Aging Connected 2025

Findings, Insights and Implications

OATS | OLDER ADULTS TECHNOLOGY SERVICES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

OATS | OLDER ADULTS TECHNOLOGY SERVICES
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In 2020, Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) from AARP, under a grant from the Humana Foundation, published the first Aging Connected report, an analysis of data from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS) revealing enormous gaps in access to high-speed data services for Americans aged 65 and older.

Five years later, older adults still experience lower levels of wireline connectivity compared to younger cohorts, with 19 million older adults (32 percent) having no wireline high-speed home service, according to new analysis of ACS data from 2023. These gaps become more acute when comparing rural seniors to their counterparts in metro or suburban areas, and when segmenting those aged 75 and above from ages 65–74. Across all categories, lower income also correlates to lower access to high-speed connectivity.

Closing these gaps for older adults is critical because full citizenship in 21st century America increasingly depends on access to digital services of all kinds, from healthcare to government services to basic human connection. The pandemic showed how essential connectivity has become to all of our lives, but particularly those of the most vulnerable and isolated populations. Regardless of whether public policy objectives are to increase the efficiency and lower costs of delivering services, or to affirmatively improve the lives of Americans of all ages and income levels, closing the digital divide remains one of the top priorities for the nation.

Data revealed in the *Aging Connected 2025* report can point the way toward solutions. We have already seen returns on recent public investments in connectivity. The varied experience at the state level highlights effective approaches for the future. The data also reveal where gaps remain, and where we should concentrate public, NGO and private efforts moving forward.

One of the biggest shifts in the landscape since 2018 is the rollout of 5G wireless networks, which promise faster, more reliable connectivity without the need for a wireline connection to the home. In the future, 5G and its successors can be instrumental in eliminating connectivity gaps, while providing a comparable experience to high-speed broadband. But as of 2025, there are still issues with wireless services that make it more of a stopgap than a full-fledged solution, especially in scenarios most relevant to the lives of older adults.

Finally, Aging Connected 2025 underscores the need for continued effort at all levels to sustain the momentum we have achieved in the last five years. We conclude this report with recommendations and a call to action that can help us achieve the goal of full connectivity for every older American by 2030.

CLOSING THE GAP IS URGENT

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While we have made significant progress extending high-speed connectivity to older Americans, the data from the most recent American Community Survey show there is still a lot of work to be done to ensure that every older adult has affordable access to the benefits of digital technology. Some of the factors driving the urgency are:

- **Demographics are shifting**. By 2030, the entire 78 million Baby Boom (b.1946–1965) generation will be 65 and older, with most retired. They will form the largest cohort of older adults ever seen in America, forming a center of political and social gravity with high expectations on public, private and NGO institutions to meet their needs.
- **High-speed connectivity is essential for modern life**. The experience of the pandemic demonstrated how online connectivity is critical for the continuity of community and society across all ages, but particularly for vulnerable groups like older adults.
- **Access to services depends on good connections**. Efficiency and budget cuts are driving older individuals online for vital government services such as Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. Connectivity must be considered part of the social safety net.
- **Healthcare innovations require digital connections**. Evolving technologies for aging in place require high-speed connectivity, including smart-home solutions that provide independence for older adults and connected medical devices, which often need wireline broadband services.
- **Connectivity helps mental health**. The high-quality communal experiences afforded by high-speed connectivity can satisfy our human need for community and connection, particularly for older adults who may face issues of isolation.
- **Traditional solutions may not be available**. The apparent shift in government policies away from subsidies and material support indicates new approaches to public, private and cross-sector partnership may be necessary.

About the Survey

The American Community Survey (ACS), conducted annually by the U.S. Census Bureau, uses a stratified random sampling method to collect detailed demographic, social, economic and housing data from about 3.5 million households nationwide. Its methodology ensures representation across all geographies and population groups, including older adults, through both one-year and five-year estimates. For broadband analysis, the ACS provides critical data on computer and internet use—introduced in 2013—along with variables like age, income, race and metro/rural location. This makes it a reliable source for tracking broadband adoption patterns among older Americans and identifying disparities across states, income levels and communities, although the sample size may not be quite large enough to infer statistically significant patterns from data found deep in the crosstabs (for example, data broken down by a combination of ethnic group, age and geographic locations in smaller states).

OATS retained John B. Horrigan, Ph.D., to analyze the data for trends germane to this report. His findings revealed substantial gaps for access to digital tools when comparing older adults (i.e., those aged 65 or older) to other age groups.

Topline Findings

The 2023 results show some improvement from the ACS survey conducted in 2018, the basis for AARP's 2020 Aging Connected report.

