

Does High-Speed Internet (Broadband) Technology Affect the Mental Health of Older Adults?

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October 7, 2023

Abstract

Recent research has shown important negative effects of social networks on younger people's mental health. Yet, we do not know if the same effects are present across the population, particularly for older adults, who are especially vulnerable to certain mental health conditions. I estimate the effect of broadband internet access on the mental health of older adults (aged 50+) in the United States, using individual panel data and recent advances in difference-in-differences (DID) methods for staggered rollouts of treatment. In contrast to the literature that finds nefarious effects of the internet among younger populations, my results show that broadband rollout significantly reduces depression symptoms by 5.3% among older adults. The results show that an increase in social connectedness and a decline in social isolation are the primary mechanisms driving these positive effects. Improved health literacy and technological efficiency (telehealth) also partly drive the results. I also find important heterogeneity by gender and geography, with rural dwellers and women being the biggest beneficiaries of broadband's positive effects on mental health. The magnitudes of my estimates of the impact of broadband access are comparable with other major life events known to affect the mental health of older adults, such as job loss, recession, and the death of a spouse. These results highlight the significant benefits of broadband for the mental health of older adults and suggest an unmeasured additional benefit to public investments in broadband infrastructure. JEL I12, I14, I18, L86, O18

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