



Connecting Minority Communities

Broadband Infrastructure and Internet Service Provision in South Carolina from 2019 to 2021

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Summary

Access and connectivity to the internet have dominated COVID-era discussions on the infrastructural underpinnings of social inequality and future access to opportunities. This brief examines the racial/ethnic dimensions of these discussions as they pertain to South Carolina. We track the significant changes made to improving metrics for minority households from 2019 to 2021 and point out how investments into internet connectivity for minority households might improve South Carolina's economy.

Spurred by Necessity

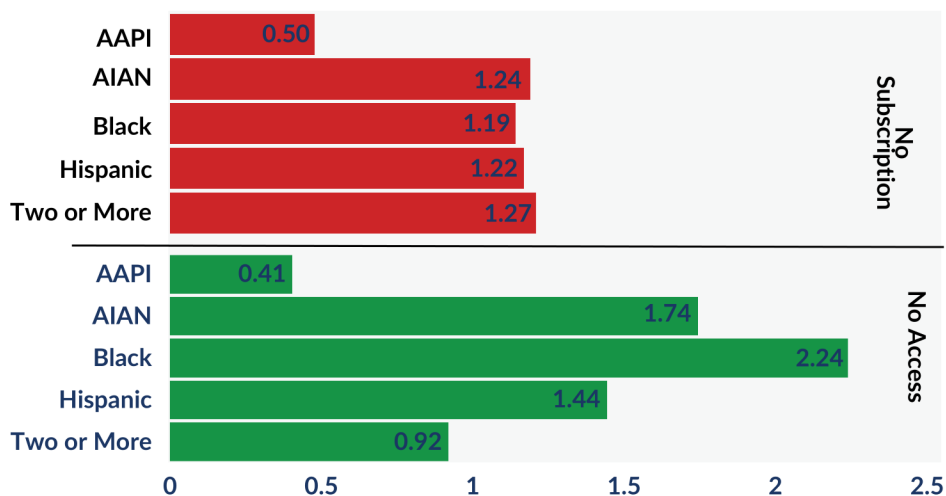
In March of 2020, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, millions of residents began working and schooling from home for the first time. This unprecedented shift in the locus of social activity underscored just how unevenly the physical infrastructure for digital economy had developed. For decades rural Americans, in general, and rural South Carolinians, in particular, were left behind by the infrastructural development of broadband and fiber optic networks. This unfurled according to the logics of profitability and economies of scale, and not equitable access. Nevertheless, access does not guarantee connectivity: one still requires a suitable device (i.e. laptop or tablet), payment of monthly subscription fees, and the technical know-how with which to effectively use a device to log on to a service. It was in the shadow of pandemic that federal and state agencies jumped at expanding both the physical, economic, and social infrastructures associated with internet connectivity.

Uneven Access and Connectivity

Although rural residents were more frequently disconnected from physical infrastructure, the state's minority population comprised the largest subgroup of residents lacking internet access in their homes. Except for the state's Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) populations, African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanic/Latinos were significantly more likely to not have internet access at home. In fact, African American households were 2.24 times more likely than Whites to not have physical internet infrastructure connections in their residences.

Nevertheless, there was a 31% decline (to around 93,600 households) in the number of minority homes lacking internet access from 2019 to 2021. Despite the reduction, minority households still comprise around 47.8% of all households without access. Alternatively, minority homes without an internet subscription have dropped to around 108,709 households (-21.1%) from 2019 to 2021. As opposed to those lacking access, these homes are less likely to be inhabited by persons age 65 and up and much more likely to own a computer. Finally, minority households comprised nearly 62% (or 111,570 homes) of all households gaining access to Broadband, DSL, or Fiber Optic internet subscriptions from 2019 to 2021. Nearly 42,300 of those households did not have internet access in 2019 (see table on backside).

Likelihood for Minority-headed Households to be without an Internet Subscription or Access Relative to White-headed Households, 2021



Household-level Descriptive Statistics for Minority/White Households without a Subscription for Internet Service

Group	Minority	White
Overall Share	36.75% (34.42-39.08)	63.25% (60.92-64.58)
Age 65+	21.16% (18.16-24.16)	35.05% (32.53-37.56)
150% or less of Poverty Line	37.68% (33.61-41.75)	24.88% (22.41-27.35)
Cost-Burdened Household	35.92% (31.84-40.00)	22.85% (20.42-25.27)
No Computer	49.78% (45.61-53.96)	42.19% (39.45-44.92)



Household-level Changes from 2019 to 2021 for Internet Access Type

Access Type	2019		2021		Change	
	# of households	Share Minority	# of households	Share Minority	# of households	Share Minority
No Access	271,037	50.15%	195,765	47.83%	-75,272	-2.31 ppts.
Access but No Subscription	331,252	41.62%	295,826	36.75%	-35,426	-4.87 ppts.
Dialup	29,860	32.58%	36,195	39.92%	+6,335	+7.34 ppts.
Broadband, DSL, Fiber	1,277,255	26.41%	1,457,444	30.80%	+180,189	+4.39 ppts.
Satellite	66,511	36.53%	64,747	39.76%	-1,764	+3.23 ppts.
Total Households	1,975,915	32.65%	2,049,977	33.73%	+74,062	+1.08 ppts.

Despite these dramatic improvements in access and connectivity metrics, minority households are still disproportionately affected by a lack of internet access in the home. In general, homes without access or without a subscription, tend to be poorer, have less formal education, and are headed by older individuals than homes without difficulties accessing the internet. Older residents, whether minority or not, might feel uncomfortable using the internet to engage in everyday activities, and therefore avoid subscribing to an internet service provider. However, the issues of access is primary. In 2021, 28.8% of elderly minority households were not serviced by internet infrastructure, significantly higher than the 14.5% of White elderly households lacking access. However, the difference between minority (15.02%) and White (15.62%) households headed by the elderly that had access but did not pay for an internet subscription was not statistically significant.

Median household incomes for minority-headed households that did not have physical internet infrastructure connected to their home was around \$19,200 dollars, and for those that had access but no subscription, that figure was \$33,500. For White households, these figures were \$27,700 and \$45,400 respectively. Considering the state's critical labor shortage, around 64.6% of Minority-headed households with access but no subscription were actively participating in the labor force, compared with only 51.98% of White households. Finally, around 11.8% of Minority children live in households that do not have access to the internet, while 22.7% live in houses with no subscription. In total, around 83,000 school-aged minors that identify as one or more racial/ethnic minority do not have internet service/access in their home.

Conclusion

After COVID-19 there is no denying the importance of internet connectivity, although the structures of the globalized economy have long pointed to such connectivity being of vital importance. Minorities across the state are still unevenly affected by a lack of access, despite tremendous advances in extending physical infrastructure over the past two years. With the Federal Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) and state-directed initiatives such as the Broadband Equity, Access, and Development (BEAD) Program and the Digital Equity program, we are hopeful that further advances can be made. (Please be sure to take the GetConnectedSC Better-internet survey by scanning the barcode below.)

Minority Households were **214** times more likely
than White households to not have in-home internet
connections in 2021.



Get Connected SC
Better Internet Survey

Contact



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