be required to close the broadband gap across the country. The agency defines broadband as internet service with a minimum download speed of 25 Megabits per second (Mbps) and a minimum upload speed of 3Mbps. These guidelines are themselves inadequate in the modern age, where multiple people in a household are working, streaming video, or gaming at the same time.

As a result of the pandemic, states are seeing drastic cuts in their budgets that threaten existing weak and piecemeal broadband expansion plans. BroadbandNow publishes statistics on broadband coverage in every state. There are large disparities across the US. Illinois, which ranked 6th in access, has 89 percent coverage, while Nebraska, ranked 48th, only has 75 percent.

Even in states with wider coverage, deeply unequal access persists. One-third to one-half of children in working class and poor neighborhoods of Chicago, including Austin, Humboldt Park and Englewood, lacked broadband access as of April 2020. When schools went online, this lack of basic infrastructure undermined their education. Affluent Chicago neighborhoods have coverage of 90 percent or better, according to a study published by the Metropolitan Planning Council. In Detroit, Michigan 45 percent of households lack broadband access.

School districts providing hotspots to rural students and teachers is no guarantee of adequate access, as internet speeds will stay slow if the town has poor cell tower coverage. In school districts across the country, school buses equipped with Wi-Fi park in neighborhoods to allow students to complete their coursework. Very poor connectivity was one of the many pressures on rural school districts in the ongoing bipartisan drive to reopen schools full-time and put workers back on the job as COVID-19 infection

rates soar.

Large internet providers use the profits they make from broadband service in urban areas to increase the dividends of stockholders, instead of using them to improve infrastructure and expand to connect rural customers. While fiber internet is being installed in some rural parts of the country, much of rural America still deals with slower internet speeds than large cities.

Nationwide, the U.S. Census Bureau found 36.4 percent of black households, 30.3 of Hispanic households and 21.2 percent of white households have no broadband or computers in 2017.

The Midwest, a 12-state region of 65 million people, has some of the lowest rates of high-speed connectivity in the nation. In 2018, Congress allocated \$550 million through the ReConnect Program to bring broadband to rural communities, through a combination of grants and loans. As this funding is meant to cover all 50 states, each individual state gets only a small portion of funding. In the Midwest, each state can connect at most a few thousand people and businesses. The profit-seeking of these private providers may price some households out of the broadband newly available in their area.

In **Indiana**, northwestern Jasper County (population 33,500) is only now having broadband installed in its Kankakee School Corporation. The State of Indiana, Watch Communications, SBA Communications, Wabash College, and the Purdue Research Foundation’s Innovation Partners Institute (IPI) indicate plans to have broadband installed in the district by January 2021. 84,000 Indiana students lack internet access at home.

The IPI director of the project, Mohammad Shakouri, Ph.D., explained the importance of small communities having access to broadband internet. “We are experiencing a digital transformation in our communities, and the wise adoption of technology is critically important to ensure not only success but equity.” He made the point, “increasingly ‘connectivity’ is viewed just as important to one’s quality of life as food, shelter, education and safety.”

Kankakee Valley School Corporation Superintendent Don Street said, “This project will help us overcome the lack of connectivity in our area that suddenly became a huge hurdle for many of our students when we moved to e-learning in the spring.”

In **Nebraska**, \$3.1 million of the ReConnect funds will be used in Brown, Rock and Keya Paha counties to connect 261 people, 70 farms and seven businesses. \$8.9 million in Remote Access Rural Broadband Grant funding will allow Great Plains Communications

(GPC) to connect 4,788 households in various small towns in a project begun this September.

The **Missouri** city of Hannibal (Marion and Ralls counties, population 17,300) has had a 4.5-mile fiber internet extension installed by communications infrastructure provider Bluebird Network, bringing the total number of fiber miles to 13.5. Hannibal now has 554 buildings with fiber service.

The Pittsburg School District of Hickory County, Missouri will install a private network for district families that cannot afford their own internet, and it can only be used for educational purposes. The school district began this initiative as it found that 20 percent of its students lacked adequate internet. Nearly 11 percent of Missouri children have no broadband access.