- The number of older adults who lack wireline broadband access at home has fallen from 22 million in 2018 (42 percent) to 19 million (32 percent) in 2023. The gap is closing, but it has not closed.
- Older adults have seen modest increases in ownership of large-screen computers (desktops and laptops), from 70 percent in 2018 to 73 percent in 2023, with a slightly larger increase from 60 percent to 67 percent for those over age 75.
- Some states have done better work than others in reducing age-based disparity of wireline access, controlling for other factors. Generally speaking, low-income older adults in southern states have the lowest wireline and cellular data adoption rates and constitute the population at greatest risk of being disconnected from vital digital services.
- Cellular connectivity, including high-speed 5G services, increased by 17 percent among older adults between 2018 and 2023, providing coverage to 7 million additional older adults.
- Some states that are lagging in wireline broadband access show some of the highest rates of cellular data plan enrollment by seniors, reflecting efforts to close the connectivity gap by whatever means are readily available.
- Policies enacted since 2021, including the American Rescue Plan Act (March 2021) and the Infrastructure Investment and Job Act (November 2021) targeted funds to increasing connectivity nationwide, but inconsistent implementation has yielded patchwork results.

The number of older adults who lack wireline broadband access at home has fallen from 22 million in 2018 (42 percent) to 19 million (32 percent) in 2023.

Additional Insights

Geography matters: the rural/urban divide. Seventy-nine percent of people in metro areas (calculated based on population, not land area) subscribe to broadband wireline service at home compared with 67 percent for those in non-metro areas. In metro areas, 88 percent of all adults have a cellular data plan compared with 80 percent in rural areas. There are many possible explanations for this, including the lack of infrastructure in less-densely populated areas, the lack of competition among carriers leading to higher prices, the vulnerability of more isolated communities to disruptions and service outages, and the relative availability and increasing quality of cellular or satellite service areas where broadband services are unavailable or prohibitively expensive.

The connectivity age gap disappears at higher income levels, whereas it is acute in the lowest quintile. Though the data show that seniors earning $100,000 or more per year have broadband wireless service at rates comparable to younger cohorts at the same income levels, only 48 percent of the lowest income older adults (aged 65+ with annual household incomes below $25,000) have wireline broadband, and 58 percent have cellular data plans, the largest deviation from national averages. Being low-income exacerbates the connectivity gap across every other category measured in the survey, indicating affordability is a crucial determinant.

Americans over 75 are less connected than those 65-74. Only 61 percent of adults age 75 or older have wired broadband connections. Seventy-three percent of those aged 65 and over have a desktop or laptop, whereas 67 percent of those aged 75 and older have such devices. Note that in some states, the sample sizes for adults 75 and older are not large enough to draw meaningful inferences. In such cases, the age-combined results of all adults over 65 were used.

Less-educated older adults lag in connectivity. Fifty-three percent of older adults with less than a high school education have wireline broadband at home compared to the overall rate of 68 percent, 65 percent of less-educated older adults have cellular data plans

Other demographic factors also play a role. Among those 65 and older, 59 percent of Blacks and 64 percent of Hispanics have wireline subscriptions at home, compared with 69 percent of whites. Some 78 percent of Hispanics have cellular data plans, compared with 77 percent for whites and 72 percent for Blacks. Being a veteran does not lead to any meaningful departure from levels of connectivity experienced by non-veteran seniors in comparable geographic, income, education, race or age categories.

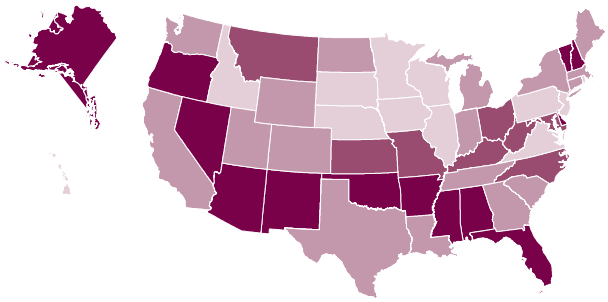
Lessons from the States

Because of the large national sample size of ACS, we have the opportunity to compare rates of broadband adoption by older adults relative to younger cohorts state-by-state, while controlling for other factors such as income. This allows us to compare conditions and policy responses across states and regions to expose best practices for other states to adopt, while also shining a spotlight on the states and populations requiring further investment to close larger gaps.

