EXPANDING BROADBAND IN THE BLACK RURAL SOUTH

by Dominique Harrison, Ph.D.
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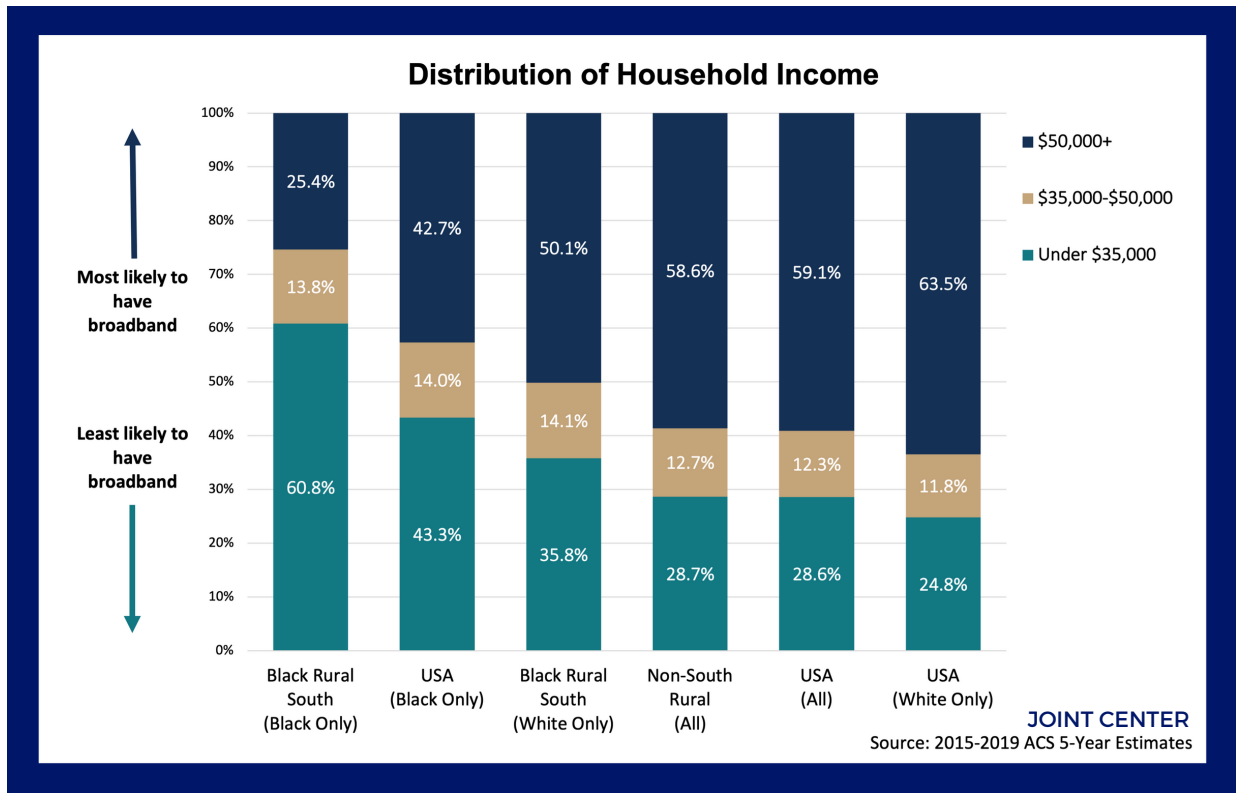**JOINT CENTER FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STUDIES**

