

Internet Use Lagging Behind in Struggling Rural Communities

How many Internet users are there in rural Canada? What are they using the Internet for? How could rural Internet users benefit more from the resources which the Internet offers?



The federal government's *Connecting Canadians Agenda* is a six-point platform including a number of interlinked initiatives: Canada On-line, Smart Communities, Canadian Content On-line, Electronic Commerce, Canadian Government On-line, and Connecting Canada to the World. It is intended to make Canada the most connected nation in the world. At the same time, it is designed to "improve access to federal government programs and services for rural Canadians." The government recently established Rural and Remote Canada On-Line, calling it "a single window to knowledge,

information, programs and services for and about rural and remote Canada."

According to the NRE 2001 Household Survey, 54% of households in rural Canada access the Internet. This is a slightly higher percentage than the Canadian population taken as a whole according to a recent survey by Statistics Canada (Dryburgh, 2001). Within rural communities, there is a variation in Internet usage among different types of communities. In communities with "leading" economic outcomes, 63% of households use the Internet, while in those with "lagging" economic outcomes, only 49% use the Internet. This suggests that communities which are socially and economically better off are able to afford, and benefit from, internet access.

It has been suggested by policy makers that the Internet will be a valuable resource for rural communities, especially to those in more remote locations, in "leveling the playing field." However, these results show that households in struggling rural communities are less likely to

use the Internet. This may be caused by a variety of reasons including: cost, lack of awareness, lack of high speed Internet availability, and fewer schools and businesses which are connected.

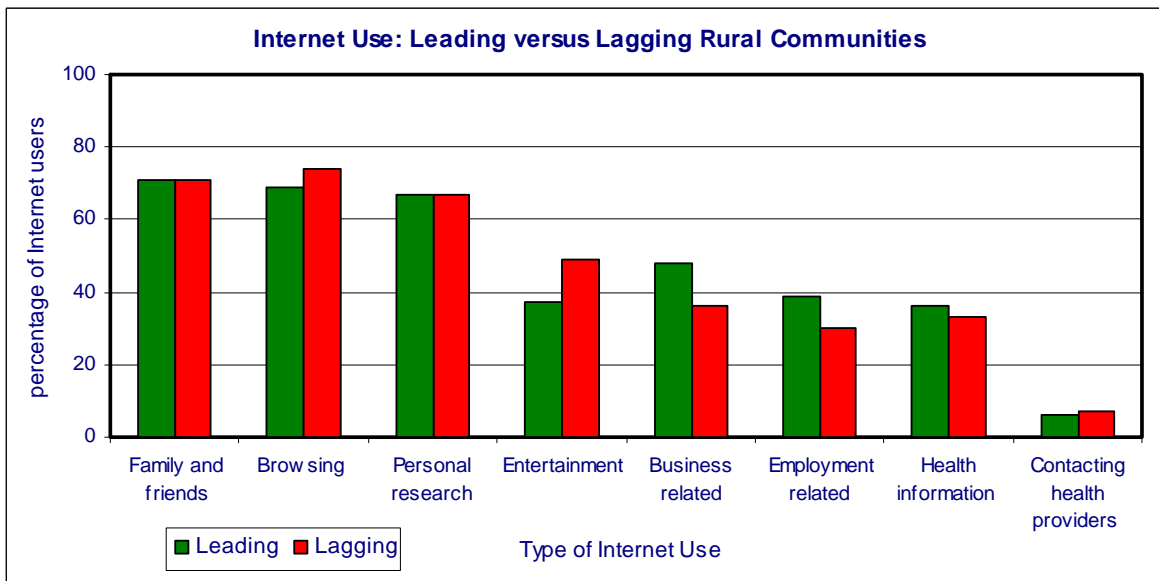
Rural Internet users tend to use the Internet for personal reasons such as browsing and entertainment opposed to more practical applications such as accessing government information, services, news and for business. 71% of rural internet users identified using the Internet for each of browsing, and communicating with friends and family. The third most frequent use for personal research (researching a trip, researching a product).

These findings are different from those in Dryburgh's study, which found that Canadians typically were more practical in their use of the Internet. However, it is important to note that the "general browsing category" offered on the 2001 survey encompasses uses such as accessing information about good and services, as well as using the Internet to get news.



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There appears to be even greater room for improvement of opportunities in lagging rural communities: 48% of users in leading communities access business information on-line, but only 36% of Internet users in lagging communities access business information. Internet users in leading communities also take more advantage of employment related information online, with 39% accessing the resource. Users in lagging communities are far behind with only 30% looking up employment information on the Internet. If rural Internet users are not taking full advantage of opportunities offered by the Internet, they may need be made aware of the possibilities the Internet offers. This may require more explicit programs and training at the community level to increase Internet awareness.



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