GEOGRAPHY SPOTLIGHT

Technology Transcends Zip Codes

Adults 50-plus everywhere lean on technology, some more than others

Adults 50-plus living in urban, suburban, and rural areas have incorporated technology into their lives in varying ways. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many have leveraged new technologies to make their lives easier.

Suburban dwellers outpace others for technology ownership

Adults 50-plus living in suburban areas are more likely than those living in rural or urban locations to own most common personal technology devices. Older suburbanites spend about $200 more on technology than their urban or rural counterparts ($1,262 vs. urban $1,018, rural $1,069). Regardless of where they live, a majority of adults 50-plus own smartphones, laptops, desktops, and tablets, but those in cities are most likely to own a regular cell phone compared to suburban or urban dwellers (27% vs. suburban 17%, rural 20%). Older adults in rural areas keep pace with their cohorts in other zip codes, but they fall behind on newer technologies, such as voice-first home assistants like Amazon Alexa or Google Home (24% vs. suburban 33%, urban 29%) and smart home technology (13% vs. suburban 22%, urban 20%).

A new study examines how people living in different types of communities engage with technology

Suburban and urban smartphone owners use their phones differently than rural owners

Regardless of where people live, they use their smartphones most often for texting, getting directions, visiting websites, getting news and information, accessing social networks, and comparison shopping. But rural dwellers tend to use their smartphones less. Significant differences in smartphone use between rural, urban, and suburban dwellers include frequency of texting (rural 89%, urban 94%, suburban 91%), playing a game (rural 46%, urban 50%, suburban 50%), video chat with friends or family (rural 48%, urban 58%, suburban 53%), video chat with medical professionals (rural 37%, urban 48%, suburban 39%), and banking (rural 47%, urban 57%, suburban 55%).

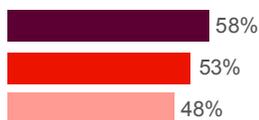## Smartphone use in the past three months

■ Urban ■ Suburban ■ Rural

Text
- Urban: 94%
- Suburban: 91%
- Rural: 89%

Perform banking or financial transactions
- Urban: 57%
- Suburban: 55%
- Rural: 47%

Visit Websites
- Urban: 75%
- Suburban: 75%
- Rural: 70%

Comparison shop for discounts and deals
- Urban: 51%
- Suburban: 51%
- Rural: 53%

Get News and Information
- Urban: 74%
- Suburban: 75%
- Rural: 72%

Play a game
- Urban: 50%
- Suburban: 50%
- Rural: 46%

Access social network sites
- Urban: 70%
- Suburban: 67%
- Rural: 62%

Video chat with medical professional
- Urban: 48%
- Suburban: 39%
- Rural: 37%

Download or purchase an app
- Urban: 66%
- Suburban: 74%
- Rural: 64%
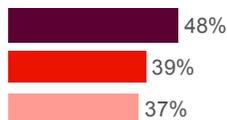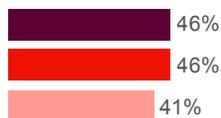
Get health and fitness information
- Urban: 46%
- Suburban: 46%
- Rural: 41%

Video chat with friends or family
- Urban: 58%
- Suburban: 53%
- Rural: 48%
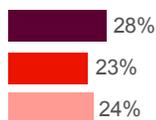
Order groceries for pick up or delivery
- Urban: 28%
- Suburban: 23%
- Rural: 24%

Technology Ownership

■ Urban ■ Suburban ■ Rural

Smartphone
- Urban: 79%
- Suburban: 89%
- Rural: 83%
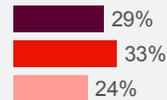
Laptop Computer
- Urban: 62%
- Suburban: 72%
- Rural: 65%