More than almost any other group, Black communities in the Black Rural South lack affordable, high-speed, quality broadband—38 percent of African Americans there report they do not have access to home internet. This is driven by both the lack of affordability and availability of broadband services. Expanding broadband could help reduce the deep racial and economic inequalities in education, jobs, and health care in the region.
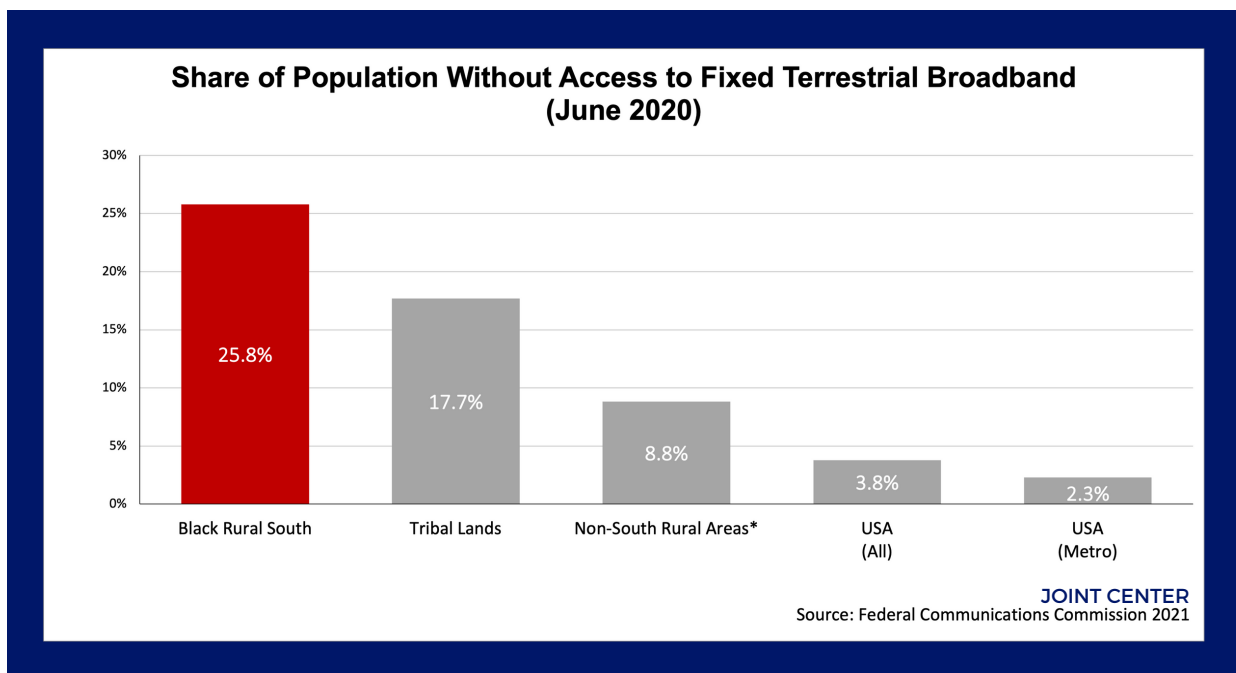

Lack of Home Access to Broadband Internet and Computer

Legend:
- without Broadband Internet, but with Computer
- without Broadband Internet and without Computer

Category	without Broadband Internet, but with Computer	without Broadband Internet and without Computer
Black Rural South (Black Only)	17.1%	20.8%
Black Rural South (White Only)	11.3%	12.0%
Non-South Rural (All)	8.7%	13.3%
USA (Black Only)	11.6%	9.9%
South Metro (Black Only)	11.7%	9.1%
South (All)	9.5%	10.5%
USA (All)	8.4%	9.9%
USA (White Only)	6.1%	5.8%

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Source: 2015-2019 ACS 5-Year Estimates

Too often, efforts to close the digital divide conflate "rural" with "White" and "urban" with "Black." The Joint Center examined the overlooked and unique plight of Black residents in rural counties with populations that are at least 35 percent Black (152 counties in 10 Southern states), which we refer to as the "Black Rural South." (See map to the right)

