



THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

A huge number of Americans don't have internet access – most of them people of color and low wage workers. And the pandemic has made the problem worse. Local governments can help.

The COVID-19 crisis has forced our country to completely restructure the way many of us live, work, and learn, and access to broadband has become essential to advancing public health, education and equity.

Local governments are at the forefront of the pandemic response, and many are struggling to figure out what they can do to expand access to broadband as quickly as possible, but they may not know what policies to pursue and they may not know whether they have local authority to pursue them.

This guide highlights the scale of the broadband problem (before and during the pandemic) and important policies that local governments can consider in the short and long-term to increase access to broadband. It also explains why efforts to expand broadband must center racial equity in order to be effective.

The Digital Divide, Broadband Access, and the Pandemic

The response to COVID-19 has forced millions of Americans to turn to the Internet to meet their most pressing needs. [At-home broadband use is surging](#); Plume reports more than 100 percent increases in the number of people who are active online during the workday in the United States. This could be for anything from telehealth to distance learning. Virtual medical care is quickly emerging as a critical tool to fight the spread of the virus; one telehealth software vendor [reported](#) a 2,000 percent increase in visits to its platform for virtual consultations. Many more Americans are accessing government services online, including [applying for unemployment](#) or [requesting an absentee ballot](#). An estimated [52 million students](#) relied on remote education to finish the school year and millions more are teleworking from home.

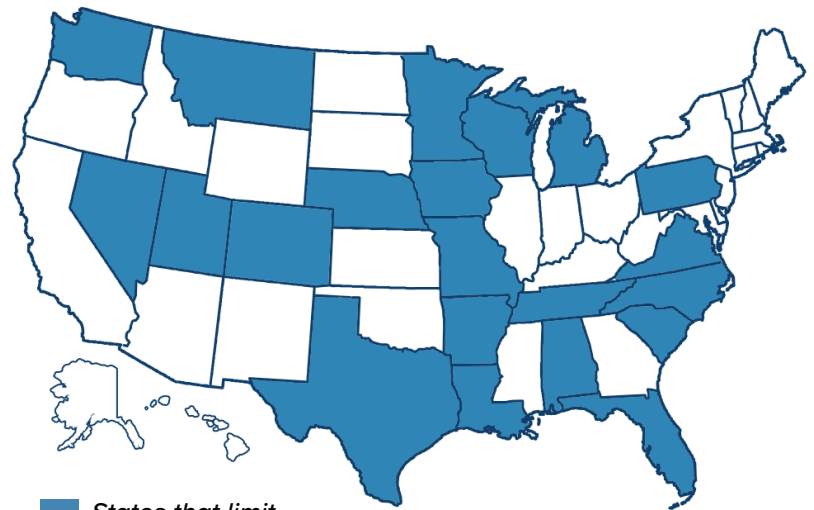
But not everyone has equal access to high speed broadband and the pandemic has exposed the vast and damaging effects of the “digital divide.” No one really knows how many people lack high-speed Internet access. The federal government puts the figure at [21 million](#), but most studies show that's a drastic undercount, and that the number is closer to [40 million](#). Tens of millions more technically have access but cannot afford the price or lack a device or literacy to use it.

The families left behind are [concentrated among low-income, nonwhite, and rural Americans](#): More than 44 percent of adults in households making under \$30,000 don't have home broadband; and, even when controlling for income, Black and Latinx Americans still lag behind their white counterparts in broadband adoption. Thirty one percent of rural Americans do not have access to broadband at home, but the problem extends into cities as well. Three out of every four Americans who [aren't connected](#) have the infrastructure in their neighborhood but haven't connected to it, often because they cannot afford it.

Though hundreds of communities around the country have built their own networks to increase access to the Internet, [21 states limit local authority](#) to address inequities, though Iowa and Colorado allow cities to opt out with a referendum. Some of these states entirely preempt community networks while others have created barriers to discourage the practice. The same corporations that have refused to invest in affordable connections for all Americans wrote the laws to stop communities from solving a problem touching more than 1 in 4 Americans.

The Role of Local Governments in Expanding Broadband During and After the COVID-19 Crisis

Between the pandemic and protests over racial inequity, 2020 is demanding that local governments address persistent differences in who has high-quality Internet access at home. Racial disparity in access to computers and home Internet connections is widening achievement gaps that existed before the pandemic. Every month with racial disparities in Internet access leaves children of color further behind and privileged children racing ahead. Research shows the shift to remote learning through the 2020-2021 school year could set the average student seven months behind academically, according to a McKinsey [analysis](#). The analysis estimates [Black students may fall behind](#) by 10.3 months, Latinx students by 9.2 months, and low-income students by more than a year. McKinsey estimates that this would worsen existing achievement gaps by 15 to 20 percent.



■ States that limit local authority to address broadband inequities

Given the racial disparities underlying unequal broadband access, any effort to expand broadband access as a response to the COVID-19 crisis and beyond must center racial equity in order to be effective. Though state and federal programs have expended tens of billions of dollars to address rural broadband challenges, there are no similar expenditures to resolve the urban digital divide that disproportionately harms communities of color.