The average broadband connectivity gap between adults aged 18–64 and adults 65+ across all 50 states is approximately 9.1 percentage points. The two charts below show how each state compares in connectivity between age gaps in the 2018 ACS survey vs. the 2023 ACS survey:

Home Broadband Gap by State and Age

2018

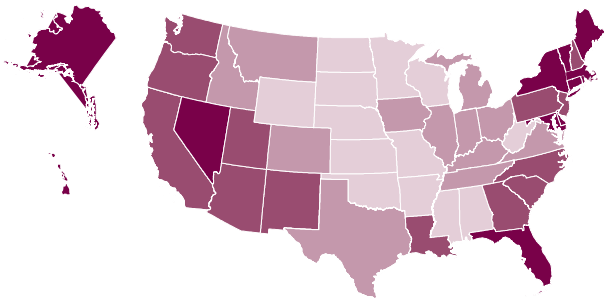


Broadband Gap (Quartiles)
- 5.7% - 14%
- 14.1% - 15.2%
- 15.3% - 17.5%
- 17.6% - 24.2%

Smallest Gap	Age 18-64	Age 65+	Broadband Gap
Alaska	69.4%	63.7%	5.7%
Nevada	74.5%	64.4%	10.0%
Arizona	72.9%	62.0%	10.8%
Vermont	74.2%	63.4%	10.8%
Florida	75.0%	64.1%	10.9%

Largest Gap	Age 18-64	Age 65+	Broadband Gap
Wisconsin	73.2%	53.3%	19.9%
Pennsyvalnia	77.7%	57.6%	20.2%
Minnesota	76.6%	56.0%	20.6%
Nebraska	75.5%	54.1%	21.4%
District of Columbia	81.0%	56.8%	24.2%

2023



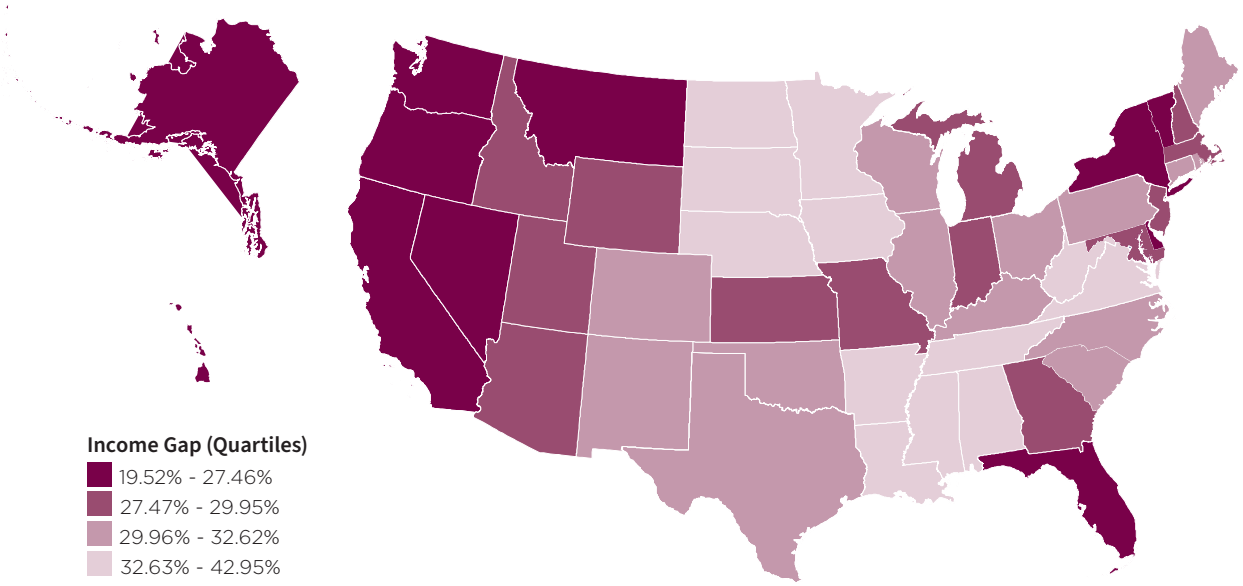
Broadband Gap (Quartiles)
- 3.0% - 6.8%
- 6.9% - 8.8%
- 8.9% - 10.2%
- 10.3% - 13.7%

Smallest Gap	Age 18-64	Age 65+	Broadband Gap
Vermont	79.56%	76.55%	3.01%
Alaska	69.53%	65.56%	3.98%
Delaware	80.08%	74.65%	5.42%
Maine	79.75%	74.15%	5.59%
Florida	79.73%	74.09%	5.64%

Largest Gap	Age 18-64	Age 65+	Broadband Gap
Arkansas	74.77%	62.61%	12.17%
Mississippi	72.59%	60.41%	12.18%
West Virginia	77.15%	64.81%	12.35%
Nebraska	78.87%	66.31%	12.56%
South Dakota	81.93%	68.29%	13.64%

There is significant variation in rates of broadband access, especially when factoring in income. The figure below compares the rates of wireline broadband access by all adults 18-64 with those of low-income seniors in each state.