Percent Black
35.00% — 90.00%

1 Mapbox © OpenStreetMap

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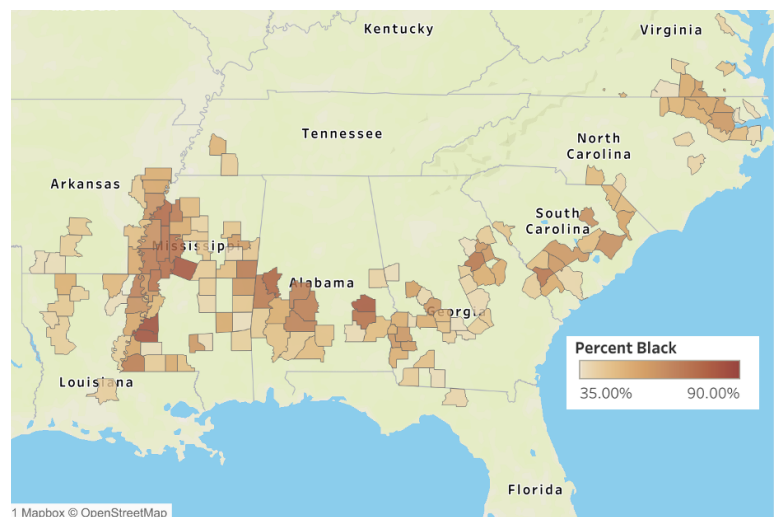
Affordability is a reason that Black families in the Black Rural South lack broadband. The Pew Research Center estimates that nationwide, 44 percent of households with incomes under $35,000 lack broadband, compared to only 13 percent of those with incomes of $50,000 or above. Black households in the Black Rural South are much more likely to have lower incomes under $35,000 and less likely to have broadband.
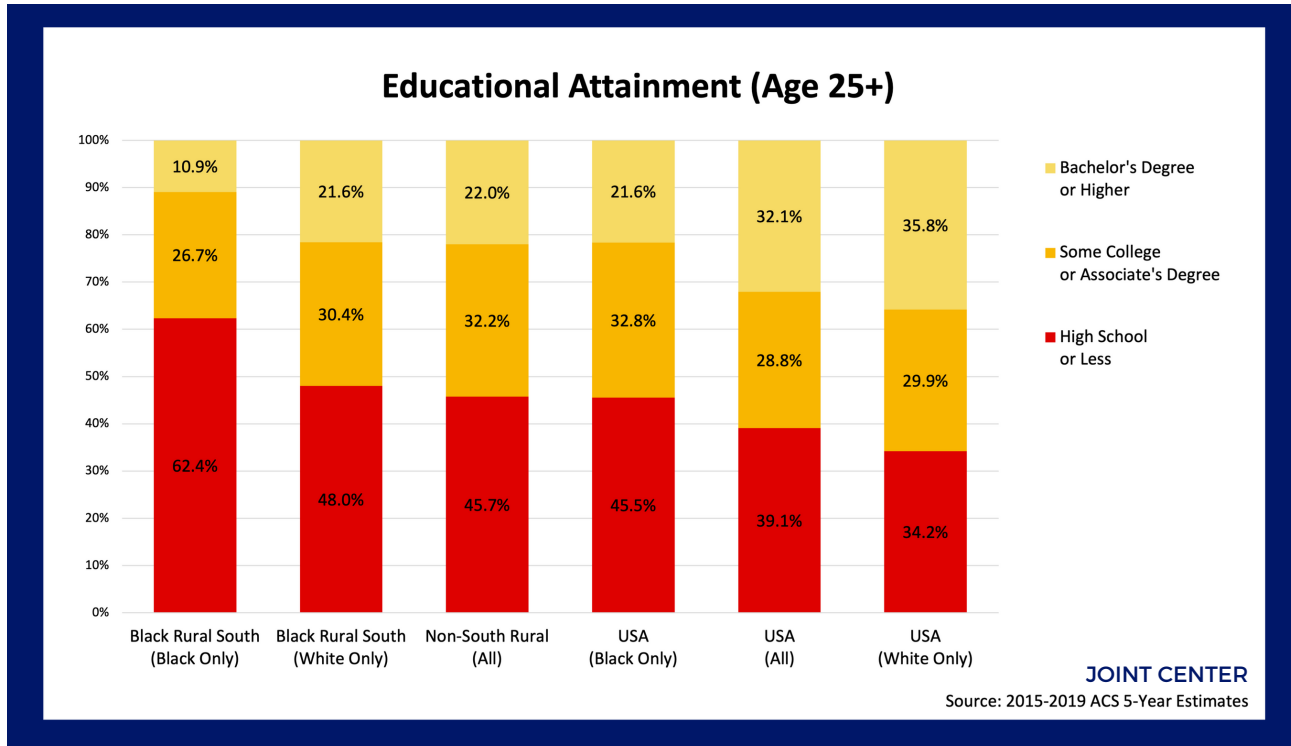
Distribution of Household Income

