

Digital Equity: Building a Coalition for Collective Impact in Guelph and Wellington County, Ontario



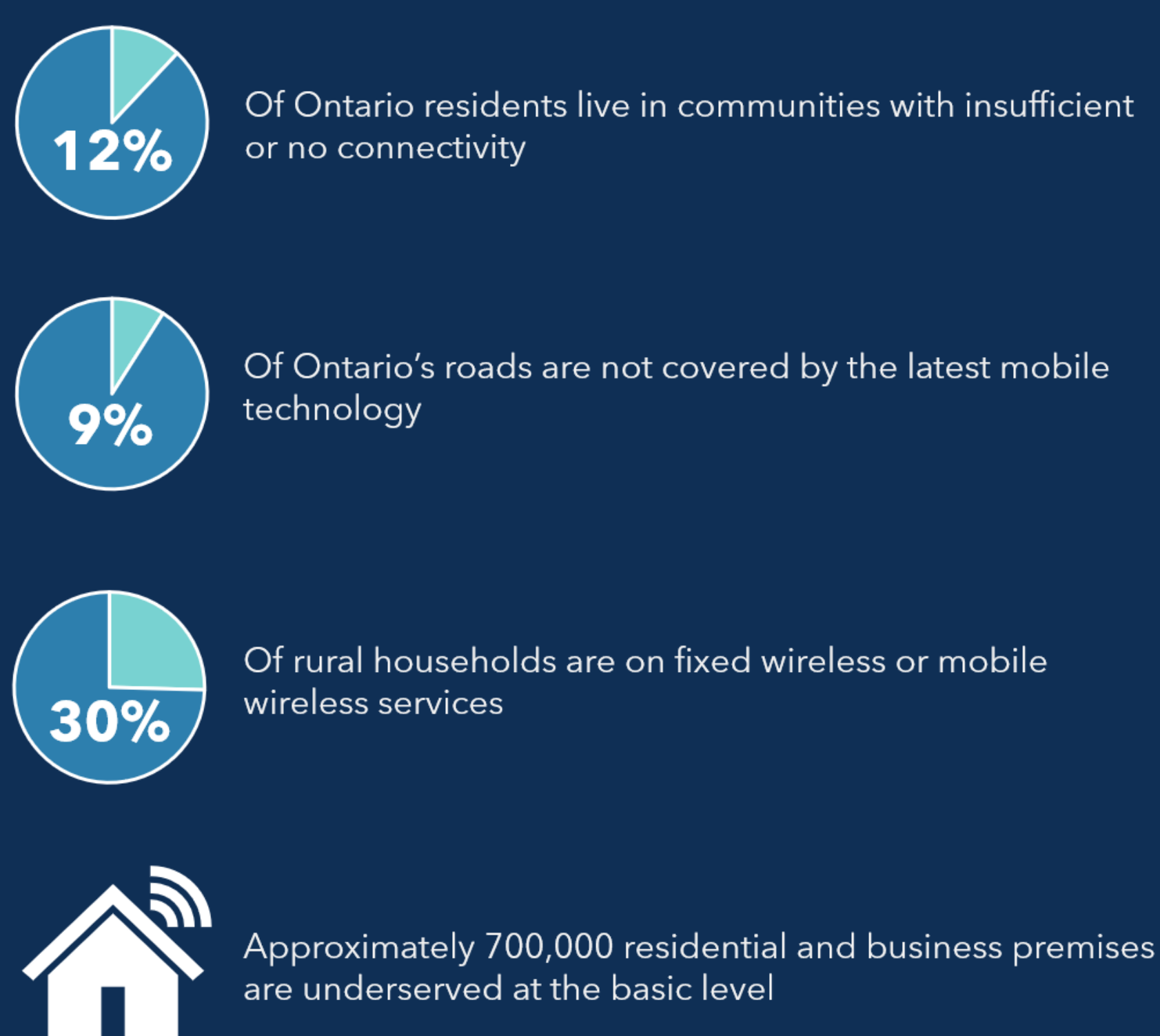
Helen Hambly, Shayla Spalding, Karrie Cumming, Brian Sankarsingh & Stuart Beumer

