

A Beacon of Hope in Michigan Shines Light on National Digital Divide

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How do you feel when the internet goes out? Frustrated? Anxious? Loss of connectivity is a difficult problem in the best of times. Now, in the new world of the COVID-19 pandemic, that single connection may be the sole lifeline—for food and medicine, for community, for education—and denied access can bring whole families to a halt.

A Widening Divide

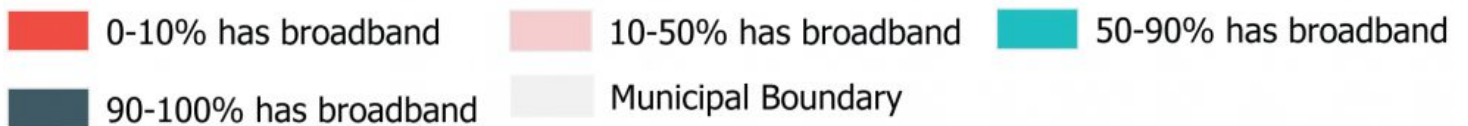
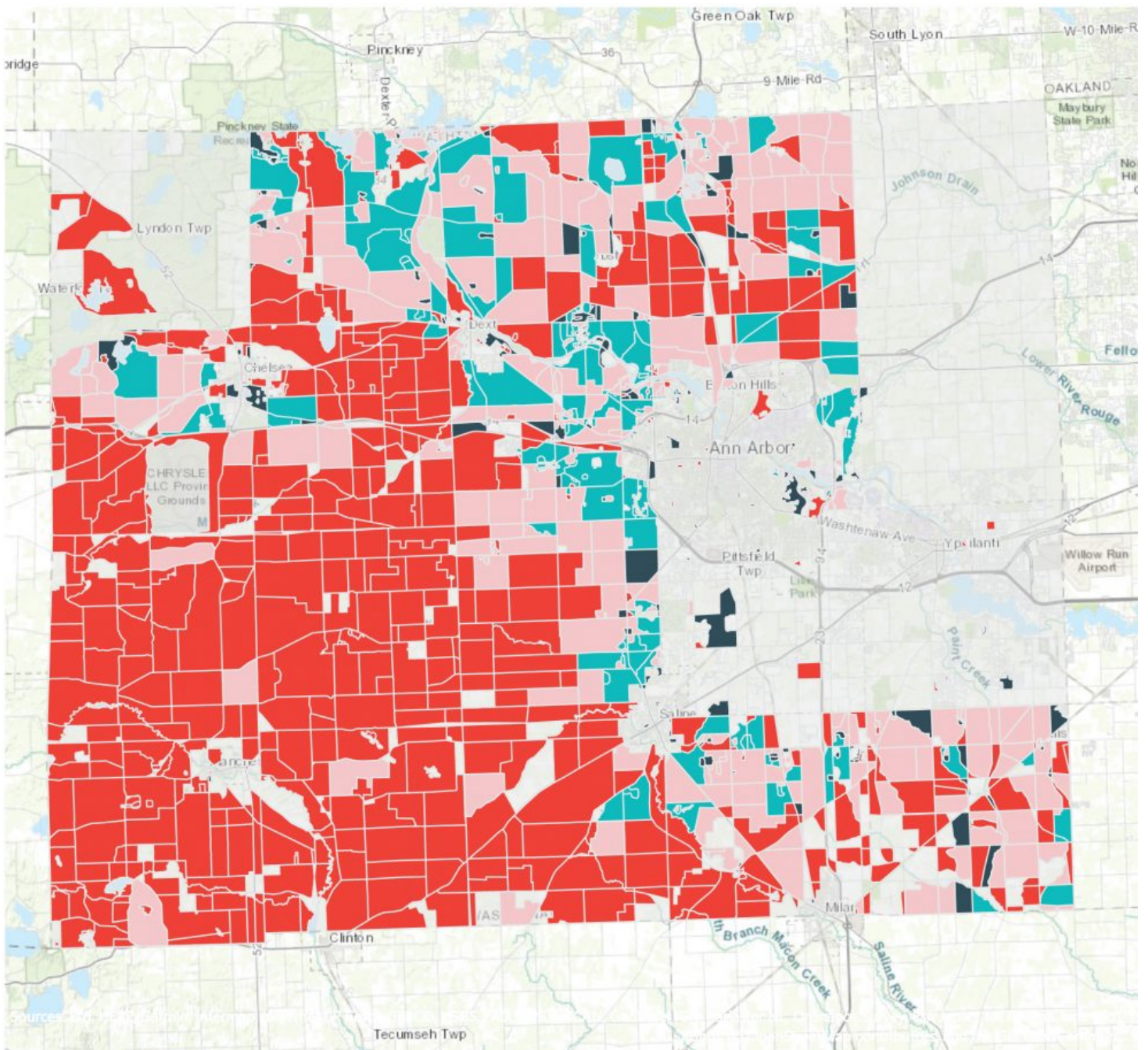
3.7 million households with children across the country do not have reliable, or, in many cases, *any* internet access.¹ Along with other cracks in the social network, the pandemic has revealed stark inequities in urban-rural broadband network coverage, which was already a problem for underserved populations. Toyota is committed to helping fix this disparity of access to information and connection through high-speed internet.

