HEALTH CARE IN RURAL AMERICA: FOCUS ON INTERNET AND TELEHEALTH USE

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Introduction

Access to specialty health services is lacking for many in rural areas.

- While nearly all rural adults 40-plus in our study reported having community access to pharmacies, one-fifth reported lacking access to specialty health services. Services like walk-in clinics, substance abuse/mental health services, and women's health services are less common.
- And when appointments are available, rural adults wait much longer for an appointment with a specialist than for primary care. A fifth indicate it could take *more than a month* to get an appointment with a specialist.
- A fourth of rural consumers say they must travel more than 30 minutes to get a doctor's office for specialty care, and about one in seven noted similar traveling times to get to a hospital or urgent care center.

Infrastructure gaps point to other challenges facing rural consumers.

- A tenth of rural adults 40-plus report the closing of a hospital or medical clinic as a result of the pandemic, further aggravating their access to timely care.
- While more than three-quarters of rural adults 40-plus say they have access to high-speed internet (broadband), rural adults who are 70-plus, with lower incomes, and in poorer health are least likely to have access to it.
- And their usage of the Internet varies similarly: One-third of rural adults ages 70 and older, one-third of those with household incomes of less than \$30,000, and one-quarter of those in fair or poor health say they *never* use the internet.

Telehealth services not widely used by rural adults 40-plus.

- Three in 10 rural adults in our study say they or a family member used telehealth in the past six months (which coincides with the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic).
- Use of telehealth is most common among rural women, those ages 40–49, and those with higher household incomes.
- The top barriers to using telehealth for rural adults 40-plus are concern that health issues cannot be resolved via video or teleconference and uncertainty on whether telehealth services are offered by their healthcare provider.
- Inability to resolve issues by video is also a top barrier among telehealth users, along with concerns about medical errors, insurance coverage, and confidentiality.

DETAILED FINDINGS

Three-fourths of rural* Americans 40-plus have high-speed internet access.

Those least likely to have high-speed (also known as broadband) access are those ages 70 and older with a household income less than \$30,000 and/or are in poor or fair health.

Percent who have broadband access in their community
Among all respondents and by age, household income, and health status

* Note: in our study, rural residents are those who live outside of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)

Q25. Do you have broadband access in your community? Base: All respondents (n=1,504)

But older rural residents, those with lower incomes, and/or those in fair or poor health say they never use the internet.

Frequency of internet use
Among all respondents and by age, household income, and health status

Q27. How often do you use the Internet? This includes using email and accessing the Internet through devices such as computers, tablets, or smartphones.
Base: All respondents (n=1,504)

Most rural internet users 40-plus have access at home, with a high-speed connection most common.

Nearly half (46%) of home internet users have a cellular data plan for their smartphone or mobile device, though cellular data plans are much less prevalent among rural adults age 70 and older (31%).

Places internet is available

Types of home internet connections

Q28. Now, I'd like you to think about all of the places in your community in which access to the Internet is available to you, even if you haven't actually used the Internet at these places. In which of the following places is access to the Internet available to you? Base: Internet users (n=1,221); Q30. What type of Internet connections do you have at home? (Base: Home Internet users (n=1,100))

Two-thirds of rural adults 40-plus have a smartphone, with notable variations in technology ownership by age.

They use a wide variety of other devices, including laptop or desktop computers and tablets. Respondents age 70 and older are least likely to have any of these devices.

Percentage who own the following technology devices
Among all respondents and by age

Q26. Which of the following items do you have or own? Base: All respondents (n=1,504)

Rural adults 40-plus with lower incomes are the least likely to have a smartphone, laptop, desktop, or tablet.

Devices Owned – by Household Income and Overall Health Status	<\$30K	\$30K-\$49K	\$50K+
	n=448	n=255	n=632
Smartphone	44%	62%	81%
Laptop or Netbook	38%	55%	72%
Desktop computer	32%	49%	57%
Tablet such as iPad	30%	49%	59%
Regular cell phone	49%	49%	38%
E-reader such as Kindle	12%	22%	31%
Wearing device such as Fitbit	5%	14%	32%
Home asst. such as Amazon Echo	8%	16%	27%
Smart home techn. such as Nest	9%	11%	22%
GPS tracker to share location	8%	8%	13%
Virtual reality (VR) device	3%	3%	5%
None of these	10%	5%	3%

Rural adult smartphone users 50-plus are less likely to video chat with medical professionals or check health through apps or websites.

