

WIRED LESS

Disconnected in Urban America

INTRODUCTION



“The digital divide means that there are significant numbers of people... who not only don’t have access to technology — to the Internet, to computers — but they don’t have the skills to be able to use them effectively.”

**KAREN
WADE**

For many Americans living in urban areas, high-speed Internet access remains elusive.

Much discussion about broadband expansion in the United States focuses on the rural areas that still lack this essential infrastructure. As we documented in our earlier report, *Five Days on the Digital Dirt Road*, residents in rural areas are struggling to live and work without high-speed Internet.

But this rural snapshot only shows a part of the picture of the digital divide in America. Even in some of our most tech-savvy wired cities, millions of people — particularly low-income households, immigrant populations and senior citizens — do not have high-speed Internet in their homes or businesses.

Barriers to Access

For many urban residents, high-speed Internet services, which typically cost \$40 to \$60 per month, are simply too pricey. Compounding the Internet access problem, many people are unable to afford a computer or lack the skills to navigate the Web.

And just like their rural counterparts, some urban areas have been redlined by Internet service providers that refuse to offer service to communities that may not provide as large a financial return.

Many urban residents are locked out, unable to participate fully in the digital era. They’re prevented from applying for jobs, telecommuting, taking online classes or even finishing their homework. It’s becoming increasingly clear that Internet connectivity is key to a sound economy and could assist those hit hardest by the economic downturn.

Additionally, the Internet has revolutionized the way everyday people can mobilize, organize and work for social change. It allows people — at least those fortunate enough to have a high-speed connection — to create media with their own voices.

From Coast to Coast

To further understand how the digital divide is affecting our urban areas, Free Press traveled to Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. We interviewed dozens of people trying to raise families, go to school, and start businesses using antiquated dial-up service or relying on libraries or community centers for a high-speed connection.

In Washington, where BlackBerries are everywhere, only 52 percent of homes are connected to broadband. In total, more than 240,000 D.C.

residents are not connected to the Internet at home, and nearly 160,000 have no Internet access at all.

While there are no specific numbers that accurately capture the digital divide in Los Angeles, nearly 16 million people across California do not have high-speed Internet, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The stories from both coasts are a testament to why our leaders in Washington should make bridging the digital divide a national priority.

OFFLINE IN L.A.



“Not having access means not being informed. And when you’re not informed, you can’t make good decisions.”

**ALBERT
TOVAR**

Northeast of Los Angeles, the town of Azusa is nestled against the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. Most of the once-fertile citrus groves have been replaced by small houses that can weather the sun, and the letter “A” has been etched on the face of one hill as the town’s tattoo.

A small crowd begins to gather as the clock nears 10 a.m., when the Azusa Public Library opens its doors. Mothers with strollers join young men who park their work trucks near the curb and older folks who seem to know one another well. The group is congenial at first, but when the doors are unlocked, there’s a dash inside.

The rush isn’t for the latest *Harry Potter* installment. There are only 13 public computers at the library, and dozens of people who need to use the Internet. Missing an available computer can mean waiting at the library for several hours, and time is in scarce supply for most people trying to balance their jobs with raising children and getting online. Even when a computer is secured, the time restrictions make doing any long activity, such as online classes, impossible.

With high-speed Internet – or broadband – costing \$40 to \$60 per month, many people in Azusa can’t afford the connection or a computer. Azusa, with its primarily Latino population, has a poverty rate of 18 percent, higher than the state average.

Azusa Public Library Director Albert Tovar says the scene is the same every day as people have come to rely on the library’s Internet connection to perform the necessary functions of life – from looking for jobs to e-mailing distant relatives to researching a city council measure.

A Troubling Divide

Albert is deeply committed to the library’s mantra, “Knowledge is power.” It comes as no surprise, then, that he finds the digital divide deeply troubling.

“Not having access means not being informed,” Albert says. “And when you’re not informed, you can’t make good decisions.”

Whether because people can’t afford a computer or high-speed Internet, don’t have the training and skills to navigate the Web, or have no broadband options in their community, the digital divide – the gap between the Internet haves and have-nots – is glaring. According to the Census Bureau, more than 16 million Californians lack a high-speed connection.