2023 Broadband Gap Between All 18-64 and Low-Income 65+



Smallest Gap	All 18-64	Low Income 65+	Gap
Alaska	69.53%	50.01%	19.52%
Florida	79.73%	56.65%	23.08%
Nevada	78.32%	54.94%	23.39%
Delaware	80.08%	55.36%	24.72%
Washington	79.79%	55.00%	24.79%

Largest Gap	All 18-64	Low Income 65+	Gap
Mississippi	72.59%	36.13%	36.46%
West Virginia	77.15%	40.59%	36.56%
South Dakota	81.93%	43.98%	37.95%
District of Columbia	77.30%	35.24%	42.05%
North Dakota	80.85%	37.90%	42.95%

- There are small differences across regions, with the Northeast having overall higher levels of broadband connectivity across all ages (80.1 percent for under 65 versus 73.6 percent for over 65) and the South having the lowest (77.1 percent under 65, 69.2 percent over 65).
- The largest disparities appear in rural-heavy states like North Dakota, Mississippi and Louisiana, suggesting older seniors in these areas face more barriers (tech literacy, affordability or physical access). The exceptionally low rate of connectivity for low-income older adults in the District of Columbia, an urban center with otherwise-strong availability and uptake of wireline broadband services, may require special attention.

- In every state, the 75+ group has lower connectivity than the 65–74 group, reinforcing the need for age-specific outreach and support.
- Gaps of 10 percentage points or more are significant and may indicate where targeted policy or funding interventions could have the greatest impact.

Drivers of the Connectivity Gap

The states with the smallest gaps between adults aged 18–64 and people aged 65+ across all categories are:

1. Nevada — 6.1 percentage point gap
2. Connecticut — 6.3% gap
3. New York — 6.6% gap
4. Maryland — 6.8% gap
5. California — 7.2% gap

On the surface, we can say these states are doing a better job overall in increasing wireline broadband access for the 65+ cohort. What do most of these states have in common? States with small connectivity gaps between older adults and younger adults tend to be urbanized, wealthier, with a strong commitment to robust senior support networks and a culture that supports lifelong digital engagement.

But closing the gap at the aggregate level does not tell the whole story. As noted above, the most acute issues affect older adults with lower income. When we look at the states with the narrowest broadband gaps between adults aged 18–64 and low-income seniors (aged 65+, income <$25,000), we get a slightly different list:

1. Alaska — -0.97% gap (older adults actually have slightly higher access than 18–64)
2. Florida — 9.5% gap
3. Nevada — 9.6% gap
4. Maine — 10.1% gap
5. Washington — 10.3% gap

On this list, there is not as much correlation between urbanization, income or geography. Reducing gaps between low-income seniors and everyone else requires additional policy choices and investments beyond just capitalizing on inherent advantages and legacy investments.

THE CASE OF ALASKA

Alaska is a fascinating outlier in broadband equity: In the data we've analyzed, older adults in Alaska — particularly low-income seniors — show higher broadband adoption rates than younger adults, although overall rates of wireline broadband access are lower on average in Alaska than most of the rest of the country. That's extremely rare in the U.S. and suggests a combination of unique policy, geography and demographic factors that other states could learn from. Here's a breakdown of what likely contributes to Alaska's surprising success:

Massive Public Investment in Broadband Infrastructure. Alaska has long struggled with isolation and remoteness, which spurred large-scale federal and state investment in broadband. Programs like the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program, USDA ReConnect and Alaska Plan have subsidized high-speed internet for rural and Native communities, prioritizing unserved areas which often include older residents. In some cases, broadband subsidies are tied to telehealth use, incentivizing older adults more than younger ones.[1]

Targeted Outreach to Older Adults. Many older adults live in extremely remote areas where broadband is the only way to access healthcare, other services and family. Younger adults may leave rural areas for work, leaving older residents as primary users of household connectivity. Consequently, aging-in-place programs in the state emphasize digital connectivity, especially in Native villages or remote communities.

Public-private partnerships, often involving tribal governments, nonprofit ISPs and the state, help equip older adults with devices and training.

Flat Cost Structures for Tribal and Rural Programs. In many remote Alaskan communities, broadband pricing is subsidized or standardized regardless of age or income.[2] When access is evenly distributed, motivation and need can drive adoption more than affordability — and older adults tend to have stronger incentives (health, family contact, services).