Percent who use technology for the following activities
By urbanicity

Source: AARP Research (Brittne Kakulla), Geography Spotlight: Technology Transcends Zip Codes. Washington, DC: AARP Research, June 2021. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.26419/res.00420.009>

Q26. Which of the following items do you have or own? Base: All respondents (n=1,504)

Rural adults 50-plus are significantly more likely to report access to and cost of high-speed internet as problems for themselves and their communities.

How problematic *access* and *monthly cost* of high-speed internet is in their community
By urbanicity

A recent study done by AARP details technology use and attitudes among adults 50 and older as well as aspects of their experiences with technology. We refer to data from that study when relevant.

Source: AARP Research (Brittne Kakulla), 2021 Tech Trends and the 50-Plus: Top Ten Biggest Trends. Washington, DC: AARP Research, April 2021. DOI: doi.org/10.26419/res.00420.001

Cost is a deterrent against technology adoption — one-fifth of rural adults 50-plus rank it as the top barrier preventing them from adopting technology.

Barriers to adopting new technology that could help you engage with friends and family
Percent ranking each barrier first, by urbanicity

Source: AARP Research (Brittne Kakulla), 2021 Tech Trends and the 50-Plus: Top Ten Biggest Trends. Washington, DC: AARP Research, April 2021. DOI: doi.org/10.26419/res.00420.001

For rural adults 40-plus, quality is the biggest impediment to home internet use, followed by availability and cost.

One-third (32%) of rural home Internet users said that quality of Internet access has limited their use of the Internet at home to at least some extent in the past 12 months. Availability and cost limited home Internet use to at least some extent for about one-fifth of respondents (22% and 21%, respectively).

Extent to which the following have limited internet use at home
In the past 12 months, among all respondents

Q29. In the past 12 months, to what extent has each of the following limited your use of the Internet at home? Base: Home Internet users (n=1,100)

Rural adults 50-plus appear comfortable using the internet but more skittish about using video-chat capabilities.

Percent very or extremely comfortable with the following tech devices
By urbanicity

Source: AARP Research (Brittne Kakulla), 2021 Tech Trends and the 50-Plus: Top Ten Biggest Trends. Washington, DC: AARP Research, April 2021. DOI: doi.org/10.26419/res.00420.001

Rural adults 50-plus are also more likely to try technology only after it's been around for a while or to be one of the last individuals to try it.

Typical engagement with new technology
By urbanicity

Source: AARP Research (Brittne Kakulla), 2021 Tech Trends and the 50-Plus: Top Ten Biggest Trends. Washington, DC: AARP Research, April 2021. DOI: doi.org/10.26419/res.00420.001

Yet, rural adults 50-plus are more likely to say they'd like to video chat with their doctor if they knew more about how to do so.

Percent who would do the following activities if they had the knowledge and felt comfortable doing so
By urbanicity

Source: AARP Research (Brittne Kakulla), 2021 Tech Trends and the 50-Plus: Top Ten Biggest Trends. Washington, DC: AARP Research, April 2021. DOI: doi.org/10.26419/res.00420.001

A sizeable minority of rural adults 40-plus have used telehealth in the past six months...

The percentage is significantly higher among women than among men and among those whose household income is \$50,000 or more. Use of telehealth in the past six months declines as age increases.

Percent who have used telehealth in the past six months
Among all respondents and by gender, age, and household income

Q38. Have you or a family member used telehealth in the past six months? (Base: All respondents)

...reflecting mixed interest in its use.

While one in seven rural adults 40 and older already use telehealth, about half are not very or not at all interested in using it. Lower levels of interest in telehealth are more common among those ages 60 and older.

Q35. [Description of telehealth is read] How interested are you in using telehealth services for yourself or a loved one if needed? Base: All respondents (n=1,504)

Renewing prescriptions is the top reason for using telehealth.

Percent using telehealth for the following reasons

Q36. What would you want to use telehealth services for? Base: Respondents at least somewhat interested in telehealth (n=450)

Concern that health issues cannot be resolved via video or teleconference tops the list of barriers to use for rural adults 40-plus.