Desktop Computer
- Urban: 53%
- Suburban: 56%
- Rural: 51%

Tablet
- Urban: 51%
- Suburban: 61%
- Rural: 52%

Home Assistant
- Urban: 29%
- Suburban: 33%
- Rural: 24%

Regular Cellphone
- Urban: 27%
- Suburban: 17%
- Rural: 20%

Wearable Device
- Urban: 24%
- Suburban: 29%
- Rural: 25%

E-Reader
- Urban: 22%
- Suburban: 29%
- Rural: 25%
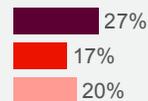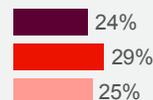
Smart Home Tech
- Urban: 20%
- Suburban: 22%
- Rural: 13%
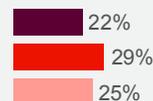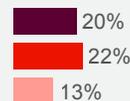
Suburban dwellers rely more on technology than others

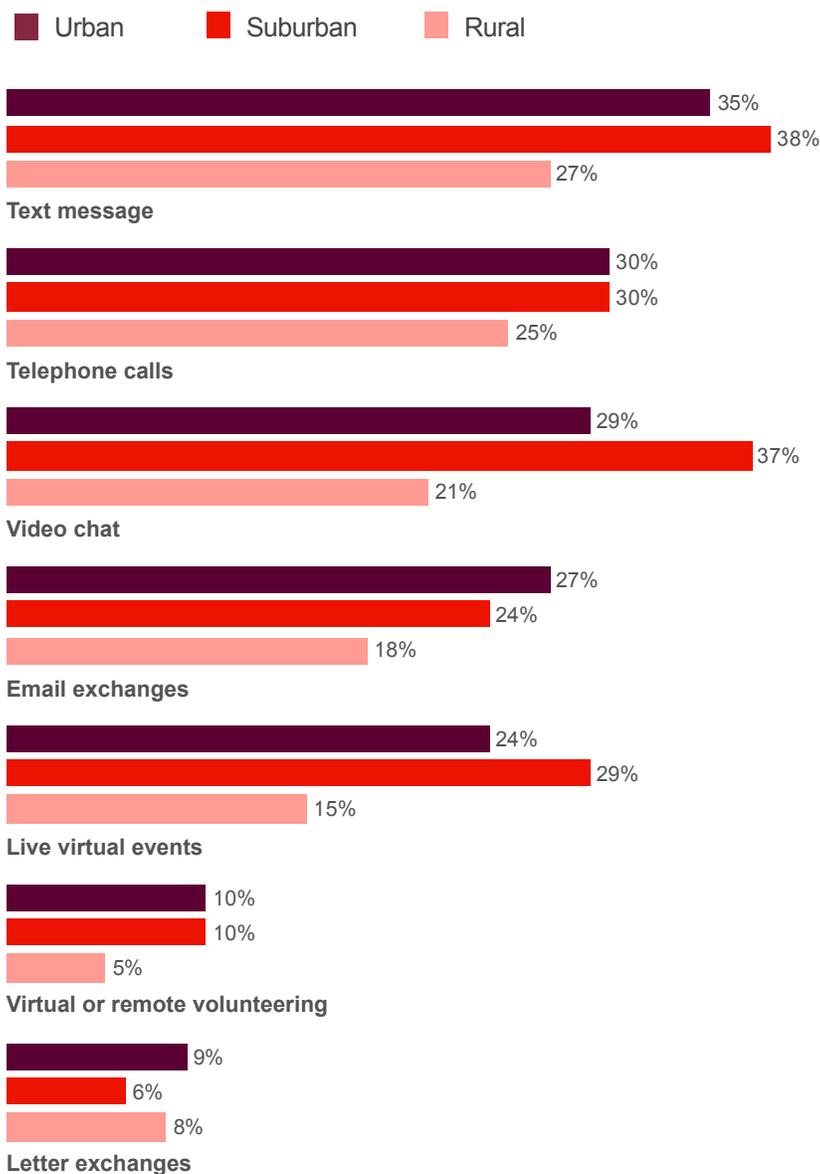Only one-third (34%) of rural dwellers say their overall impression of technology's ability to connect with others has improved during the pandemic, far less than their peers (urban 51%, suburban 48%). Adults 50-plus living in rural areas are much less likely than their urban and suburban counterparts to have increased their technology use during the pandemic. Compared to those in other communities, suburban dwellers are more likely than those living in other areas to say they are using technology more now for live virtual events (29% vs. urban 24%, rural 15%) and video chat (37% vs. urban 29%, rural 21%).

