

New Solutions Needed to Help Rural Households Use the Internet to Overcome the Burden of Distance

A recent report by Statistics Canada finds that households living in rural places are much less likely to be using the Internet, simply because they are living in rural places. This finding holds even after taking into account that there are more rural households which are older, which have lower incomes, and which have lower levels of education attainment, all of which are associated with lower levels of Internet use.

This finding is somewhat startling because the Internet has been touted by policy makers as a means to provide universal access to services and programs. In fact, the federal government has a very aggressive approach to promoting household Internet use, through its Connecting Canadians Agenda. It includes an emphasis on providing more government services on-line. In recent years there has been heavy investment by various levels of government through programs such as

Community Access and SchoolNet to provide resources and support to encourage household Internet use. It is clear that while these programs have been important initial

and small town analysis bulletins, prepared by Statistics Canada. Data drawn from its "Household Internet Use Survey" for the years 1998, 1999, and 2000. Internet use is

defined as "one or more members of the household used the Internet from home in the month previous to the survey." The survey excludes households on Indian Reserves and in the northern territories.

Some very specific findings are particularly surprising. For example, young adults (under the age of 35), and households with incomes of \$60,000 or more, are much less likely to use the Internet if they are living in rural communities. Furthermore, rural households with lower education levels who could be using the Internet to further their education and learning are also less likely to use the Internet. Finally, people who are self-employed and living in rural areas are also less likely to be using the Internet. This last point suggests that the Internet is not providing a full



steps, additional actions are needed to achieve more universal use of the Internet.

Factors Associated with Household Internet Use is part of a series of rural

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IN SITES

economic boost to disadvantaged rural areas.

How do we explain these findings? First, it has been more than three years since the data was collected. It is possible that some of the gap has closed since the survey.

However, we do know from other studies that Internet use in general has plateaued in terms of the percent of households using the Internet.

Second, the cost of computers continues to come down. Since the survey it is possible that more rural households have now found that purchasing a home computer is affordable. Third, more rural employment (compared to urban employment) does not require the use of computers.

Without exposure to the Internet through work, some households may not be aware of the possible advantages and uses of the Internet and therefore may not have considered a home computer with

Internet connection. Finally, many of the self-employed in rural areas may not necessarily be working in “knowledge-based” activities where Internet access is important.



Assuming that most people still agree that universal Internet access is an important public policy issue, what measures can we now take to improve

the situation? Perhaps the best bet is to invest in access for young persons - children in particular, and young adults, with the hope that over time many will remain in rural areas and they will continue to be

Internet users. The survey results do show that households with children under the age of 18 are more likely to use the Internet at home if they are in rural areas. So, it makes sense to encourage exposure to the Internet (primarily for its education value) among children through more investments in computers in schools, and in public access centres. This in turn may lead to greater demands by children at home for a home computer with Internet access. By extension, the adults may then also use the Internet.

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