Percent citing the following barriers to using telehealth
Among all respondents

Q37. What are some things that might prevent you from using telehealth services? Base: All respondents (n=1,504)

Uncertainty about use, coverage, and confidentiality are among the top barriers to telehealth use for rural adults with lower incomes.

Percent citing the following barriers to using telehealth
By household income

Q37. What are some things that might prevent you from using telehealth services? Base: All respondents (n=1,504)

Inability to resolve issues by video is another top barrier among telehealth users, along with concerns about medical errors, insurance coverage, and confidentiality.

Percent citing the following barriers to using telehealth
Among current telehealth users

Q37. What are some things that might prevent you from using telehealth services? Base: Respondents who already use telehealth (n=211)

Uncertainty whether telehealth is offered by their doctor or is covered by insurance is common among those at least somewhat interested.

Percent citing the following barriers to using telehealth
Among those at least somewhat interested in using telehealth

55%
In fair or poor health who are interested in using telehealth are not sure their insurance covers it

Q37. What are some things that might prevent you from using telehealth services? Base: Respondents who are at least somewhat interested in telehealth (n=450)

IMPLICATIONS

Implications

Access to telehealth services has often been described as assisting in the delivery of healthcare to underserved populations — such as those in rural areas — by reducing challenges to care. Findings from our study suggest that while there is interest in telehealth among rural adults 40-plus, the most likely barrier to use is concern over health issues that cannot be resolved in a virtual environment and that require an in-person medical appointment.

- **Increasing access to quality high-speed Internet** for all rural Americans could facilitate the use of telehealth.
- **Rural Americans should be informed about telehealth** generally as well as encouraged to contact their health insurance provider to determine if telehealth is covered under their plan. They should also contact their doctor's office to see if their provider offers telehealth and what ailments or services are best suited for a telehealth appointment.
- Similarly, **providers should be encouraged to offer telehealth** services to their patients, especially for those with transportation issues or who are concerned regarding social distancing at a doctor's office. Low-cost options for those who are uninsured or with lower incomes would increase access to care, as would simple guidebooks or other assistance regarding how to set-up/participate in a telehealth appointment.
- **Alternative methods of care (i.e., other than telehealth) should be explored** to expand access to quality healthcare for older rural Americans who do not use the internet and/or do not own smartphones or computers.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology

- **Objectives:** To take a deeper look at the health attitudes, behaviors, and concerns of United States (U.S.) adults age 40 and older who are living in rural areas of the country
- **Methodology:** Phone survey (40% landline and 60% cell phone)
- **Qualifications:** Age 40 or older; resident of U.S. living outside a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)
- **Sample:** Aristotle (n=1,504)
- **Interviewing Dates:** November 20 – December 18, 2020
- **Weighting:** The data are weighted by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and education according to 2019 5-Year Census Bureau National ACS statistics
- **Questionnaire length:** 22 minutes on average
- **Confidence Interval:** Total sample: $\pm 2.5\%$
- **Note:** Throughout the report, statistics representing survey responses are reported in percentages which may not add up to 100% due to rounding and nonresponse. Also due to rounding, the percentages reported in the text may vary slightly from those in the annotation or in the graphs.

About AARP

AARP is the nation's largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering Americans 50 and older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members and offices in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, AARP works to strengthen communities and advocate for what matters most to families with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. AARP also works for individuals in the marketplace by sparking new solutions and allowing carefully chosen, high-quality products and services to carry the AARP name. As a trusted source for news and information, AARP produces the nation's largest circulation publications, AARP The Magazine and AARP Bulletin. To learn more, visit www.aarp.org or follow @AARP and @AARPadvocates on social media.

About ANR Market Research Consultants

ANR is a full-service market research firm founded in 1978. It has a full-time staff of twelve people and a part-time staff of thirty-five. As a Virginia SWaM-certified small business, ANR is managed by executives age 50+ and also employs multiple professional staff age 50+. Its corporate offices, located in Richmond, Virginia, include a state-of-the-art focus group facility. ANR specializes in business and consumer research to determine attitudes and opinions, advertising effectiveness, organization image and awareness, market positioning and new product development. Its clients span a variety of industries, including state and federal government, health care, communications, finance, manufacturing, retail, travel, tourism, real estate development, and education. For more information, visit www.anr.com.

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