Stan Finger wrote a story on how rural **Kansas** residents' efforts to maintain their work and complete schoolwork are hindered by lack of internet access. State Rep. Mark Schreiber said that around 95,000 Kansas households have nonexistent or inadequate internet. As with urban businesses, farmers need high-speed internet to keep track of the changes that happen throughout the growing season and to operate equipment.

Kansas Commerce Secretary David Toland remarked on how the pandemic exposed how badly needed broadband is in the state. "When you're suddenly thrust into a situation where people are having to work remotely, and go to school remotely, and visit their medical provider remotely, you find out really quickly where those deficiencies are and how work and life can and can't get done." **Minnesota** Compass released a report stating that almost half of all households in Greater Minnesota, and 40 percent in the Twin Cities, with annual incomes of \$20,000 or less, do not subscribe to internet service.

In **Wisconsin**, a quarter of rural residents lack broadband at 25Mbps or better. Ninety-two percent of urban and 75 percent of rural residents have broadband in the state. For **Michigan**, the US Census Bureau reports that 82,894 households in the Detroit Public Schools District and 14,221 households in the Flint School District have no internet access. In Washtenaw County, where University of Michigan Ann Arbor is located, 57 percent of K-12 students have no high-speed internet in their homes.

In rural northern Michigan, Lake County high school junior Michael Cavender explained how his home internet gets bogged down. "Since I have five brothers, the internet slows down a lot, like long wait times just sitting there. So, yeah, that's kind of difficult. It's really hard to turn in assignments and do work like that, and sometimes when I'm in meetings, I can barely hear the person because of how much of a lag there is."

As of 2020 in **South Dakota**, 91.6 percent of residents had broadband access. However, the Regional Educational Laboratory Central at the Institute of Education Sciences reported that 11.1 percent of people aged 5-19 in South Dakota (17,280 people) did not have access in 2019.

The Midwest states of **North Dakota**, South Dakota, and Minnesota have large tracts of Tribal land. Only 65 percent of Tribal lands had access to broadband as of July 2020, according to the DIGITAL Reservations Act.

In **Iowa**, \$1.8 million of the ReConnect program funds will go to adding broadband, including for 1,338 people, 70 farms and 21

businesses in rural counties.

In **Ohio**, in areas with 20 or fewer households per square mile, 80-90 percent of households have no broadband access. One million people, or 340,000 households, in Ohio have no internet at all. Even in a major city like Columbus, 30 percent of households are unable to access broadband, mainly due to cost. About 402,000 children in the state lack internet-capable devices. ReConnect funds of \$14.9 million will enable 2,722 homes and businesses to be served by 318 miles of fiber in southern **Illinois** by West Kentucky and Tennessee Telecommunications. The city of Quincy (Adams County, population 65,700) will receive \$1.6 million to connect 440 people, 34 farms and 18 businesses. Work on the Quincy project is to begin next year. Over one million Illinois residents are still unable to access consistent high-speed internet.

The naked profiteering anticipated with the end of "net neutrality" is being accelerated by the pandemic, which has put families at home more than ever, relying on high-speed internet for work, school and recreation. Last month, Comcast announced that it plans to place data caps on users in 14 states and the District of Columbia, including Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Maryland, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Vermont, West Virginia, Washington D.C., and parts of North Carolina and Ohio, according to The Verge. Once users use more than 1.2TB (terabytes) of data in a month, they will be charged \$10 per 50GB, up to a maximum overage fee of \$100. This cap is already in effect in other states.

Companies like AT&T are also imposing usage caps. A recent OpenVault study indicates that from the third quarter of 2019 to the third quarter of 2020, the number of internet subscribers using at least 1TB of data has more than doubled. Claims by the telecommunications companies that they must increase rates because high-data users "stress the system" are lies, and the companies have boasted in 2020 of how well their networks have handled increased demand throughout the pandemic.

Ensuring all have access to high-speed internet is a vital part of creating a socialist culture. The money to ensure that all Americans have reliable, high-speed internet exists many times over, but it is controlled by a tiny section of the megarich. It will be up to the American working class to return that stolen wealth to the people to address the many problems of infrastructure the country has, internet access included.



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