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Millions Of Americans Are Still Missing Out On Broadband Access And Leaving Money On The Table—Here's Why

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Across the country, rural households and low-wage workers are stuck with slow or no internet while the rest of the world moves forward with high-speed broadband—a problem that has ramifications more dire than not being able to stream the latest Netflix show.

For households that either couldn't afford broadband or didn't have access to it because of where they lived, managing life during stay-home orders was even more challenging. And those problems persist today.

Currently, some 42 million Americans have no access to broadband, according to Broadband Now, a data technology company.

The FCC defines broadband as having download speeds of a minimum of 25 megabits per second (or Mbps) and upload speeds of at least 3 Mbps. Broadband technology can include everything from WiFi and satellite to fiber-optic cables.

The Biden administration has launched programs that seek to close the broadband access gap by reducing monthly bills—but they've had low adoption rates, while some rural and tribal communities are still waiting for broadband to arrive in their areas.

Lack of Broadband Shuts Workers Out of Jobs

People like Michael McMaster, who live in rural areas without high-speed internet access, depend on local coffee shops and other public facilities with high-speed internet to fill in the gap. McMaster operated his video production company out of his 90-acre citrus farm for 25 years and only got broadband less than two years ago—an option he never thought was possible in rural California. As technology evolved, he found himself struggling to keep up with slow internet speeds. (Disclosure: McMaster is a friend of mine.)

When he first heard President Barack Obama talk about bringing the internet to rural communities through the [ConnectHome program](#) back in 2015, he was skeptical because he says that “rural areas are forgotten areas.”

Fast forward five years and a 5G tower was finally installed in nearby Porterville, “a doorway to the rest of the world,” he calls the new high-speed internet access.

“Before they installed the 5G tower, we were using a really expensive Wi-Fi jetpack that was barely a step above dial-up,” McMaster says. “And when I needed to download big files for a job, I had to drive 15 miles to Starbucks and use their internet. It was miserable.”

Not only is the internet much faster, but it's cheaper, too. He reduced his monthly internet bill from \$90 per month with the Verizon jetpack to just \$40 per month through AT&T. He's also saving money by not having to pay for gas—or coffee—to drive to Starbucks.

Bob Rogers, CEO of Oii.ai, a data science company specializing in supply chain modeling, says he wouldn't consider hiring a remote employee who doesn't have access to broadband internet.

“I would ask potential candidates if they have reliable access to internet solutions because, without it, you simply can't succeed at remote work,” Rogers says.

Beyond work, online healthcare, education, and conveniences like online shopping work best—and sometimes only—with broadband. During the pandemic, these tasks became necessities for many.

Harold Feld, senior vice president at Public Knowledge, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit public interest group that advocates for affordable communication tools, says that people's lives and livelihoods may suffer without broadband.

“You can't run a garage and repair a car without broadband. You can't apply for a job or do a Zoom interview or telehealth call. People with pacemakers or other medical devices can't connect to the internet and monitor their health in real-time,” Feld says. “This is a problem that goes beyond not having a luxury.”

Millions Of People Qualify For Reduced Internet Costs, But Aren't Signing Up

Broadband has eluded low-income and rural households for one main reason: money. It's a thorn for consumers and [internet service providers](#) (ISPs) alike.

For many consumers, it's simply too expensive—and costs can vary wildly by city or even neighborhood. Not only that, people blocks away from each other may be paying the same amount for lesser service with the same ISP, as reported by The Markup.

For ISPs, the challenge is justifying the capital investment to establish rural broadband infrastructure in low-density areas with fewer subscribers.

While the federal government poured billions into expanding internet access to low-income and rural households, there are still road bumps to achieving connectivity.

The 2021 Infrastructure Investment Bill and American Jobs Act (IIJA) earmarked \$65 billion to expand broadband access. It also includes the [Affordable Connectivity Program \(ACP\)](#), which gives eligible households a \$30 per month discount on their internet subscription (or \$75 per month for households on tribal lands), as well as a one-time discount of up to \$100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet.

While 51.6 million households are eligible for ACP assistance, just 13 million households are enrolled in the program, according to Education Superhighway, a nonprofit organization that connects classrooms with high-speed internet.

A recent survey by Education Superhighway found that the greatest hurdle for ACP enrollment is awareness: an astonishing 75% of people in many communities don't know this program exists.

On a national level, the adoption rate is 25%, but the rate of adoption fluctuates sharply by state. In North Dakota, just 7% of eligible households have signed up for ACP assistance; whereas 35% of Ohio residents from eligible households are enrolled.

States With Fewest People Enrolled In The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)

State	Number of Eligible Households	% of Eligible Households Enrolled in ACP
North Dakota	114,650	7%
Idaho	277,968	9%
South Dakota	129,617	10%
Alaska	96,935	12%

Source: Education Superhighway

States With The Most People Enrolled In The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)

State	Number of Eligible Households	% of Eligible Households Enrolled in ACP
Ohio	1,984,218	35%
Louisiana	904,157	34%
Kentucky	846,290	33%
North Carolina	1,741,427	31%

Source: Education Superhighway

How to Apply For Broadband Assistance

If your income is at or below 200% of the [2022 federal poverty guideline](#), you're eligible for the ACP. For example, a family of four with an annual income of up to \$55,500/27,750 per year would qualify.

You may also qualify if you got a Federal Pell Grant during the current award year, or if you already enrolled in programs like SNAP, Medicaid, the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program (Section 8 Vouchers), or project-based rental assistance (PBRA).

There are two main steps to applying, but different regions may have other rules, so be sure to check with your local ISP:

You can apply online at [AffordableConnectivity.gov](https://www.AffordableConnectivity.gov) or print an application and send it via mail.

Next, let your ISP know you wish to enroll in the ACP program and have the discount applied to your monthly bill.

Monopolies Drive Up The Price of Internet Service

Those who don't qualify for assistance must still contend with high internet prices driven by monopolies that face little competition.

More than 200 million Americans only have a choice between two ISPs, according to a White House fact sheet. In these markets, consumers may pay up to five times more than those living in areas with more options for ISPs.

“If you're lucky enough to live in an area where you have multiple providers, you can get some competition, which can mean better prices and better service,” Feld says. “But most people aren't that lucky.”

The Future of Broadband for Consumers

With so much at stake for millions of Americans, the Biden Administration is investing billions in expanding broadband service. Here are some efforts being made to narrow the digital divide:

The [High-Speed Internet for All](#) initiative is investing \$48 billion to expand broadband infrastructure and related job training on a nationwide basis.

Tribal lands have been significantly underserved in receiving broadband access, and the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP) is a major step toward bridging the gap. The TBCP received \$1.35 billion in funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to grow broadband availability and digital skills training in tribal lands across 15 states.

More than \$25 billion from the American Rescue Plan will go toward three funds to expand broadband access to underserved communities.

Lifeline is another federal program that provides financial assistance for monthly phone or internet service. Lifeline is available per household—not per person—and only one service may be chosen (either phone or internet).

To be eligible for the Lifeline program, your income must be at or below 135% of the federal poverty guideline (in 2022, that's \$18,347 for a single-person household) or you should be already enrolled in a federal assistance program, like Medicaid, [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#), or certain Tribal Programs. Applicants can check their eligibility and apply online at lifelinesupport.org.

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