



Research Brief

Internet Access for Low-Income Families

Question: How do students and low-income families access the Internet?

In a Nutshell

A digital divide exists in American society between higher-income and lower-income households. Once Internet access is gained, the patterns of use are similar. Low-income families are more likely to access the Internet through their cell-phone, which limits the type of online activity that can occur. Higher-income families are more likely to have broadband at home and to use the Internet for a greater variety of activities.

Free or low-cost Internet access is available in many sites including public libraries, schools, community centers, coffee shops and fast-food restaurants.

Digital Divide:

A “digital divide” exists in American society. A recent report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2010) found distinct differences between those who live in higher-income households and those in lower-income households. The differences were in both access and use of the Internet.

	<\$30,000	\$30,000 - \$49,999	\$50,000 - \$74,999	\$75,000 +
Broadband at home	40%	64%	79%	87%
Use Internet	57%	80%	86%	95%
Own cellphone	75%	90%	93%	95%

From: Jansen, J. (2010). The Better-Off Online, Pew Research Center Internet & American Life Project. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1809/internet-usage-higher-income-americans>

The study also found that:

- 79% of those living in households earning \$75,000 or more own desktop computers, compared with 55% of those in less well-off homes;

- 79% of those living in higher-income household own laptops, compared with 47% of those in less well-off homes;
- 70% of those in higher-income households own iPods or other MP3 players, compared with 42% of those in less well-off homes
- Higher-income households are more likely to get news on the Internet, use the Internet to make purchases, research products, and search for information.

Further, “Internet users in higher-income households are more likely than others to go online multiple times a day, both at home and at work. Some 86% of Internet users in higher-income households go online daily, compared with 54% in the lowest income category.”

Another recent Pew Internet study (Washington, 2011) found that Latinos and African-Americans are more likely than the general population to access the Internet by cellular phone. The study, however, reports that the reliance on the cellphone for Internet access contributes to a different kind of digital divide. For example, while the cellphone can access the Internet, it is difficult to complete a job application or other forms and activities on the phone. A greater percentage of Caucasians have broadband access at home and own a desktop or laptop computer than do Latinos or African-Americans.

Internet and College Access

The Internet has become an essential tool for fully participating in the educational system. Beyond day-to-day learning activities at school the Internet has become a tool for gathering information about college and for completing applications and financial aid forms. Families with limited access to the Internet often find themselves at a disadvantage compared to more online families. The Internet has become a marketing tool for admission and college websites are used to navigate financial aid, housing and registration.

Accessing the Internet

For those without ready access to the Internet there are several free or low-cost alternatives. They include the following options.

Public Libraries – Virtually every public library in the country has computers that the public can use to access the Internet. In most cases you must be a resident of the community where the library is located and there may be limitations on how long you can be online and on the content you may access.

Schools – Public schools provide access to the Internet for students from low-income families. Virtually all schools provide some access during the school day in either computer labs, individual classrooms, or in the media center. Because of the importance of Internet access for students, many schools have begun to extend the hours when computers are accessible to students. For example, several high schools in



Oregon open their labs and media centers in the evening so that students can access technology and complete assignments that are part of their classes.

Community Centers – Many school districts and communities have community or recreational centers that provide some access to the Internet. Many locations include computers, or wi-fi access that can be used by people participating in activities at the centers.

Boys and Girls Clubs, the Y (YMCA) and Churches – Many community-based clubs and churches often sponsor teen centers and other activities for teens. Frequently the centers include access to computers and the Internet. Specific activities vary among sites.

Coffee Shops and Fast Food Restaurants – Most coffee shops and many fast-food restaurants provide free wi-fi Internet access. Individuals will need their own computer or Internet enabled cell phone to access the network.

Summary

As our society has become more digitally connected access to the Internet is important for students' learning and for ready access to the information and resources necessary to support that learning. The Internet has become an essential tool for e-commerce, conducting research, interacting with government, and accessing resources for college. There continues to be a digital divide among families based on income but there are places that students and their families can access the Internet for little or no cost.

Online Resources:

Digital Divide Is a Matter of Income (2010) – This report from the Pew Research Center and the Pew Internet and American Life Project found a correlation between income and Internet activities.

www.pewinternet.org/Media-Mentions/2010/Digital-Divide-Is-a-Matter-of-Income.aspx

For Minorities, new 'Digital Divide' Seen – This report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project reports recent data about the digital divide based on race and ethnicity.

<http://www.pewinternet.org/Media-Mentions/2011/For-minorities-new-digital-divide-seen.aspx>

The Internet and College Access: Challenges for Low-Income Students – This article by Kristan Venegas discusses how lack of access to the Internet can be a significant barrier to college for low-income students.

www.aft.org/pdfs/highered/academic/january07/Venegas.pdf



The Essential Internet: Digital Exclusion in Low-Income American Communities

– This study from the Oxford Internet Institute reports the findings from a 2010 examination of the impact of lack of Internet access on low-income families.

www.psocommons.org/policyandinternet/vol2/iss2/art7/

National Public Radio Survey on Technology – NPR conducted a survey to gather data about the use of technology among the American public. The results are reported at this site.

<http://www.npr.org/programs/specials/poll/technology/>

Home Internet Use in Low-Income Families – This report sponsored by the National Science Foundation provides some data about Internet use among low-income families.

<http://www2002.org/CDROM/alternate/649/>

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