The Connectivity Gap: The Internet Is Still Out of Reach for Many Low-Income Renters

Having a home computer and Internet access is increasingly important for individual and family well-being and self-sufficiency. The availability of Internet access is associated with greater student achievement,[1] improved health outcomes,[2] and less social isolation,[3] as well as with more robust economic growth.[4] Connecting to the Internet is increasingly the way people learn, get health care information, share news, pay bills, and interact with government. Most Americans say that being online is essential for "job-related or other reasons."[5] However, low-income individuals and families—and particularly very low-income renters—are far less likely than others to have Internet access or a computer at home. The persistent digital divide in the U.S. exacerbates economic inequality and risks leaving low-income individuals and families further behind.[6]

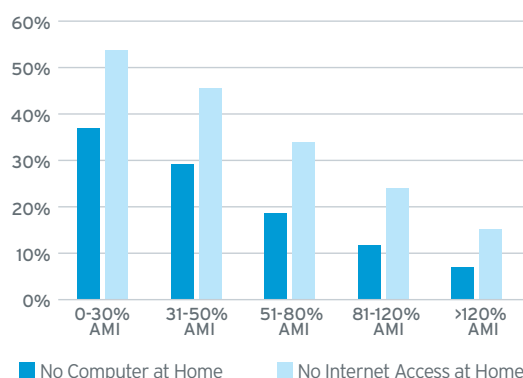## Low-Income Renters are Much Less Likely than Other Households to Have Home Computer or Internet Access

In 2013, 84 percent of U.S. households had a computer at home and 74 percent had home access to the Internet.[7,8] But there are significant variations across income groups, and low-income renters—including many served by federal housing programs—are among the least likely to have access to technology in their homes.

Thirty-seven percent of extremely low-income renters (with incomes below 30 percent of area median income) do not have a computer at home and 54 percent do not have home Internet access (Figure 1). Among renters with incomes between 31 and 50 percent of area median income (AMI), 29 percent have no home computer and 46 percent have no home Internet access. The likelihood of having access increases as households move up the income scale.

Very Low-Income Renters are Somewhat More Likely to Rely on a Smartphone Rather than a Laptop or Desktop Computer

While smartphones are useful for some Internet applications, a home laptop or desktop computer can be necessary for some important tasks, including accessing health information or doing schoolwork.

Source: 2013 American Community Survey 1-year PUMS file

Eleven percent of very low-income renter households (with incomes below 50 percent of AMI) rely solely on a smartphone or other handheld device for their at-home computer access, compared to nine percent of all renters (Figure 2). Higher-income renters are much more likely to have a desktop or laptop at home—70 percent of all renters compared to 55 percent of very low-income renters.

◀ **FIGURE 1**

Share of Renters with No Computer and No Internet Access at Home by Income, 2013

Only Half of Very Low-Income Renters Have Home Internet Access

Among very low-income renters with home Internet access, the most common type of access is via a cable modem. Mobile broadband access is the second most common mode of home Internet access. However, the availability and speed of different Internet connections vary substantially around the country.[9]

Not only is having access to home Internet important, but having sufficient speed to use online education and training programs like streaming course lectures or to maintain a video connection with a health care provider is equally as important.

Very Low-Income Senior and Disabled Renters are Unlikely to Have Home Computer or Internet Access

Nearly 70 percent of very low-income senior renters do not have a computer and 74 percent do not have home Internet access. Very low-income disabled renters also lack access; more than half have no computer of any kind and about two-thirds do not have access to the Internet in their homes. A lack of access to technology can limit opportunities for seniors and disabled persons to stay connected to friends and families and precludes them from accessing Internet-based health care options.

Very low-income renters with children are more likely than other low-income renters to have both a home computer and home Internet access.

Part of the reason households with children are more connected is because of the focus on access and the integration of the Internet into education. For very low-income seniors and disabled renters, illustrating the benefit of home Internet access has been more of a challenge. However, as federal benefit programs like Social Security move online, Internet access will become critical for older adults and disabled persons.
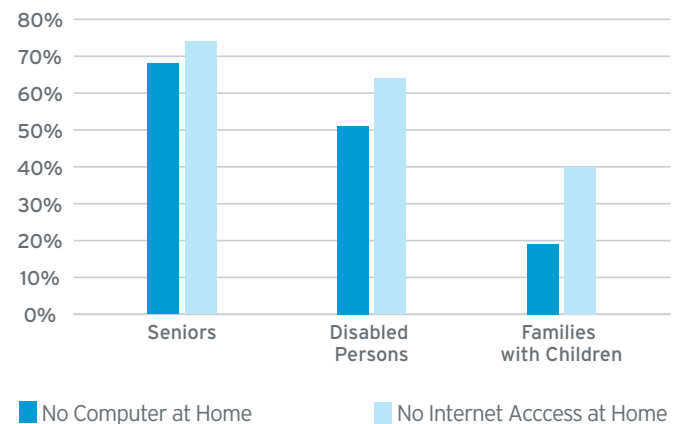
FIGURE 2

Computer and Internet Access Type

	SHARE OF HOUSEHOLDS	
	VERY LOW-INCOME RENTERS	ALL RENTERS
TYPE OF COMPUTER		
Smartphone only, no computer	11%	9%
Computer only, no smartphone	19%	16%
Both computer and smartphone	37%	53%
Neither computer nor smartphone	34%	22%
TYPE OF INTERNET ACCESS[a]		
Mobile broadband	20%	29%
DSL	12%	15%
Cable modem	30%	40%
Fiber optic	4%	6%
Other	4%	4%
No Internet access	50%	35%

[a]Numbers sum to more than 100 because households may have more than one source of home Internet access.

Source: 2013 American Community Survey 1-year PUMS file

FIGURE 3

Very Low-Income Renter with No Computer and No Internet Access at Home, 2013

Source: 2013 American Community Survey 1-year PUMS file

ENDOTES

1. Darling-Hammond, Linda, Molly B. Zielezinski and Shelley Goldman. 2014. *Using Technology to Support At-Risk Students' Learning*. Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. Online https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/publications/pubs/1241.

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3. Barbarotta, Linda. 2014. "Fighting isolation with technology," *LeadingAge Magazine* July/August. Online http://www.leadingage.org/Fighting_Isolation_With_Technology_V4N4.aspx.

4. Kolko, Jed. 2010. *Does Broadband Boost Local Economic Development?* Public Policy Institute of California. Online http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_110JKR.pdf.

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6. Crow, David. 2014. Digital divide exacerbates US inequality. *Financial Times*. October 28. Online http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/b75d095a-5d76-11e4-9753-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3Q97suiF0.

7. All data in this report were tabulated from the 2013 American Community Survey 1-year public use microdata sample (PUMS) file.

8. For this report, "computers" include desktops, laptops, notebooks, and smartphones as well as other handheld computers. Internet access includes wireless broadband, dialup, DSL, fiber optic, cable model and satellite Internet services.

9. NTIA. 2013. *U.S. Broadband Availability: June 2010-June 2012*. May. Online http://www.ntia.doc.gov/files/ntia/publications/usbb_avail_report_05102013.pdf.