Not all of these circumstances or programs are applicable to states in the lower 48, but some of Alaska's approaches deserve to be studied, especially by states that have the same issues of geographic dispersal, large tribal communities, and distance from centers of infrastructure.

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1 For example, The Telehealth Broadband Pilot (a collaboration between the HRSA, FCC, and USDA) specifically targets broadband capacity linked to telehealth service in Alaska, among other states, see hrsa.gov. Since 1999, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium has relied on USF subsidies to support broadband in remote clinics and homes, enabling telemedicine in villages that would otherwise be disconnected (see https://www.anthc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Alaska-Telemedicine-Growth-Through-Collaboration-2004.pdf?).

2 Such as the Enhanced Lifeline Credit for Native Communities (including all indigenous tribes, not just native Alaskans), which offer up to $25/month on top of the standard $9.25. See https://broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/sites/default/files/2023-04/Digital_Equity_in_Tribal_Communities.pdf?

States Facing Challenges

The states with the biggest broadband connectivity gaps between adults aged 18–64 and seniors aged 65+ are:

1. West Virginia — 12.3 percentage point gap
2. Mississippi — 12.2% gap
3. North Dakota — 11.6% gap
4. Alabama — 10.8% gap
5. Wyoming — 10.4% gap

States still facing challenges around connecting seniors have several features in common.

High Rural Populations and Geographic Barriers. States like West Virginia, Mississippi, North Dakota, Alabama and Wyoming have large rural, mountainous or frontier areas where infrastructure is costly to deploy. The lack of infrastructure leads to higher costs and fewer choices.

Lower Income and Education Levels. Older adults in these states are more likely to live below the poverty line or rely on fixed incomes. Digital literacy tends to be lower due to historically limited exposure to technology, especially in older and less-educated populations.

Older, More Isolated Older Adult Populations. These states often have aging populations living alone in rural areas, far from tech support or digital training programs. Lack of nearby family or community support makes it harder for older adults to get online and stay connected.

Fewer state programs and resources. Many of these states have a smaller population, smaller tax base, lower per-capita household income and less propensity toward public spending. That translates to less investment in broadband access for low-income residents, especially programs targeting older adults, and few statewide initiatives for device access, training or public Wi-Fi alternatives.

Legacy barriers. Areas where the culture or economy favor self-sufficiency and traditional industries may have greater suspicion about the value of digital connectivity than regions with higher dependence on information work. Older adults with limited online experience may have well-founded fears around privacy and security. This further widens the “trust and relevance” gap, which is as important as affordability or access.

Wireless Clouds the Picture

The biggest change in the technology ecosystem between our first report, using data from 2018, and today, is the arrival and widespread adoption of 5G wireless cellular data systems across the United States. 5G is the fifth generation of wireless network technology, offering significantly faster speeds, lower latency and greater capacity than previous mobile networks to support advanced applications like smart cities, autonomous vehicles and real-time streaming. That is, 5G under ideal conditions provides a comparable high-speed digital experience to broadband wireline service and could potentially offer the same benefits to older adults.

5G technology began gaining broad adoption in the United States around 2022. While initial deployments started in 2019, widespread consumer uptake accelerated significantly by 2022. By that year, 5G accounted for approximately 45 percent of all U.S. mobile connections, a substantial increase from 15 percent in 2021. This growth was driven by expanded network coverage, increased availability of 5G-compatible devices, and the rollout of mid-band spectrum, which offered a balance between speed and coverage. By early 2023, the U.S. reached 100 million 5G connections. Projections indicate that by 2030, over 90 percent of U.S. mobile connections will utilize 5G technology.

A WORD ABOUT SATELLITE DATA SERVICES

For areas not served by either wireline broadband or 5G cellular, the satellite data service Starlink provides high-speed internet access via low Earth orbit satellites. This relatively new option can provide a "last line of defense" capability for areas that lack other forms of connectivity. Here is how wireline, 5G and Starlink services compare in terms of speed and latency:

Service Type	Range of Download Speeds	Latency	Notes
Wireline (Fiber/Cable)	100 Mbps–1 Gbps+	5–20 ms	Best performance, but limited to built-out areas
5G	100 Mbps–1 Gbps+	<10–50 ms	Fastest when in range of high-band 5G
Starlink (Satellite)	25–250 Mbps	25–60 ms	Slower than fiber, but much improved over traditional satellite