Percent using technology more often now than before COVID-19
Among adults 50-plus, by geography

■ Urban   ■ Suburban   ■ Rural

Text message
- Urban: 35%
- Suburban: 38%
- Rural: 27%

Telephone calls
- Urban: 30%
- Suburban: 30%
- Rural: 25%

Video chat
- Urban: 29%
- Suburban: 37%
- Rural: 21%

Email exchanges
- Urban: 27%
- Suburban: 24%
- Rural: 18%

Live virtual events
- Urban: 24%
- Suburban: 29%
- Rural: 15%

Virtual or remote volunteering
- Urban: 10%
- Suburban: 10%
- Rural: 5%

Letter exchanges
- Urban: 9%
- Suburban: 6%
- Rural: 8%

Even though they're all called high-speed internet, *DSL, cable, and fiber-optic run at very different speeds.*

DSL is the slowest, running over phone lines; cable is a bit faster because it runs over the same cable lines that bring TV service; and fiber-optic lines send the signal at the speed of light, making them, by far, the fastest.

SOURCE:
DSL vs Cable vs Fiber: Comparing Internet Options : Guides. BroadbandNow, 15 June 2020, broadbandnow.com/guides/desl-vs-cable-vs-fiber.

Rural dwellers stream less frequently

Older adults living in urban, rural, or suburban areas own smart TV's at about the same rate (suburban 66%, urban 64%, rural 61%). Although urban, rural, and suburban dwellers spend, on average, the same amount monthly on streaming services (suburban $20, urban $24, rural $19), rural dwellers stream less often than those in other areas. While a majority of those in urban (55%) and suburban (55%) settings stream shows, movies, or videos at least a few times a week, while those in rural areas are less likely to do so (46%).

High-speed cable is the most common means of internet access

Regardless of where adults 50-plus live, they access the internet most often using high-speed cable, especially in the suburbs (57% vs. urban 46%, rural 40%), with satellite or fixed wireless service being far less prevalent, even in rural areas (12% vs. urban 8%, suburban 7%). Those in rural areas are twice as likely to use their local phone line to deliver high-speed internet via high-speed DSL (23%) than their urban (12%) or suburban (11%) peers.