The digital divide especially affects communities of color. Nationwide, only 35 percent of Hispanic urban homes are connected to broadband, compared to 60 percent of urban non-Hispanic white households.

Then there are the kids. Albert says the digital divide is primarily harming children who are being left behind because their educational opportunities are stifled without the Internet.

“They may have [Internet] access in the schools, but what happens in the summer?” Albert says. “What happens after school? What happens when they need a quick answer to ‘Who was the 10th president of the United States?’ They should be able to have that right to go to the computer and get that information anytime they want it.”

Lower Grades without a Log-on



In downtown Los Angeles, 14-year-old Lily Huerta wants to be a veterinarian. Or maybe a doctor. Or even a lawyer. She says she’ll decide later, when she’s older.

But right now, Lily is struggling just to do her homework. Her family can’t afford Internet access at home, and can only get online for small chunks of time at a local community center – the All People’s Christian Center in Los Angeles.

“A lot of kids get good grades because of the research they do on the Internet,” Lily says. “For me, I might get a lower grade because I don’t have Internet access at home. So I can’t get the good grades that I want to achieve and make my parents proud of me.”

Lily says she lives in a dangerous neighborhood. Her mother doesn’t want Lily on the streets at night, hopping from the library to friends’ houses to use the Internet. Yet paying for a high-speed connection is simply out of the question for the Huerta family.

Working Twice as Hard

A few miles away, Antonio Reyes and Julian Rosas grew up together in California’s San Fernando Valley. Now 17 and seniors in high school, the two friends are beginning to fill out college applications. Antonio wants to be a pediatrician, while Julian is considering computer engineering.

But Antonio has one distinct advantage: He has high-speed Internet access at home. Julian – whose family can’t afford a connection – can only get online at school, when one of his working parents can drive him to the library, or at a local youth center, the Youth Speak! Collective (a nonprofit organization that works to empower “at-risk” youth).

“A lot of kids get good grades because of the research they do on the Internet. For me, I might get a lower grade because I don’t have Internet access at home.”

**LILY
HUERTA**

Restricted Internet access makes doing homework and applying for colleges especially difficult for Julian. “I can’t go online anytime I want,” he says. “I have to work twice as hard just to turn something in.”

The Great Equalizer

Back at the library, Albert Tovar says eliminating the barriers to Internet access is urgent so that Lily and Julian can have the same opportunities as Antonio and millions of other kids across the nation.

“It’s something that we have to do, because that [the Internet] is the great equalizer,” he says. “Once we all have equal access and the same access. It doesn’t matter what your background or economic status is when you enter a library, and we have to reach that with the Internet – where everybody has access.”

A CONNECTION CHANGES FAMILY'S WORLD



“With all these media we have, and all this access... we should have an easier and better future than when I was a little girl, you know?”

**ROSY
QUINTERO**

Five-year-old Memphis Quintero wanted to show off. In a family of six children, Memphis' precocious performances outshine even her cuddly younger twin sisters. But instead of flaunting her reading talents or new dance moves, Memphis had something else to parade – the list of Web sites she visits when she has her turn on the computer.

One of her favorite sites is Zwinky.com, where she can create 3-D images of herself and her family. But mostly, she can be found trolling BrainPOP.com. “BrainPop has a lot of stuff and you can learn and they have videos,” she says. “I watched a show about the continents.”

Memphis' exuberance is understandable. Until six months ago, she could barely get online, as her family struggled with slow dial-up that would never load the videos she loves. On a low-income budget, the Quinteros couldn't afford high-speed Internet. But thanks to a grant through a local community organization, the Little Tokyo Service Center, they now have a broadband connection.

The family's one laptop rarely leaves the kitchen table in their small Los Angeles apartment, where 14-year-old Christian does his homework and mom Rosy stays connected to family and friends abroad. It's not an overstatement to say that broadband has changed the Quinteros' world. With almost every aspect of life demanding a high-speed connection, the family is finally able to fully participate.

“It's been easier because I can spend more time doing my homework instead of waiting for the page to load,” Christian says.

Overcoming Digital Illiteracy

Dad Derek had been worried about his children's education and future when they were limited to dial-up. “If you don't have access to the Internet, you're missing a giant portion of the world and it makes it hard to interact with the world,” he says.

