

Broadband Internet Access: Equal Access and Opportunity for All

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BROADBAND ACCESS: A NECESSITY OF MODERN LIFE.

Issue Statement

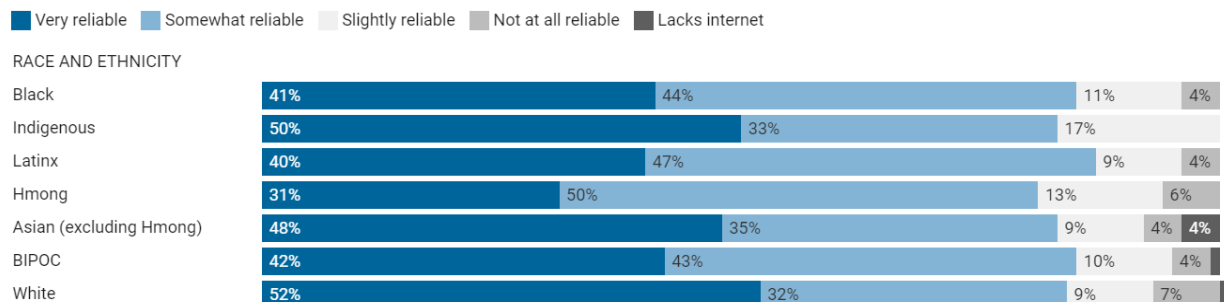
The **DIGITAL DIVIDE** is a “phrase used to explain the gap between those who can easily use and access technology, and those who cannot.”
- [Sanders & Scanlon \(2021\)](#)

The internet has become the primary way households gain access to daily services, including education, healthcare, employment resources, and transportation. In 2016, the [United Nations General Assembly](#) designated internet access a **basic human right**. Millions of Americans are living in the [digital divide](#). Low-wage workers, people of color, children, older adults, individuals with disabilities, the less educated, rural residents, and limited English-speaking households are among those most affected by lack of broadband access in Minnesota. Those without access experience social and economic inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the need for broadband access. Minnesota must end the digital divide that limits access and opportunities. Minnesota must invest public resources to create universal access to high speed broadband.

Understanding the Need

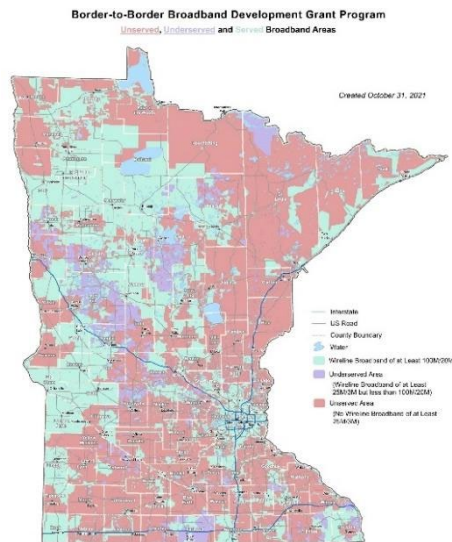
Broadband is a shorthand term for any high-speed Internet access. The [Federal Communications Commission](#) (FCC) defines minimum criteria for broadband connection speeds. Over 330,000 Minnesota residents either do not have access to the internet or have inadequate [download and upload speeds](#). Almost 80% of these residents live in rural areas. These residents range from rural Minnesotan business owners to urban-area students, and everyone in-between.

A 2021 [APM Research Lab](#) study found that only 50% of Minnesotans who needed internet access for work or school had “very reliable” internet access. Reliability varied by location, educational attainment, income, and **race/ethnicity**. Hmong Minnesotans were the most disadvantaged ([figure below](#)).



In 2020, the [Minneapolis Star-Tribune](#) reported that individuals most affected by technology disparities were nonwhite, elderly, less educated, and lower-income. 38% of households with incomes less than \$20,000 report having no internet access.

People with disabilities are also impacted by the digital divide. Lack of access, skills, and socioeconomic barriers limited access to adaptive technology necessary to utilize the internet. These barriers, compounded by social distancing and quarantine, led to increased isolation, abandonment, and institutionalization.¹



[The map](#) to the left shows large sections of Minnesota, particularly **rural areas**, that are unserved or underserved. **Unserved** (pictured in red) defines an area where households and businesses lack access to broadband services. **Underserved** (pictured in purple) defines those who have access to Internet service, but it may not meet broadband connection speeds.

Minnesota has inadequate physical infrastructure in place to meet broadband needs. Providers build where they can earn a return on their investment, — areas with higher population density (i.e., more customers). Discrepancy in actual versus advertised speeds, typically found in underserved areas, are due to access during high-use hours, provider hardware and infrastructure, and physical distance to internet servers. Furthermore, lack of provider competition in rural areas forces consumers to accept insufficient technology.²

Why Broadband Access is Essential

“Broadband access is no longer a matter of convenience and entertainment, but overall **quality of life.**” – [Malone \(2022\)](#)

Education. Children regularly attend school remotely. Remote learning requires learners to have broadband to participate, ask questions, and complete their homework. There are programs available to assist [students and schools](#) to provide necessary internet access. However, families that are most affected by accessibility and affordability reflect these barriers on their children’s education.

