

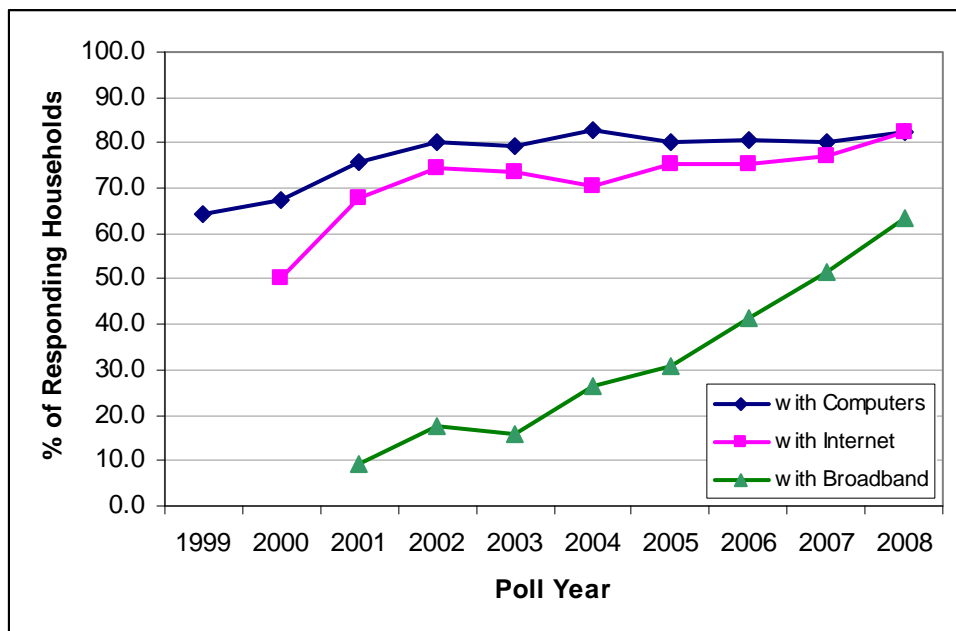
Household Internet ubiquitous, broadband connections rising, digital divides remain.

Summary

In Vermont the percentage of households with computers has held steady around 80% for several years (see Figure 1). However 2008 is the first year that fully 100% of responding computer-owning households are shown to also have Internet connections. In the meantime, the proportion of these Internet connections that are “high-speed” or “broadband” continues its steady rise.

An income divide remains in household computer ownership, and the rural-urban divide in high-speed Internet is still active. There is majority support for municipal efforts and partnerships to increase broadband availability, including projects that focus exclusively on fiberoptic infrastructure.

Figure 1. Vermont households by computer ownership, Internet connections, and broadband connections, 1999-2008.



Source: University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies, *Vermont Poll, 1999-2008*.

Measuring Computer Ownership and Internet Connections with the *Vermont Poll*

For more than a decade, the *Vermont Poll* has collected data on computer ownership and Internet connectivity among Vermont households. Other than tracking computer ownership and Internet connectivity, this data has more recently been used to explore facets of the *digital divide* in Vermont. The digital divide is a term that refers to inequalities in the abilities of people to access information technology and Internet resources.

For some time now, *Vermont Poll* data have shown that there is an income-based divide in household computer ownership. Households with higher incomes are more likely to have computers. The 2008 poll data continue to follow this trend.

One piece of data that stands out this year is that, for the first time, Internet connectivity is virtually ubiquitous with computer ownership. No household with a computer responded that they do not have some sort Internet connectivity.

However CRS has been focusing its digital divide exploration, not on general connectivity, but on the TYPE of connectivity. With today's Internet, users limited to dial-up connections are not getting the same experience and access as those with "broadband" or "high-speed" connections.

Vermont Poll data, and other information sources, have revealed a rural-urban digital divide in broadband connectivity in Vermont and around the nation. The 2008 data continue to verify this trend. Internet households that identify themselves as living in rural areas are less likely (71%) to have broadband than suburban (87%) and urban (77%) households. While the majority of all groups have broadband, there is still a divide.

Household income seems to have little to no effect upon broadband connectivity. The linkages between broadband and income are driven more by the rural-urban location of different income groups. Urban households have higher tendency to be in lower income groups and yet also have better access to broadband. The data seem to show that broadband connectivity is more closely linked to geographic location and market density than to household income.

In 2007, the *Vermont Poll* found that the majority of households without computers or Internet did not want them at all. However the majority of households with a computer and Internet connection without broadband did respond that they wanted high-speed Internet to be made available to them. Overall many organizations, policy-makers, and private citizens have come forward during the course of the decade to proclaim the economic and social benefits of universal broadband availability in Vermont.

Assorted local, regional and statewide efforts to bridge the rural-urban broadband divide are in various stages of organization, activity and success. Most of these efforts – Burlington Telecom and the East Central Vermont Community Fiber Network, for example – require the commitment of local municipal resources, primarily through bonds for infrastructure development. The 2007 *Vermont Poll* found a majority (58%) of respondents in support of the allocation of State funds toward universal broadband. However only a minority (36%) was in favor of the use of municipal funds for the development of broadband infrastructure.

In 2008 the *Vermont Poll* asked more focused questions about the favorability of respondents toward the use of local resources to work "alone or in partnership with other municipalities to develop high-speed Internet infrastructure, such as data lines or wireless transmitters, so that companies may use them to sell high-speed Internet connections to local residents and businesses." This is more in line with the types of efforts underway today. The understanding is that any municipal investment eventually would be paid back through fees charged for the use of the new infrastructure.

A vast majority of respondents (77%) were in favor of having their city or town involved in such an effort. When the question was focused to ask if respondents were in favor of an effort exclusively in fiberoptic infrastructure, much faster than typical broadband, a majority (73%) said yes once again. When looking at the data from the viewpoint of the rural-urban divide, there was no discernible different in the support for local efforts overall, but more rural households (74%) were in favor of the fiber-exclusive concept than urban households (68%) with suburban in the middle. Overall the local effort concepts had much more support in households with computers and Internet than in those that did not, although there was majority support amongst both. Whether or not a connected household had broadband or dial-up did not seem to have an effect.

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