Digital Divide: Millions of Americans Have Limited or No Meaningful Access to the Internet[1]

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Congress and federal agencies are considering how to make access to information easier for households in the United States by facilitating communication through email, hyperlinks, and important notices provided on the internet. It is essential that the tens of millions of people in America who are *not* connected digitally also be protected.

- Over *40 million Americans* have **no internet subscription** in their homes.[2]
- These 40 million people include 11 million American households (9%) **without any type of computing device** (smartphone, laptop, tablet, computer), *and*
- The 9.5 million households (8%) with **only smartphones,**
- For a total of **17% of households** (more than 20 million) without internet subscriptions.[3]

Low-Income Households. Among those households with an annual income below $20,000, a full *40%* --more than *double* the national average and representing **7 million households** -- have *no* internet subscription through any mechanism. In comparison, only 5% of families earning more than $75,000 are without internet subscriptions.[4]

Elders. Older consumers and people of color are also more likely to have limited or no internet access. Eight and a half million people over age 65 – almost 18% of all elders – have no computer in their households, compared with only 4% of working people (age 18-64), and almost 4 million older consumers (8%) have a computer without an internet subscription. This means that **12.4 million older consumers, more than 25% of all seniors,** are without internet access.

People of Color. Meanwhile, about 10% each of Black and Hispanic Americans, **more than 10 million people, have no internet subscription,** while more than 13% of American Indians and Alaska Natives (about 350,000 people) are without one. Among white families, only 6% lack internet.[5]

Rural Families. Additionally, the digital divide between urban and rural America remains an enduring one. **Less than two thirds of Americans in rural areas** have access to broadband internet at home.[6] People in rural areas are also less likely to live near public wi-fi, such as internet cafes or public libraries, which would allow them online access.

Limitations of Smartphones. A further problem is the dependence by some families who lack home internet subscriptions on smartphones. Smartphones typically have strict data limits and the less expensive cell phones often used by low-income families often do not work well for even basic online tasks.[7]

- **A third of families below the poverty line who access the internet rely solely on smartphones to do so,** and
- Three in ten of those families hit the limits of their data plans in the last year, meaning that they either had to pay more or were often unable to access the internet.[8]

The average smartphone user (who usually also has a home internet subscription) uses about 5GB of data per month, and those who rely on a smartphone for all of their internet access, or who have to share a cellular data plan among all members of the household, likely use much more.[9]

- One in five poor families relying on smartphones shares a phone among too many people for everyone to be able to do all they need to do online – another obstacle to clear, private email communication with creditors, collectors, and others.[10]
- **Even among households of all income levels, a full 11% lack any internet subscription other than a cellular data plan.[11]**

Families that rely solely on smartphones for internet access are also more likely to be black or Hispanic.[12] People without home computers cannot print important documents, forcing them to keep important files on their phones, which can be lost through deletion or theft of a phone, and difficult to read on small screens.

Endnotes

1. Not all data sources cited here use the same measurements – some use absolute number of people, while others use number of households, to measure internet subscriptions. Each data source gives a different necessary piece of the picture on American connectivity, so unfortunately, we cannot rely on just one measurement. "Internet subscription" here and subsequently means a broadband subscription connected to a home address, not internet access available through cellular data, mobile hotspots, or public internet like a library, café, etc.
2. Census Bureau American Community Survey, Types of Internet Subscriptions by Selected Characteristics (2017).
3. Census ACS, Types of Computers and Internet Subscriptions (2017).
4. *Id*.
5. Census ACS, Types of Internet Subscriptions by Selected Characteristics.
6. Pew Research Center, "Digital gap between rural and nonrural America persists" (2019).
7. Miller, G.E., "The Cheapest Data Plans for Mobile Phones," 20Something Finance (2019), (Some limited-data plans charge by the gigabyte, discouraging low-income families from too much internet use, while prepaid limited-data plans range from $25 to $65, with varying data caps.)
8. Rideout, V. J. & Katz, V.S. *Opportunity for all? Technology and learning in lower-income families*, The Joan Ganz Cooney Center (2016) at 5.
9. Shehey, Kelsey, "Cell Phone Plans: How Much Data Do You Really Need?" NerdWallet (2016).
10. Rideout & Katz at 5.
11. Census ACS, Types of Computers and Internet Subscriptions.
12. Ryan, Camille, *Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2016*, American Community Surveys ACS-39 (2018) at 2.

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