Type of home internet access
Among adults 50-plus, by geography

■ Urban   ■ Suburban   ■ Rural

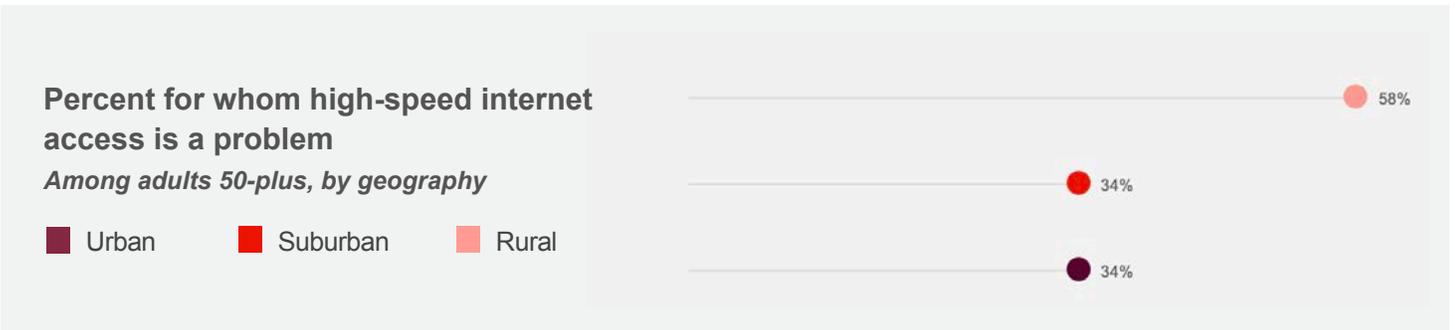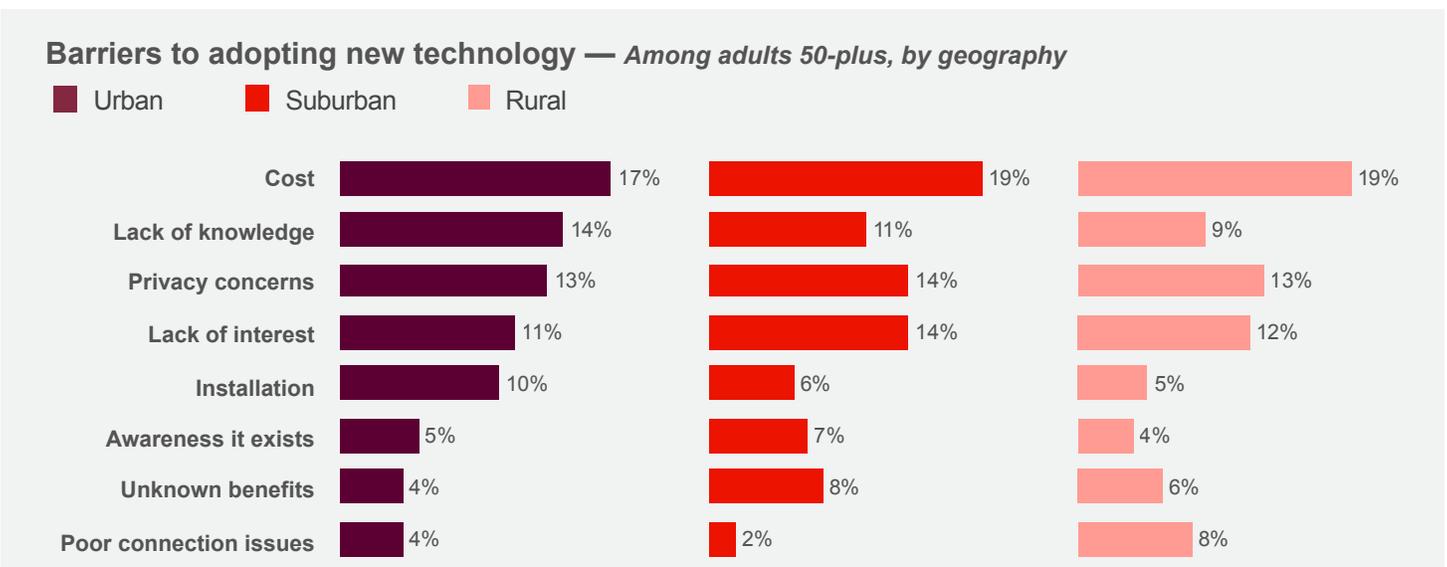|	Urban	Suburban	Rural
High-speed cable	46%	57%	40%
High-speed fiber	14%	12%	7%
High-speed DSL	12%	11%	23%
Satellite or fixed wireless	8%	7%	12%
Through cellular data	6%	4%	6%
None	7%	2%	5%
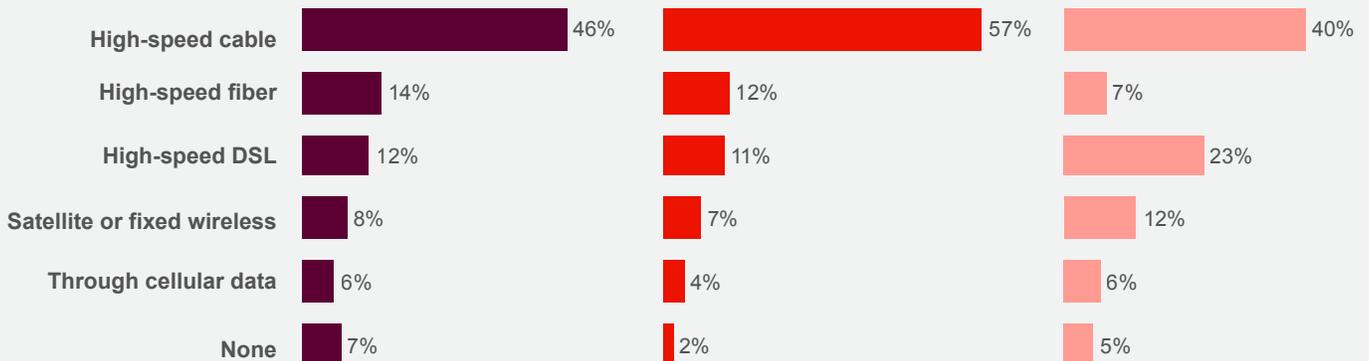
High-speed internet costs and access are a problem in rural areas