Background

Canada still has a significant urban/rural digital divide. According to the national regulator 98% of urban households have basic Internet access (50/10 Megabits per second,/Mbps), but by contrast, 55% of rural households cannot access these Internet speeds. Broadband (defined as high speed Internet access) varies by connection type (e.g. residential/business plans, wired/fixed wireless, cellular, or free/public wifi). Typically, rural users rely more on mobile connections, have slower and unlimited data plans, and experience far more frequent service disruptions. Post-pandemic, Internet access is considered even more of a vital service and important for addressing misinformation. For businesses such as farms and rural processing enterprises high quality Internet access is essential, including in Ontario, Canada where agriculture provides over \$46 billion in annual GDP.

Rural Broadband in Ontario

R2B2 argues for a “needs-based approach” based on the analysis of 18 million Internet performance test results, because 12% of communities are well below the basic service level and have to “make do” on speeds below 5/1 Mbps.



Goal & Objectives

Goal:

To ensure that everyone has access to technology and the skills to use it to be part of our society, government and economy so that people can participate in civic and cultural activities, find jobs, keep learning throughout their lives and access important services.

Objectives:

- To build a coalition to address digital inequity in all its forms.
- To make and deliver on a plan to promote digital equity locally, in the City of Guelph and Wellington County so that everyone in the community can benefit from technology.
- To promote and support users to gain digital literacy, access devices and affordable Internet no matter where they live, work or travel in Guelph/Wellington.