	Black Rural South (Black Only)	USA (Black Only)	Black Rural South (White Only)	Non-South Rural (All)	USA (All)	USA (White Only)
$50,000+	25.4%	42.7%	50.1%	58.6%	59.1%	63.5%
$35,000-$50,000	13.8%	14.0%	14.1%	12.7%	12.3%	11.8%
Under $35,000	60.8%	43.3%	35.8%	28.7%	28.6%	24.8%

Most likely to have broadband
Least likely to have broadband

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Source: 2015-2019 ACS 5-Year Estimates

Lack of availability of broadband is another factor driving less access to broadband in the region. According to FCC data, Internet Service Providers have failed to deploy broadband infrastructure at speeds of at least 25/3 megabits per second (Mbps) to a greater share of residents in the Black Rural South than other regions. The deployment of faster, quality broadband infrastructure in concentrated higher-income areas—also known as "digital redlining"—facilitates economic and racial disparities.

Share of Population Without Access to Fixed Terrestrial Broadband (June 2020)

	Black Rural South	Tribal Lands	Non-South Rural Areas*	USA (All)	USA (Metro)
	25.8%	17.7%	8.8%	3.8%	2.3%

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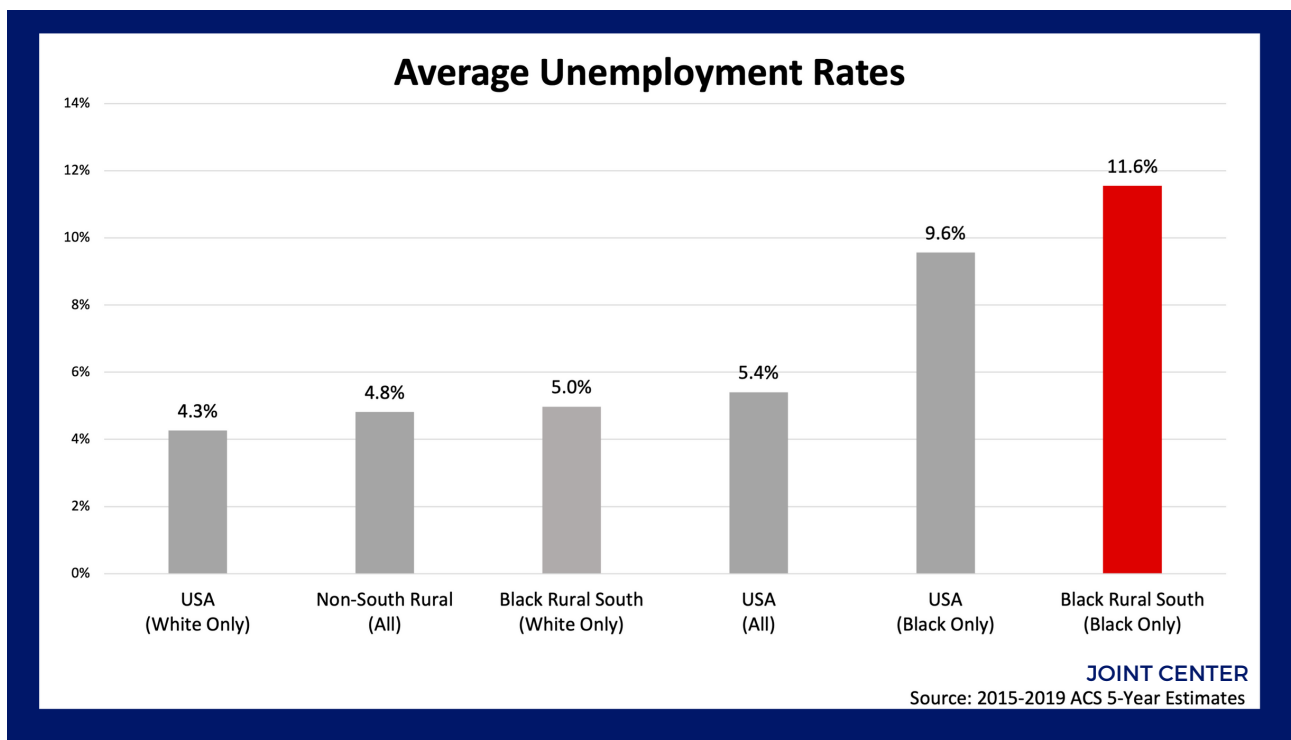Source: Federal Communications Commission 2021