“Knowing how to get on the Internet and how to gather the information is essential – especially for young children. If they don't have computer literacy as they get into the higher grades and progress into college, they're so much more behind the children who have access.”

A World of Bits and Bytes

Derek is relieved that his children are no longer being left behind, and he thinks that someday soon, in a reversal of roles, they'll be teaching him about new online innovations.

"The world is swiftly becoming a world of bits and bytes," he says. "As it becomes more and more digital, our children need to be more digital. One day, I'll need Christian to help me get online, either through a PDA or Blackberry or chokecherry or whatever they got."

It's not just the kids of the Quintero family that are benefiting from broadband. Rosy has long been separated from her family in Mexico, and now she can finally communicate with them in ways that make them feel closer than ever.

"I can post videos of my children," she says. "My mom can see my children. I don't know how to express it. It makes me feel really happy because they're not here and it's not easy for them to come and visit. They can see my family."

DESPERATELY NEEDING THE NET IN EL MONTE



“It’s hard to do a lot of things without the Internet. Other people don’t have that struggle because they have Internet. But the people who can’t afford it have that kind of struggle.”

**MICHAEL
IBARRA**

The wooden sign in Margaret Ibarra’s kitchen, “Mom’s Diner – Open 24 Hours,” speaks the truth: If a midnight sandwich-and-chat is in order, Margaret is there, sleepy but ready to console.

She’s taken care of her grandson Michael since he started to walk. Now nearly 12 years old, Michael and Margaret have a close bond.

“We watch TV, and we discuss a lot of politics,” Margaret says. She’s been living in the same house in El Monte, Calif., for decades, watching the houses sprout up around her like dandelions.

She’s fiercely proud of Michael and the scholarship he won to attend a private school.

“He was born with a good brain,” she says, patting Michael’s head before he ducks and smoothes down his chin-length hair. She embarrasses him again: “He’s beginning to look at girls recently. He’s at that age.”

Asked if that’s true, Michael looks at his feet and shrugs coolly. “Sorta,” he says.

But because Margaret can’t afford high-speed Internet access on her limited income, Michael struggles daily to keep up with his classmates who can zip through research reports at home.

Desperately Needing the Internet

“I know he needs [the Internet] desperately,” Margaret says. “Most of his homework comes through the network. And I haven’t got it. Sometimes he gets angry because he’s got to go to the neighbors to borrow it or to the library if there’s room.”

When Michael was assigned a science project on astronomy, he tried to squeeze in time to do research at school. “Sometimes I look up some information in study hall, but we don’t have very much time in study hall, only 45 minutes,” he says.

Margaret says something that others take for granted – Internet access – is taking an emotional toll on her family.

“He cries sometimes,” she says. “He says, ‘Why do I have to go to the neighbors? Why can’t we get the network?’ ”

Trading Shoes for Internet

Michael spreads his workbooks across the plastic-covered kitchen table next to a dish of round peppermint candies and plump brown bananas. His pencil pauses over a troublesome word problem: _____ is to danger as _____ is to pledge. Margaret offers little assistance, saying she's not "book smart."

"But she's streetwise," Michael says.

Michael's been studying Greek gods in school, and has become particularly fond of Hades, "because he's the god of the Underworld." He wants to look up more information on the Web.

"It's hard to do a lot of things without the Internet," he says. "Other people don't have that struggle because they have Internet. But the people who can't afford it have that kind of struggle."

In order to pay for expensive Internet service on Margaret's \$1,400-a-month income, the Ibarras would have to shave off other expenses.

"Well, we couldn't eat in a good restaurant when he wants to," she says. "We go to Applebee's sometimes; we treat ourselves. Or he gets good shoes. He doesn't care about the clothes, but the shoes he likes to look like everybody else. So he'd have to give up cheaper shoes. Do you think you could do that?"

Michael clicks his red high-tops together. "I don't know," he says, and they both laugh. They'd do almost anything to get the Internet. But realistically, foregoing a pair of shoes won't get them there.

D.C. KIDS WANT INTERNET



“Having Internet access would be a God-given gift and I would be happy because for once, I would have Internet access and I could do more homework and I could do a lot of stuff.”