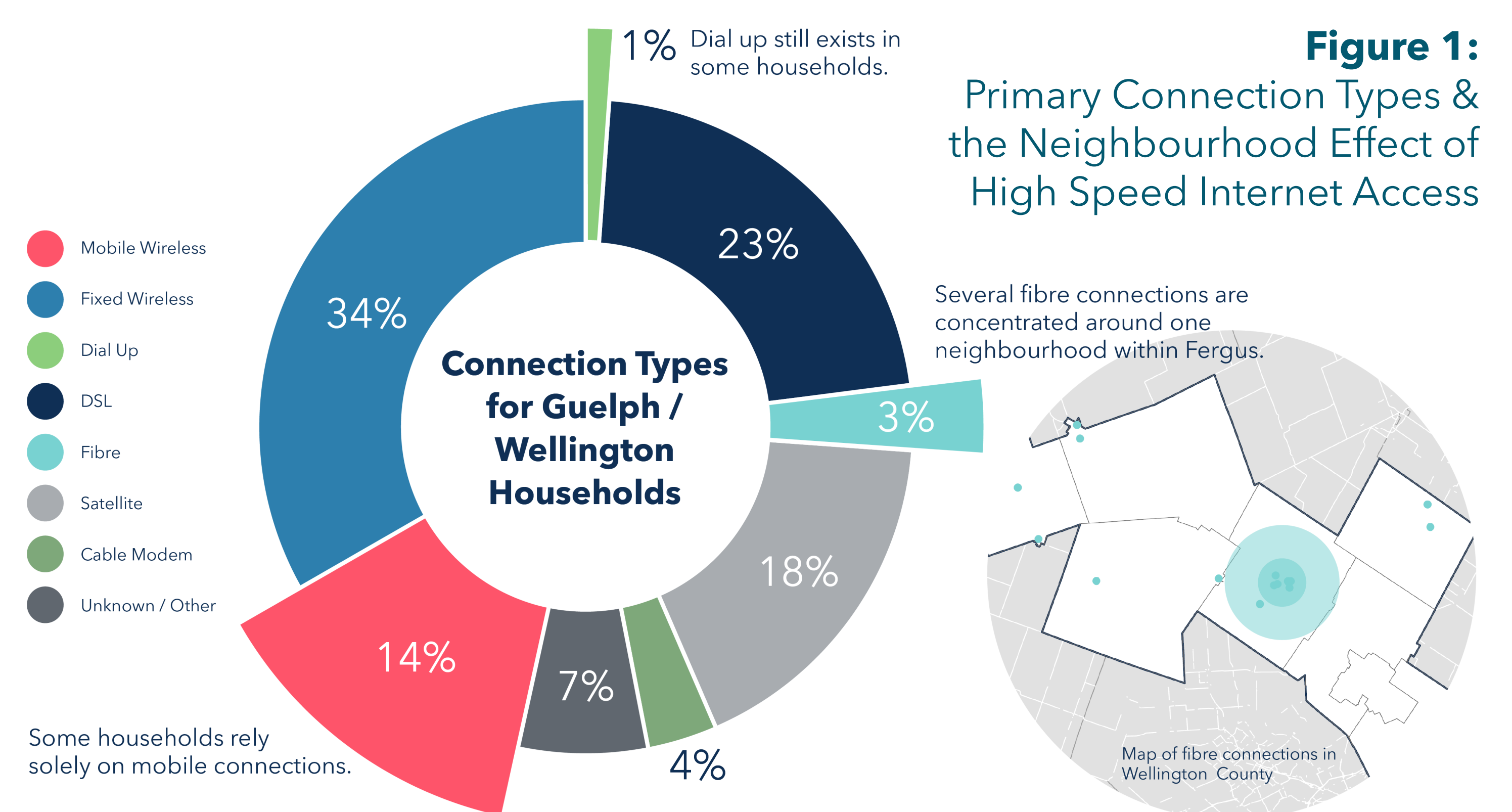
Methodology: Community-Engaged Research

The Guelph/Wellington Digital Equity Coalition is made up of community members and organizational representatives who take action on issues related to preventing and reducing the effects of digital inequity in all its forms. Members work together to guide the development and implementation of a comprehensive plan to advance digital equity in Guelph Wellington. The University of Guelph Regional and Rural Broadband (R2B2project.ca) project provides research and advocacy support to the Coalition, including a website for knowledge mobilization: [Guelph Wellington \(gwdigitalequity.ca\)](http://GuelphWellington.org/digitalequity.ca).



Results

R2B2 project maps quality of service broadband data for the Coalition and is in the process of identifying indicators of digital divides across the city and county. On affordability, for example, we find that prices for inferior Internet services can be as much as three times higher in rural areas. Figure 1 illustrates the variability of users' primary access sites across Guelph/Wellington. We point out two trends that are informing proposed new studies: a) within the City of Guelph some emerging digital divides by neighbourhood; b) a clear urban/rural digital divide in Wellington County; c) townships that have broadband access gaps that may affect specific premises such as farms and agri-food processing.



Discussion

Variability in Internet access is evident within the City of Guelph, across Wellington County, and in comparing urban and rural service levels. This means barriers for users accessing broadband networks and getting some people connected at service levels that make working, learning, and communicating in the digital age possible. Communicating progress about the changing digital landscape in Guelph/Wellington is important for municipal, provincial and federal policymaking and programs that are currently upgrading or building new broadband infrastructure. Filling the gaps in Wellington County, and being aware of potentially emergent digital divides in the City of Guelph, are strategies for digital equity.

Also, capacity building is recommended for users who are challenged with digital literacy or who find it difficult to afford access to the Internet or digital devices. We recommend further information sharing, in addition to the Coalition website, such as digital equity promotion in local media such as community newspapers and libraries because some people in Guelph/Wellington may lack higher speed Internet access or digital skills to use online resources.

Conclusion

Equitable Internet access is a challenge that many Canadians have consistently been faced with, even here in Guelph/Wellington County. Through this community-engaged project we generate evidence-based analysis and share it with community organizations collaborating as a digital equity coalition. This work engages service providers within municipalities, non-governmental organizations and individuals (households and businesses) in understanding digital equity in the community. It helps to develop ways to improve access to technology, including digital devices and wifi access, digital literacy and advocacy for policymaking and programs funding broadband. Next steps may include updating the County's guidebook which addresses the challenges associated with farm and rural internet access. More information sharing by the Coalition is expected to address digital equity challenges in practical and strategic ways. The University of Guelph's Regional and Rural Broadband (R2B2) project should continue to engage in broadband data science and knowledge sharing on digital access in our local community while comparing our experiences with rural communities across Canada.