While factors such as speed and bandwidth play a role in pricing, suburban dwellers 50-plus pay more on average than urban and rural residents for home internet service ($71 vs. urban $65, rural $63), but those in rural areas report that the cost of high-speed access is a problem for them personally (64% vs. urban 60%, suburban 59%). Those living in rural areas are also much more likely than their cohorts to report that access to high-speed internet is a problem in their communities (58% vs. urban 34%, suburban 34%), including nearly one-quarter (23%) who say it's a major problem, which is more than double the number who say it's a major problem in urban areas (5%), and four times more than those in the suburbs (10%).
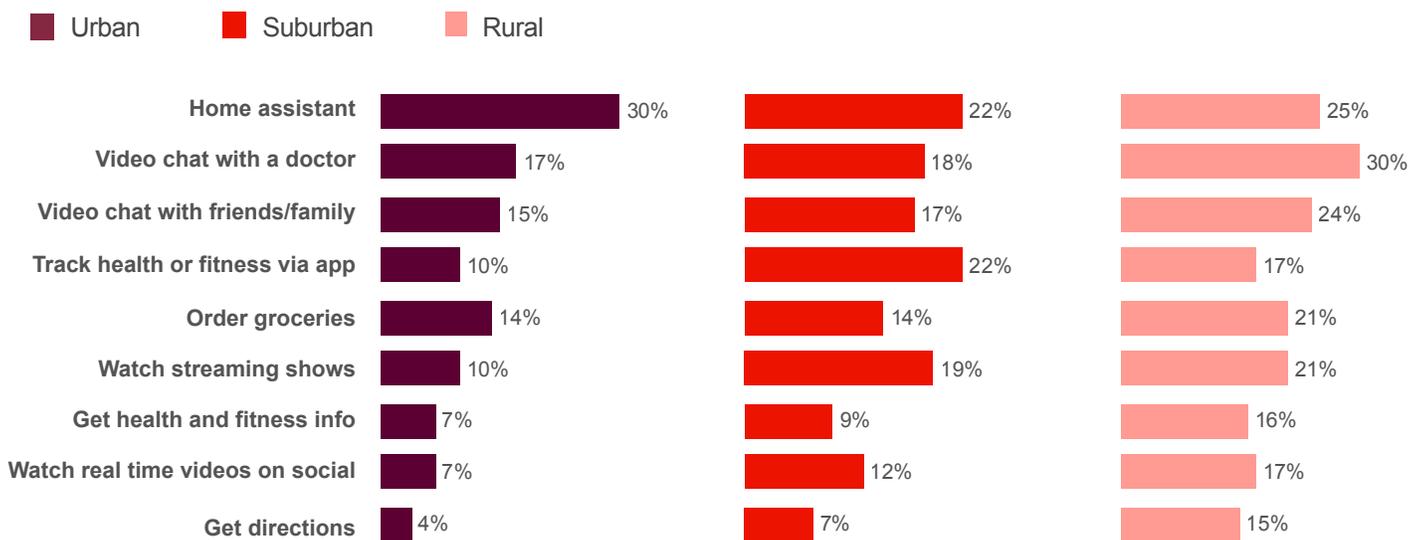
Percent for whom high-speed internet access is a problem
Among adults 50-plus, by geography

