

## BROADBAND NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN IOWA

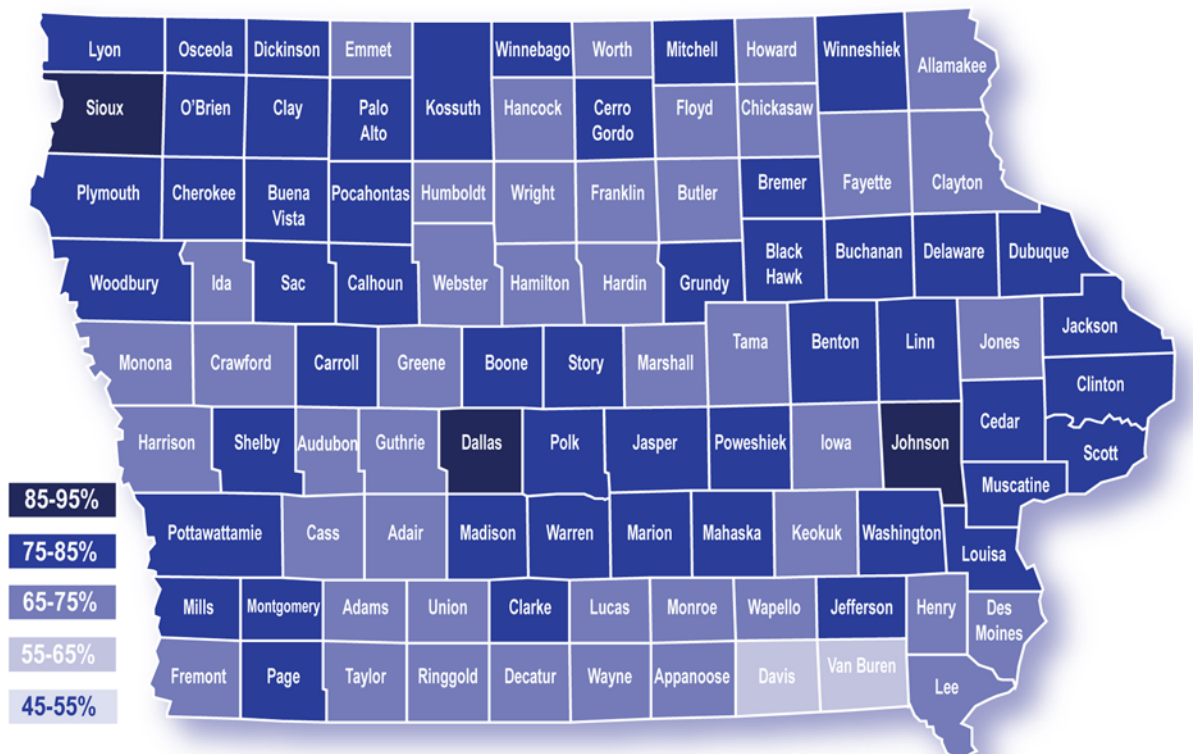
*States can work with communities to address rural, low-income needs*

By Karen Mossberger, Arizona State University  
 Caroline Tolbert, University of Iowa  
 Scott LaCombe, University of Iowa and Smith College

June 8, 2020

**A**s so much of daily life moved online during the pandemic, unequal access to the internet became an urgent problem for communities across the state, as schools, libraries and businesses closed, workers were sent home to work remotely, shops turned to online commerce for survival, and hospitals increased reliance on telemedicine. Two decades after the emergence of broadband, or high-speed internet, many rural communities lack the infrastructure to support distance education, telecommuting, or telehealth. Even where high-speed internet service is available, there are households without the ability to afford computers and broadband connections.

**Wide differences across Iowa counties in access to broadband**  
 Percent of population with broadband — any type



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, American Community survey, 2018, 5-year averages

Overall, 21.2 percent of Iowa's residents lack a broadband subscription, even with mobile access included, according to the most recent Bureau of the Census data (American Community Survey 2018, five-year averages). This is slightly higher than the national average, which is 19.6 percent of the U.S. population, reflecting the rural nature of the state. Yet, 37.2 percent of Davis County residents lack a broadband subscription, as do 36.5 percent of the population of neighboring Van Buren County. Statewide, 47.3 percent of Iowa residents with annual household incomes of \$20,000 or less lack broadband subscriptions — nearly half. The map above shows that Dallas, Johnson, and Sioux counties have the highest broadband subscription rates in the state with over 85 percent of households having coverage, whereas less than 65 percent of the population has broadband in Davis and Van Buren counties.

Some private internet providers offered to extend low-cost offers or pledged to not cut off customers during the COVID-19 emergency, but these policies were uneven across providers and often poorly implemented.<sup>1</sup> With public schools closed statewide by April 1 (and many in mid-March), many school districts scrambled to provide tablets for students and/or mobile hotspots in parking lots or school buses. Some school districts provided low-income families free broadband during the pandemic. Even with these efforts, the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2020) reported in a pulse survey conducted from May 14 to May 19, 2020, that 27.3 percent of U.S. households that earned \$25,000 or less and had schoolchildren did not always or usually have devices available for educational purposes, and 21.8 percent did not always or usually have internet access. In Iowa, 29.6 percent of these low-income households said that they did not always or usually have devices, and 25 percent did not always or usually have internet access for educational purposes.

### ***Broadband is a necessary resource for communities***

Bipartisan recognition has emerged in Iowa of the need for reliable broadband infrastructure offering speeds that are adequate for live-streaming, educational videos, online conferences, and medical diagnosis, and bandwidth to accommodate innovation and future development. Research shows local communities with a larger percentage of the population with broadband subscriptions are more prosperous.<sup>2</sup> States can play an important role in distributing existing and proposed federal loans and grants effectively, and in marshaling their own resources. States can work with local governments and community-based organizations to address needs in rural and in low-income communities. This includes allowing local initiatives such as public-private partnerships or municipal broadband, especially when the market has failed to deploy adequate infrastructure. States can also support local efforts by providing grants and loans to assist in planning and implementing infrastructure programs.

Legislation moving in Iowa in 2020 (SF2400) takes steps on these issues. Its effectiveness will be evaluated on how well the broadband access gaps are closed. The need for prompt and constant evaluation is highlighted by the COVID crisis, with so many services most easily accessed online, from unemployment insurance to education. Affordable internet access should be required when there is public investment in infrastructure. Skills training, low-cost devices and information about discounted internet can be disseminated by local schools, libraries, hospitals, and nonprofit organizations, and states can support these efforts as well through funding. The current pandemic has underscored the need for efforts to effect meaningful change for a broadband future.

***The Iowa Policy Project thanks the authors for providing this summary of broadband issues facing Iowa. See their longer report on our website, [www.iowapolicyproject.org](http://www.iowapolicyproject.org). IPP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy research and analysis organization in Iowa City, founded in 2001.***

<sup>1</sup> McCabe, D. (2020, March 20). Poor Americans Face Hurdles in Getting Promised Internet. *The New York Times*. <https://nyti.ms/37akwq1>

<sup>2</sup> Mossberger, Tolbert and LaCombe, forthcoming.