U.S. House Democrats announced a [\\$100 billion plan](#) to dramatically improve Internet access in June. The bill would restore authority to build networks to local governments, stopping state-based preemption. It is the first serious effort to also put real money behind solutions to both urban and rural Internet access challenges. Though this plan may not pass the Republican Senate, it is a marker for a Democratic Party priority in January of 2021.

During and beyond the current COVID-19 crisis, communities need to develop long-term and short-term solutions that redress persistent racial inequalities in broadband access. These efforts must be supported by substantial financial investment over several years.

The ideal long-term solution will ensure in-home high-quality access at affordable rates, [meaning \\$10/month or less](#) for qualifying families. These connections should be paired with funding for digital literacy training programs (including how to be safe online) as well as subsidies for acquiring a network-connected device.

How Can Local Governments Expand Broadband Access Immediately?

1 PROMOTE EXISTING PROGRAMS

Many cable and telephone companies have some kind of low-income Internet access plan for qualifying families. Comcast's Internet Essentials is the most successful to date with millions of families served. Portland and San Francisco will pay the cost for families in their schools to have access in the 2020-2021 school year. The federal government has a program called Lifeline that offers a small monthly subsidy for telephone or broadband access. These programs are available to millions more families than take advantage of them. Local governments should promote them, especially with campaigns run by people within those communities. These programs have some weaknesses but are the best short-term option for rapidly bringing families online.

2 PARK WI-FI BUSES

Urban and rural communities have used school buses to deliver Wi-Fi on evenings and weekends by parking them in areas that have many unconnected people. The goal is to reduce the distance people have to travel for Internet access in a safe location. Many communities are using solutions from a [company called Kajeet](#) which equips and provides smart buses.

3 DATA COLLECTION

There is no sufficiently accurate state or federal data set explaining where families are not online. Cities need granular data to know where to target efforts – ideally city block by block. Are the least connected families distributed in single family homes or in large multi-family developments? What areas of town have the greatest need? This data will later help to prioritize investments based on costs and expected benefits. Seattle has shared the materials and survey questions from its [Technology Access and Adoption Study](#). San Jose also has [a study](#) that may offer a good model.

None of these solutions above are preempted by states because state laws typically focus on cases where local governments are charging a customer to deliver Internet access. Free access is generally allowed, though difficult for a community to finance over the long term without charging anyone.



How Can Local Governments Expand Broadband Access in the Long-Term?

Taking advantage of existing programs is a good first step, but most families are stuck with expensive options from a few national corporations. Cities can spend millions of dollars to subsidize access from those corporate networks, but the day they stop appropriating, the access goes away. Ultimately, local governments must help to develop and support new networks with incentives that redress disparity head on. Long-term sustainability requires building networks that have a low operating cost to ensure that they operate either entirely without or with minimal need for outside grants or municipal appropriations.

National cable and telephone companies are focused on maximizing their short-term revenues; they have little incentive to develop sustainable models for the provision of affordable Internet access to low-income families. They, instead, use their lobbying power to block new innovative business models that would create competition – even in areas that are not well-served. Pushing back against their lobbying efforts has been and will continue to be a political challenge.

New York City has developed an innovative [Internet Master Plan](#) that other cities should study and emulate. It details the existing gaps in access, quantifies the benefits of expanding Internet access to all, and sets realistic goals for the city. The city is not likely to become an ISP so much as building the needed infrastructure to lower costs for ISPs to deliver their services by leasing access across town from the city. Contracts to use the infrastructure may require low-income plans or the creation of revenue to fund digital inclusion efforts.

Efforts like New York City’s are the approaches that the big cable and telephone companies have sought to disrupt or bar with laws crafted to interfere with local broadband investments. Some of these approaches are impossible under current law in the [21 states](#) with such restrictions. LSSC has published a [decision tree](#) to consider these investments as well as a matrix with information about the restrictions.

Local programs to build a broadband network can involve:

Good long-term solutions require local action - work with your municipal and state legislative allies to repeal or suspend any existing preemption laws.

A BUILDING BROADBAND NETWORKS INDEPENDENTLY

Some communities will choose to build networks themselves, often financed with debt from private investors that are repaid with revenues from the project. Networks like [Chattanooga](#), Tennessee; [Wilson](#), North Carolina; and [Longmont](#), Colorado, are among the most well-known.

B BUILDING BROADBAND NETWORKS WITH PARTNERS

Other communities will find partners to solve the problem of broadband access. The most successful partnerships will tend to be with local companies that are rooted in the community. The partnership between [San Francisco](#) and local ISP Monkeybrains, for example, has been experimenting with a great solution for delivering very high-quality Internet access to every unit in multi-family low-income housing developments in the city.

Internet access in the U.S. has largely developed as a market focused on families that have the resources to pay significant monthly fees. Ensuring that all families are connected requires different models that will often involve local solutions that fit with the unique set of assets and challenges within each community. States that restrict local solutions will only slow economic development while harming educational, health, and other important outcomes.