

B | Metropolitan Policy Program at BROOKINGS

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Digital divide in America: Lagging U.S. broadband subscription dampens local economic opportunities

New Brookings Metro report shows neighborhood-level broadband subscription and availability commonly falls short in metros across the country

Washington, D.C. — A new report from the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program finds that although 93 percent of the nation lives in neighborhoods where 25 Mbps wireline broadband service is available, over 73 million Americans (including 17.7 million children) live in neighborhoods where in-home broadband subscription rates fall below 40 percent.

The report uses census tract data to reveal neighborhood-level conditions and needs, generating new measures of the digital divide in every American community. The report is released at an important time: the FCC is considering lowering the threshold for broadband speed and service, while Congress is primarily focused on rural gaps. Missed in these debates is the importance of getting all Americans subscribed to in-home broadband.

“The United States is quickly becoming a digital economy: from how we teach our students, to how workers find employment, to the rise of telecommuters,” said Adie Tomer, report author and Brookings Metro fellow. “These subscription gaps present fresh obstacles to enabling all Americans to pursue economic opportunity.”

In *Signs of digital distress: Mapping broadband access and subscription in American neighborhoods*, authors Adie Tomer, Elizabeth Kneebone, and Ranjitha Shivaram breakdown both availability and subscription challenges. They find that geography and income levels are the two greatest drivers of broadband subscription gaps, perpetuating the digital divide in even the most connected metro areas. Meanwhile, availability is especially inadequate in rural America, where more than half of residents lack access to broadband. Yet many large metro areas also don’t enjoy ubiquitous service, leaving many thousands of people without currently-defined broadband.

The report also includes a combined index of broadband availability and subscription. It finds coastal areas lead in broadband performance, including metro areas in Florida, the Northeast, and the Pacific Coast. Conversely, many Southern and lower-density metro areas perform poorly across both measures.

Elizabeth Kneebone, report author and Brookings Metro fellow, said, “Given the dual dimensions of today’s digital divide, federal, state, and local leaders need to pursue policies that give equal weight to connecting American homes and getting their residents subscribed to high-speed service.”

Tomer added, “The digital disconnect facing many American neighborhoods is a wake-up call to the extent of our challenges, but policy has enormous opportunities to help get all Americans online.”

The report is accompanied by an interactive website that allows users to explore local data through “heat maps” showcasing neighborhood-level broadband availability and subscription for the top 100 metro areas, highlighting the stark intra-regional digital divide.

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