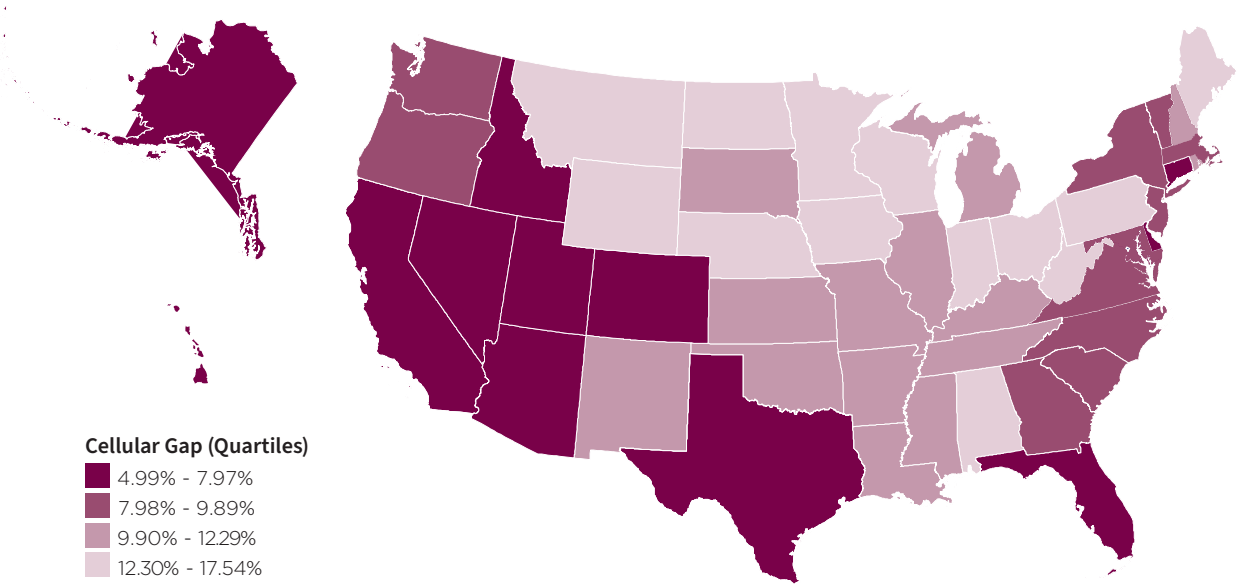
As of now, however, 5G still has limited reach, depends on proximity to high-band 5G towers and requires compatible devices such as higher-end cell phones and 5G modems to deliver on its potential. 5G service can be inconsistent, whereas wireline broadband offers constant speeds, stable connections and better uptime, which makes it more appropriate for scenarios like telehealth and emergency services, as well as day-to-day tasks. Some lower-priced data plans impose caps on 5G usage, or throttle data speeds after a certain point. These kind of "surprise slowdowns" could also hinder applications that require constant speeds and constant levels of data transfer.

Most importantly for older adults, wireline broadband supports many of today's critical aging-in-place systems such as medical alerts, in-home monitoring devices and smart-home technology for accessibility (e.g., voice-activated assistance). There is little doubt that 5G will eventually provide equivalent capabilities, but for the time being, it does not integrate as smoothly with this infrastructure.

Wireless Connectivity and Older Adults

The map below illustrates the cellular age gap between younger and older Americans across the 50 states.

2023 Cellular Gap by State and Age



Smallest Gap	Age 18-64	Age 65+	Cellular Gap
Hawaii	88.84%	83.85%	4.99%
Alaska	86.74%	81.67%	5.07%
Florida	89.47%	83.29%	6.18%
Arizona	87.90%	81.59%	6.31%
California	91.19%	84.73%	6.46%

Largest Gap	Age 18-64	Age 65+	Cellular Gap
Wisconsin	89.65%	75.56%	14.09%
North Dakota	85.44%	70.44%	15.00%
Nebraska	89.47%	72.85%	16.62%
West Virginia	82.93%	65.98%	16.95%
Wyoming	85.63%	68.09%	17.54%

While many rural states still lag in cellular connectivity, the rates of mobile adoption by seniors are higher, and the age gaps smaller, in those states compared to the gaps with wireline service.

