PUBLISHED MAY 2026

EVIDENCE BRIEF

The **Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council** in collaboration with the **Canadian Institutes of Health Research** and **UK Research and Innovation Arts and Humanities Research Council and Economic and Social Research Council**

SSHRC's Imagining Canada's Future initiative mobilizes social sciences and humanities research to address emerging economic, societal and knowledge needs for Canada, and help guide decision-making across all sectors toward a better future. This evidence brief addresses the Future Challenge Area of: **Envisioning Governance Systems that Work**

Does AI have a place in rural governance? Navigating the co-creation of responsive digital technology solutions in rural Canada and Scotland

About the project

Governments across jurisdictions continue to struggle to develop and implement robust, flexible, and effective rural policies that are capable of meeting the ever-changing realities and contexts of rural life. Similarly, they are also faced with responding to the impacts of rapidly developing new technologies, with artificial intelligence (AI) currently attracting significant attention.

This project was a collaboration between Brandon University (Canada) and Scotland's Rural College (SRUC - Scotland). It reviewed existing academic literature as well as sources like government policies and reports, and industry commentary targeting AI governance in Canada and Scotland (and the United Kingdom, more broadly) to explore whether, and how, rural places are approached by this fast-moving area of policy concern.

In total, 133 pieces of literature were sourced for the UK and Scotland, with 53 of these included in the review. In Canada, 91 pieces of literature were sourced and reviewed. Gray literature included blog posts, news articles, policy documents, toolkits, a Freedom of Information response, and an independently commissioned report. Academic literature was sourced from a wide array of journals in the fields of health, governance, digital policy, data and society, cybersecurity, and many more.

Key findings

Governance

- Definitions of what, exactly, is considered under the umbrella of 'AI' appears to depend on the context (political, economic, social, etc). There is no agreed upon set of technologies that make up 'AI' in existing government approaches.
- Existing literature frequently struggles to fully separate governance *of* AI (i.e. rules and regulations surrounding the proper use of AI, or changes to the algorithm) versus governance *by* AI (i.e. using AI to inform decision-making). Inflection points are emerging in the distinction between AI as an enabling tool versus AI as a decision agent, raising questions about transparency and accountability.

- Governance of AI (and AI for governance) in Canada is evolving rapidly, but remains fragmented. Scotland has developed a national AI strategy. The current United Kingdom's AI Strategy appears overwhelmingly influenced by the recommendations of a single report (released January 2025).
- In both Canada and Scotland, rural-specific opportunities, challenges, and use-cases remain unexplored.

Opportunities

- There are strong use-cases for specific applications of AI, particularly machine learning, to support data-based decision-making, particularly in health, environmental management, agriculture, and data-heavy analyses.
- Existing rural use-cases point to predictive analytics and machine learning as particularly promising.

Challenges

- Authority and Accountability: External-to-government actors appear to be exerting considerable influence over the development of AI governance strategies, raising questions about who is accountable for harms or outcomes.
- 'Garbage In, Garbage Out': if the data used to develop AI-based governance tools is biased, incomplete, or improperly managed, the downstream impacts can be extremely damaging (immigration and healthcare examples). AI systems mirror societal biases and may worsen inequalities for marginalized, rural, remote, northern, and/or Indigenous populations.
- Current approaches emphasize quick, visible results (cost savings, efficiency, or trendy tech) with a focus on innovation and economic growth, rather than long-term public good, ethics, or structural reforms or social consequences.
- Rural specific challenges: Lack of digital capacity (data poverty, data deserts and data divides) , shortages of digital expertise & literacy, budget constraints, digital readiness and difficulties modernizing legacy systems**.**

Gaps

- AI tools remain ineffective at understanding complex relationship dynamics such as those that may show up in public consultations.
- Limited mechanisms available for people or communities that would like to opt-out of being subject to AI-based policies or decision-making.
- Rural places and voices are not being considered in these strategies, ignoring significant differences in capacity, skill development, infrastructure, goals, and needs of different types of communities.

Policy implications

- More research is required due to the lack of robust, applied use-case examples that could be used to support evidence-informed decision-making of both governance *of* AI and/or governance *by* AI. (Existing literature is focused largely on the promises of AI, rather than results of its applications/'real-world' use in policymaking, with significant gaps in rurally-based uses).
- The 'devil is in the details': Whether and how different bodies use AI (or any emerging technology) remains unclear. Policies around AI use by or in government have yet to clearly articulate existing and new regulatory measures, clear lines of accountability, options for redress or opting out, or community-specific responsiveness/place-responsiveness.

- Current approaches appear vulnerable to outsize influence from external actors, particularly private capital in the technology sector. Public institutions must be careful to prioritize good stewardship and alignment with the greatest public good by developing, evaluating, and applying evidence-informed use-cases guided by principled regulatory oversight.
- Assumptions about where, who, and what specific AI-based governance activities might be undertaken by public institutions should be careful to address place-based and demographic diversity. This is particularly important in rural contexts, where geography, demography, and socioeconomic dynamics are strongly influenced by place-based variables.

Contact the researchers

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Further information

Read full report: Coming soon

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