Healthcare. The declaration of a public health emergency act redefined modern society. The American Community Survey demonstrated that 26% of [600,000 Medicare beneficiaries](#) did not have access to a computer with high-speed internet or a smartphone with a wireless data plan. Bridging the digital divide in health care means improving quality care for all, not just those with broadband.

Employment Opportunities. Internet access is essential to finding, applying for, and sustaining employment. [37%](#) of non-broadband users indicate that it would not be easy for them to create a professional resume; [30%](#) would find it difficult to contact an employer via email, or fill out an online job application; and [27%](#) would have a hard time finding online lists of available jobs in their area.

Approaches to Achieving Universal Connectivity

“By 2022 and thereafter, Minnesota wants to be in the **top five states** in the nation for **broadband speed** universally accessible to residents and businesses and the **top five states** for **broadband access**” ([Minnesota Office of Broadband Development](#)).

Minnesota’s Efforts. The Minnesota Legislature has established clear goals in statute to guide the state’s broadband development efforts through the year 2026 (See [Minn. Stat. 237.012](#)).

- “No later than 2026, all Minnesota businesses and homes have access to at least one provider of broadband with download speeds of at least 100 megabits per second and upload speeds of at least 20 megabits per second”.

Minnesota’s effort to expand broadband include:

- The formation in 2011 of the [Governor’s Broadband Task Force](#) to advise legislators on broadband policy.
- The [Minnesota Rural Broadband Coalition](#), a nonpartisan group of citizens, working to ensure that rural perspectives are considered as part of the policy conversation.
- The [Border-to-Border Grant Program](#) awards grants to eligible applicants with the purpose to support infrastructure costs for new and existing broadband providers.
- The [Broadband Mapping Program](#) offers a visual representation of Minnesota’s efforts toward broadband expansion and includes maps of unserved and underserved communities, infrastructure gaps, provider availability, and much more.

Since 2014, Minnesota has awarded [\\$126 million in grant funding to 179 project](#), service to over 57,000 homes and businesses. In 2021, state legislators agreed to spend an additional [\\$70 million](#) on the Border-to-Border Program. This investment led to the praised [“Minnesota Model”](#) of broadband expansion.

Minnesota’s efforts can be enhanced by learning from the successes of other states. The 2019 Pew Charitable Trusts report documents approaches to [funding broadband initiatives](#). Additionally, the 2020 Pew report documented the [promising practices](#) of 8 other states.

Federal Efforts. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government created a variety of initiatives:

- The [Keep Americans Connected Pledge](#) had providers agree to not terminate service due to incapacity to pay bills due to the pandemic, suspend any late fees due to economic circumstances related to the pandemic, and provide hot spots to Americans in need. Some FCC initiatives have utilized CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act) funding. FCC initiatives have also focused on improving remote learning & accessing telehealth in rural areas.
- The [United States Department of Agriculture](#) (USDA) is committed to expanding rural broadband access. Almost \$700 million has been allocated to accessing or enhancing broadband service in rural areas. Public-private collaboration has contributed to building broadband through distance learning and telemedicine.

- The [National Telecommunications and Information Administration](#) (NTIA) recently allocated \$277 billion to provide broadband to about 133,000 unserved households. These funds will go to twelve states and one federal territory.

Policy Position Statement

While Minnesota has made great strides in increasing broadband access for its residents, there is still room for improvement. Without ensuring that all Minnesotans have equal broadband access, many residents will continue to be left behind when it comes to critical opportunities, including employment, education, and health care. Utilizing the Minnesota Model, Minnesota **must accelerate** its efforts toward universal broadband access to ensure its citizens equal opportunity to healthcare, education, and employment.

For these reasons, we recommend:

- Minnesota leverages all available federal dollars to continue to fight the digital divide and to promote broadband internet access and affordability as a necessity of modern life.
- Minnesota allocates an additional \$170 million as recommended by the [Walz-Flanagan Budget](#), for broadband development including funding for the Border-to-Border program. Further investments will allow providers to build broadband infrastructure in unserved and underserved areas to help Minnesota achieve its 2026 broadband speed goal.
- Minnesota continue to fund the Broadband Mapping Program to identify unserved and underserved areas. Identification of unserved and underserved areas will support investment efforts in the Border-to-Border Program.
- Minnesota's public policy makers engage with local, state, and federal stakeholders, including groups like the Minnesota Rural Broadband Coalition. Engagement with stakeholders will increase awareness of the digital divide in Minnesota.

To access this and other policy advocacy briefs go to: <https://ahn.mnsu.edu/academic-programs/social-work/master-of-social-work/policy-briefs/>

References

To the extent possible, full text online sources were used to create this policy advocacy brief and are [linked](#) throughout the document.

¹ Cho, M., & Kim, K. M. (2022). Effect of digital divide on people with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Disability and Health Journal*, 15(1), 101214. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2021.101214>

² Lai, J., & Widmar, N. O. (2020). Revisiting the Digital Divide in the COVID -19 Era. *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy*, 43(1), 458–464. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aepp.13104>