The following states show the largest gaps between low wireline broadband adoption and high cellular data plan usage among all people aged 65+:

State	Wireline Broadband	Cellular Data	Gap (Cellular – Wireline)
Mississippi	60.4 percent	76.8 percent	+16.4 percentage points
Arkansas	62.6 percent	77.5 percent	+14.9%
Oklahoma	62.8 percent	77.6 percent	+14.8%
Idaho	65.5 percent	80.2 percent	+14.7%
Alaska	65.6 percent	79.8 percent	+14.2%

Here is the ranking for low-income seniors only:

State	Wireline Access	Cellular Access	Gap (Cellular – Wireline)
Alaska	50.0 percent	72.3 percent	+22.3%
Oklahoma	40.6 percent	57.2 percent	+16.6%
Texas	44.4 percent	60.6 percent	+16.2%
North Dakota	37.9 percent	53.1 percent	+15.2%
Idaho	45.7 percent	60.7 percent	+15.0%

These states may reflect:

- Preference for mobile access due to cost, simplicity or flexibility
- Barriers to wireline (e.g., rural availability, cost of in-home service)
- Effective mobile subsidy programs (e.g., Lifeline cellular) not matched by wireline equivalents
- Greater reliance on smartphones among older adults as their primary or sole device

As a public policy matter, we should consider wireless connectivity as a glass half full, and getting fuller as 5G service becomes more pervasive. There is hope for older adults, and especially lower-income seniors facing barriers to broadband access, to have some means of participating in the digital world through phones or other connected devices.

However, we need to recognize the limits of this solution with regard to the speed, convenience, availability and quality of the digital experience. It means that older adults with the lowest incomes, often correlating to lower levels of educational attainment, face the highest technological hurdles to accessing information and services, using devices that can be more difficult to use for older adults with physical or other limitations.

The Policy Landscape 2018–2023

Policymakers have become increasingly aware of the dangers of the connectivity gap, both for the population in general and for older adults specifically. The experience of the pandemic brought the need for universal connectivity into sharp focus and led to a series of high-profile legislative initiatives designed to build out infrastructure, reduce costs of access and bring the promise of high-speed data services to less-served regions and populations.

These programs collectively aimed to bridge the digital divide by addressing both infrastructure gaps and affordability issues. The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), in particular, played a crucial role in making broadband services more accessible to older adults and low-income households, who often face financial barriers to connectivity.

Three key programs undertaken since 2018 are:

ReConnect Program (USDA, 2018): Launched to fund broadband infrastructure in unserved rural and tribal areas, this program has invested over $1 billion to improve connectivity in these regions.

Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB, 2021): This was a temporary program launched by the FCC in May 2021 to assist households struggling with internet costs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Funded with $3.2 billion under the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, the EBB offered eligible households discounts of up to $50 per month for broadband service — or up to $75 for those on tribal lands — and a one-time discount of up to $100 toward the purchase of a laptop, desktop computer or tablet. The program concluded on December 31, 2021, transitioning into the longer-term Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which continued to provide similar benefits to eligible households.

Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP, 2021–2024): As a successor to the Emergency Broadband Benefit, the ACP provided monthly subsidies of up to $30 for eligible households and $75 for those on tribal lands, significantly reducing cost barriers to broadband access. Before the program's expiration, nearly half of ACP recipients — roughly 10.6 million people — were age 50 or older. 20% were over

65. An AARP survey revealed that 77% of households relying on the ACP feared their internet service would be disrupted by having to change their plan plan or drop it entirely. The program ceased accepting new applications in February 2024.

Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA, 2021): This bipartisan legislation allocated $65 billion for broadband initiatives, including $42.45 billion for the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program, which prioritizes infrastructure in unserved and underserved areas. However, as of 2025, most funds allocated under the BEAD program were not disbursed and therefore did not influence trends observed in the 2023 ACS.

State-level Actions: Following the conclusion of the ACP, several states initiated their own measures to maintain broadband affordability for low-income residents. These efforts include exploring new funding mechanisms and programs to continue supporting affordable internet access.

It is reasonable to infer that these programs contributed significantly to the narrowing of the wireline digital gap from 22 million disconnected seniors in 2018 to 19 million in 2023, by bringing high-speed connectivity within reach. However, it also points to how stubborn a problem this is, that such a high level of investment still leaves 32 percent of older adults unserved by broadband wireline.

Policy Uncertainties Ahead

The 2024 election signaled a change in policy direction at the highest levels of government and a change in fiscal priorities. Given this new landscape, it is prudent to plan for a rollback of federal investment. In that event, states, localities, community groups, NGOs and the private sector will likely need to take up the slack. The experience of 2018–2023 shows it is possible to make progress closing the digital age gap. New policies may require stakeholders to get more creative in finding partners and building cross-industry alliances.