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Broadband access could advance education and workforce training in the Black Rural South. Significant educational disparities persist, and the lack of high-speed broadband prevents Black students in the Black Rural South from completing assignments because they do not have reliable internet access at home. Online learning and remote training could open opportunities for students, workers, and teachers.
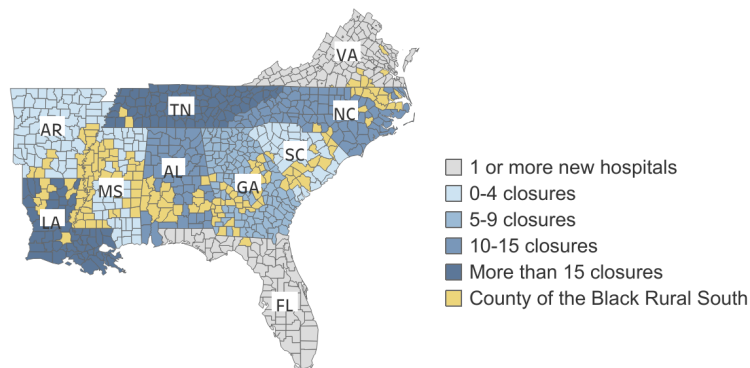
Educational Attainment (Age 25+)

Category	Black Rural South (Black Only)	Black Rural South (White Only)	Non-South Rural (All)	USA (Black Only)	USA (All)	USA (White Only)
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	10.9%	21.6%	22.0%	21.6%	32.1%	35.8%
Some College or Associate's Degree	26.7%	30.4%	32.2%	32.8%	28.8%	29.9%
High School or Less	62.4%	48.0%	45.7%	45.5%	39.1%	34.2%

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Source: 2015-2019 ACS 5-Year Estimates

Broadband access could create job opportunities. Unemployment is higher and labor force participation is lower in the Black Rural South. Research published by Cornell University shows that expanding access to broadband contributes to greater employment gains in rural areas than in metro areas. Broadband can also support people working remotely, impede outmigration, facilitate small business growth, and encourage talented people and businesses to stay in the region.

Average Unemployment Rates

Category	Rate
USA (White Only)	4.3%
Non-South Rural (All)	4.8%
Black Rural South (White Only)	5.0%
USA (All)	5.4%
USA (Black Only)	9.6%
Black Rural South (Black Only)	11.6%

JOINT CENTER
Source: 2015-2019 ACS 5-Year Estimates

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Broadband access can help improve health. From 2010 to 2018, states with Black Rural South counties experienced some of the highest numbers of rural hospital closures. As hospitals close, telemedicine can connect rural patients to medical specialists and specialty care not available in their community and also lower costs by diverting patients from more expensive care settings. Broadband connectivity is a social determinant of health in the Black Rural South.

Statewide Hospital Closures from 2010 to 2018 in States with Black Rural South Counties

Legend:
- 1 or more new hospitals
- 0-4 closures
- 5-9 closures
- 10-15 closures
- More than 15 closures
- County of the Black Rural South

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Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2020)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers should support the following solutions to ensure high-speed, quality broadband is affordable and available in the Black Rural South:

- Establish a permanent and meaningful broadband benefit program for lower-income households.

- Require broadband providers that receive Universal Service Funds (USF) to provide low-income households and high-cost area consumers with an affordable option.

- Federal broadband infrastructure investments should prioritize the Black Rural South.

- When distributing recovery funds, Southern states should prioritize broadband expansion in Black Rural South counties.

- Launch a task force and create rules to prevent digital redlining.

- Prioritize federal funding for broadband projects developed by Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

- Invest in research to understand challenges and to steadily improve broadband access.

- Update the federal definition of "high-speed" broadband.

- Prohibit state governments from inhibiting local broadband networks.

- Increase federal agency coordination and focus on the Black Rural South.

For an in-depth discussion of the ideas in this issue brief, please see the Joint Center's forthcoming report on expanding broadband in the Black Rural South, which will be available at JointCenter.org.