The U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey found that in 2016, less than half of U.S. households had high connectivity. Although the digital divide creates hardship throughout the U.S., there are places where the gap has become a chasm. For instance, nearly half (40%) of Detroit's population has no access to the internet—of any kind.² What's more, 25% of Michigan students do not have access to broadband in their

homes, according to FCC data.³ For families with school-aged children in Washtenaw County near Ann Arbor, Michigan, the access gap is particularly staggering.

In a 2019 Washtenaw County Broadband Task Force and Merit Network's Michigan Moonshot survey of 15 townships, 57% of households with K-12 students lack broadband access.⁴ This means that students in those areas don't have service capable of supporting video conferencing, lesson and homework programs, video streaming and other essential online learning tool, leading to poorer academic outcomes.

Michigan's findings are not isolated. These figures simply represent the same obstacles faced by students on a national scale. The pandemic merely amplified the crisis of connectivity and pushed it to the forefront nationwide.



*Broadband density map: Among survey households per census block, this map reflects the share of respondents in Washtenaw County, Michigan, who indicated having broadband.**

Narrowing the Gap

Though public awareness of the inequity is expanding, Toyota’s efforts to ease the digital divide predate the extraordinary conditions that have marked 2020. Before COVID-19 upended daily life, the automaker was

already seeking solutions to this widespread social problem. Through trusted partnerships with organizations, such as Merit Network⁵, which provides fiber network access to non-profit organizations throughout the state of Michigan, the company has been working to identify the disparities and mitigate the gaps in the areas that need it most. “As COVID-19 continues to spread throughout our nation, Toyota is proud to partner with Michigan Moonshot and Cisco to expand free Wi-Fi to Southeast Michigan area schools, libraries and community gathering locations to provide an immediate solution to this urgent issue of access,” says Chris Reynolds, chief administrative officer, Toyota Motor North America.

Most recently, the Toyota USA Foundation awarded grants totaling \$3,357,000 in 13 states where the company operates. In addition to bolstering educational equity, the grants support wireless internet access for any member of the public who needs it, including seniors and developing members of the workforce.⁶ The grants will fund Wi-Fi access points, mobile Wi-Fi devices, laptop computers and software licenses, helping more than 350,000 students access virtual learning. For example, in Michigan’s Washtenaw County, the grants will be distributed to 9 school districts at 30 sites, as well as 20 public spaces in Flint, Detroit and the Ann Arbor area. These Wi-Fi access points for student and public use can be located on an easy-to-read interactive map.⁷

“For thousands of students across the state of Michigan, the pandemic has introduced new challenges and highlighted existing ones. tied to living, learning and working,” says Charlotte Bewersdorff, Merit Network’s vice president for Community Engagement.



Bringing Students Up to Speed

It didn't take long for the internet to jump from revolutionary new technology to the global staple of social and professional life. Now, education has been added as a critical third lane of the information superhighway.

Perhaps it's not surprising then that a recent Quello Center and Michigan State University [report](#) on broadband and student performance gaps in rural Michigan shows that middle and high school students with access to adequate internet at home receive higher grades, perform better on standardized tests and have more-robust digital skills than those who don't.⁸ The study also suggests that, regardless of socioeconomic status, students who can't access the internet at home are less likely to attend college. As a result, fewer of these students pursue valuable, in-demand careers, such as those related to science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).

Connecting the dots between high-speed internet access and the larger economy, it's easy to see why solving this problem is vital. Without prospective STEM students in higher education, the talent pool shrinks, inhibiting the development of much-needed workers and leaders in critical growing fields. In the decade between 2015 and 2025, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates a shortage of 1 million STEM workers.⁹ That deficiency impacts the U.S. economy, hurting growth and, ultimately, threatening its stability.



Connectivity for All

As a mobility company, Toyota's priority is to help provide all people with the opportunity to move freely physically and socially, and that includes navigating the world wide web. Mobility for all means equal access to the vehicles driving fulfilled potential and greater innovation. When you're free to move, anything is possible, especially across the bridge to the future.

Want to learn more?

[Toyota USA Foundation grants address digital divide.](#)

[Michigan Moonshot Partners with Toyota and Cisco to Expand Wi-Fi Access in Detroit, Inkster, Flint and Washtenaw County, Michigan](#)

[Washtenaw County, Michigan, Data Collection Review](#)

[The Michigan Moonshot](#)

[Quello Center Media and Information Policy Broadband and Student Performance Gaps](#)