IMPLICATIONS

OATS OLDER ADULTS TECHNOLOGY SERVICES FROM AARP

We can draw the following conclusions from analysis of the data in this report:

- **The digital age gap of 19 million is still too big**. Yes, there has been progress, but there is still an unacceptably large number of Americans over 65 who do not have wireline broadband at home, leading to tangible negative impacts on their lives and communities. America can and should do better for its most vulnerable citizens.
- **Investment yields results but requires consistent, sustained implementation**. Commitments of resources through various public policies and technology innovations brought wireline broadband access to three million more older adults 65+, helping to bring the percentage of disconnected older adults down 10 percent in five years. However, problems implementing programs state-to-state, and issues with the centralized distribution of funds in programs like BEAD, resulted in a lower rate of improvement than many people have hoped for.
- **Variations in results by states may reveal best practices**. The varied results and experiences across states point to best practices for closing gaps related to age, income and geography.
- **Gaps remain for the most vulnerable older adults**. Lagging adoption by lower income, older and disabled seniors suggests more investment is needed to serve those populations specifically.
- **The evolving demographics of the 65+ cohort reflect changing attitudes toward technology**. Improvements in connectivity for older seniors may reflect demographic changes: Tomorrow's seniors have a different relationship and greater familiarity with digital technology in their lives than previous generations. That picture will continue to evolve as we move toward 2030 and beyond.
- **5G wireless and satellite can play an important role moving forward, as the technologies mature**. Improvements in wireless connectivity point to a good-better-best approach, with distinctions blurring as coverage, speed and technology improve. Current patterns risk a two-tier system where some people have superior always-on connectivity afforded by wireline broadband while others depend exclusively on spotty wireless coverage.

Circumstances demand everyone with an interest in closing the connectivity gap for older Americans assess their own approaches in light of the current state of play. Five years of heavy public investment have made some difference in closing the gap, but not enough. Over the next five years, when we can no longer assume the same commitment of attention and resources at the federal level, other stakeholders need to step up.

We recommend the following strategies:

Advocates for Older Adults:

- Remind cost-conscious policymakers of the link between connectivity and efficiency. Investing in expanding access can help realize cost savings in service delivery.
- Use the data in this report and elsewhere to demonstrate that subsidies are important and have been effective. Reversing course now risks the progress that has already been made.
- Remember that local action can be effective, especially in states where we can pinpoint the unique problems at the junction between age, geography, income and race. Document and disseminate examples of where local action is making a difference.
- Encourage wide adoption of best practices from states making progress in closing the gaps. Create or support forums for sharing approaches and results.
- Conduct further research and furnish data-driven cost-benefit analyses to policymakers and stakeholders to validate additional investments.

Technology Partners and Service Providers:

- Highlight the value of broadband for older adults in public messaging and advertising, focusing on benefits such as increased independence, connectedness and access to essential services. Current messaging that focuses only on scenarios benefiting families (connect lots of devices!), working professionals or niche markets like gamers can send the message that these services are not valuable for older users.
- Continue wireless innovation/investments that benefit older adults: 5G modems that offer stable, always-on connections, better and more even coverage, increased compatibility with medical devices, home security solutions and aging-in-place solutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide simpler, lower-cost offerings that provide clear value for money for older adults, especially people with fewer economic resources.

Policymakers:

- In the absence of sustained federal commitments, build institutional relationships between public and private organizations, device makers, carriers and other stakeholders to build solutions that encourage fitness, social connection and other benefits that improve the lives of older Americans, especially in the most vulnerable areas.
- Promote digital literacy, community and confidence for older adults across all groups, focusing resources specifically on the least-served segments (low income, lower educational attainment, rural).

CONNECTIVITY BELONGS AT THE TOP OF THE AGENDA: A CALL TO ACTION

OATS FROM AARP | OLDER ADULTS TECHNOLOGY SERVICES

The mission of organizations like OATS is more critical than ever to closing the remaining gaps. In 2020, our goal with the original Aging Connect project with founding support from the Humana Foundation was to bring a million older Americans online by the end of 2022. By that standard, the data from the past five years show we succeeded, but it was still not enough.

We must keep up the momentum to bring as many of the remaining 19 million Americans 65+ into "full digital citizenship" with high-speed connectivity.

With 32 percent of older Americans still lacking wireline broadband access at home and gaps between young and old, there is still work to be done.

Progress is possible: We've seen measurable, incremental improvement in closing the gap thanks to efforts over the past five years. We cannot risk backsliding that rips the connectivity gap open further and isolating older Americans at a time when digital connection is a lifeline to the services and communities everyone needs.

With uncertainties surrounding public sector commitment, the roles of NGOs and the private sector are more important than ever. We must have sustained dialogue and engagement to maintain momentum, and we must use studies like this one to point the way toward a more inclusive, connected future.

The original **Aging Connected** *report was generously sponsored by The Humana Foundation.*

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