■ Urban   ■ Suburban   ■ Rural

58%
34%
34%

Personal barriers to adopting technology vary by community type, but cost is a barrier for everyone

A majority of people 50-plus feel confident using technology — the internet, smartphones, or computers — though rural dwellers are slightly less likely to say they are comfortable overall (56% vs. suburban 67%, urban 61%). Setting aside cost, which is the top barrier to adopting new technology, communities face varying other barriers. Those in rural areas are twice as likely than urban dwellers to be concerned about connection issues and four times more likely than suburban dwellers (8% vs. urban 4%, suburban 2%). Those in urban areas cite lack of knowledge (14%) and installation concerns (10%) more often than their counterparts, and some suburbanites have privacy concerns (14%), while others simply are not interested in incorporating new technology into their lives (14%).

Barriers to adopting new technology — *Among adults 50-plus, by geography*

■ Urban   ■ Suburban   ■ Rural

Barrier	Urban	Suburban	Rural
Cost	17%	19%	19%
Lack of knowledge	14%	11%	9%
Privacy concerns	13%	14%	13%
Lack of interest	11%	14%	12%
Installation	10%	6%	5%
Awareness it exists	5%	7%	4%
Unknown benefits	4%	8%	6%
Poor connection issues	4%	2%	8%

Nevertheless, a majority of those living in urban areas say they would use technology more often if they knew how (52%), compared to less than two in five in rural (37%) or suburban (35%) areas. However, those in rural areas say they would be more likely to use a number of new technologies, especially those that increase conveniences, if they knew how to use them. Activities like video chatting with a doctor (30% vs. urban 17%, suburban 18%) or family and friends (24% vs. urban 15%, suburban 17%) or ordering groceries for delivery or pick up (21% vs. urban 14%, suburban 14%), are attractive to those in rural areas likely because of long distances some living in rural areas must travel to accomplish these routine tasks. Regardless of location, adults 50-plus most prefer to learn about new technologies hands-on from friends and family members (rural 43%, suburban 39%, rural 35%).

Technologies older adults would use daily if they knew how — *Among adults 50-plus, by geography*

■ Urban   ■ Suburban   ■ Rural

Technology	Urban	Suburban	Rural
Home assistant	30%	22%	25%
Video chat with a doctor	17%	18%	30%
Video chat with friends/family	15%	17%	24%
Track health or fitness via app	10%	22%	17%
Order groceries	14%	14%	21%
Watch streaming shows	10%	19%	21%
Get health and fitness info	7%	9%	16%
Watch real time videos on social	7%	12%	17%
Get directions	4%	7%	15%

Rural, urban, and suburban dwellers equally lack confidence that the things they do online remain private

85% RURAL | **83%** SUBURBAN | **78%** URBAN

Implications

Those in rural areas would incorporate more technology into their lives, particularly for common conveniences, which are often not easily accessible, if they only knew more about it. Friends and family members of rural dwellers should reach out to make their loved ones aware of how they could use technology to simplify their lives, such as ordering groceries for delivery, video chatting with doctors and other medical professionals, or installing home assistants and smart home technologies.

Technology companies could be more creative in addressing the specific needs of consumers based on where they live. For example, urban dwellers are concerned about installation of new technology, so companies should take special care to offer convenient and safe in-person or virtual support with purchase. In rural areas, tech companies should work to assuage concerns around poor connection issues by offering specific solutions or explaining how their products work even with a poor connection. Those in the suburbs are less interested in adopting new technology, so tech companies should market their products as solutions to common problems or as a means of increasing convenience and peace of mind.

Those in rural areas need greater access to low-cost high-speed internet. Internet companies cannot add cables and improve connections overnight, but in the meantime, they could provide low or no-cost boosters and extenders to improve signal strength.