**ALEXIS
BOYCE**

Eight-year-old Brenna Ratliff says she’s shy, although five minutes talking to her is like making an instant best friend who wants to confide everything. Math is her favorite subject because it’s not boring, she wouldn’t mind being an actress, and she’s got a very specific request for President Barack Obama:

“We could use change,” she says. “Could he pick up all of these thugs on the street and put them in jail?”

Brenna attends the Arts and Technology Academy Public Charter School (ATA) in Ward 7 in Northeast Washington, D.C. For the 98 percent African-American and 97 percent low-income student body, ATA has become a beacon in the community. The school allows children to explore performing, visual and media arts using modern technology.

But when the bell rings at the end of the day, Brenna’s brush with the digital world ends. Like many of the students at ATA and in urban areas across the country, she does not have the Internet or a computer at home because her family can’t afford it.

Although specific data on the demographics of D.C.’s digital divide is scarce, nationally, only 31 percent of urban households with incomes below \$35,000 subscribe to broadband, compared to 73 percent of urban homes with incomes above \$35,000. In D.C., 34 percent of the more than 250,000 households have incomes below \$35,000.

And the divide also extends to race. Nationwide, only 38 percent of black urban households are connected to broadband, compared to 60 percent of urban non-Hispanic white households. Only 35 percent of Hispanic urban homes nationwide are connected to broadband.

In D.C., two-thirds of the city’s population are racial and ethnic minorities, compared to just one-third of the total U.S. population.

Missing Out

Although she’s barely grasped what high-speed Internet can offer, Brenna can sense that it’s important, and that its absence is putting her at a disadvantage.

“I feel sad that I can’t use the Internet,” she says. “I’m probably missing out on fun, games, different kinds of Web sites, going on educational stuff.”

Like a new pair of flashy shoes, Internet and computer access is becoming a point of envy for kids.

“My friend has the Internet, and she printed her reading on a paper,” Brenna recalls. “So when I came to school, she said she printed her book report on paper. I just thought about that. I just wrote it on a plain piece of paper.”

A few grades above Brenna, 11-year-old Alexis Boyce is feeling the same disadvantage. To get on the Internet after school, Alexis has to go to her aunt’s house, an inconvenience for her family.

“I think I’m missing out on Yahoo and Bebo and Barbie Girls and stuff like that,” she says. “They say it’s fun and one day I would like to try it. Having Internet access would be a God-given gift and I would be happy because for once, I would have Internet access and I could do more homework and I could do a lot of stuff.”

Parental Concern



Kimberley Bryant spends many hours of the week camped out in the public library while her children wait for a free computer. She recently had to cancel her family’s high-speed Internet service after her husband was laid off.

“When you look at our budget and have a limited income ... the rent, the food, things like that have to get done,” she says.

But Kimberley worries that her kids are paying the price. “[The Internet] is very important for our children,” she says. “We chose to make this into a technology world, but yet we’re not allowing our kids to have the access that we created.”

And while Kimberley tries to shield her children from the full reality of their financial struggles, it’s not lost on her 9-year-old daughter Erin, who says, “I feel a lot upset because we don’t have enough money to pay the Internet bill.”

Digital Divide in the Classroom

As parents deal with the after-school ramifications of the digital divide, the teachers at ATA see how the lack of Internet access at home seeps into classrooms.

“A lot of the textbooks have a lot of extension activities that deal with technology and going on the Internet using online resources,” says Ashea Williams, a special education teacher at ATA. “So we spend a lot of time at school having to go back over those different assignments and those skills because they cannot take it home to reinforce it at all.”

“[Kids] need to know how to use those resources in the real world and not having access at home and only having access for a limited period of time is not preparing them for the future.”

**ASHEA
WILLIAMS**

Ashea says it's often difficult to pry kids from the computers, because they know they have such a short window to be online.

"[Kids] need to know how to use those resources in the real world and not having access at home and only having access for a limited period of time is not preparing them for the future."

No longer even feigning shyness, Brenna has a follow-up request to President Obama: "I would send him a message about maybe sending computer access to my home, and I would be very excited."

LEFT OUT IN THE COLD IN D.C.



“It’s a negative situation when you have that many people excluded from what so many others have access to.”

**FERMAN
FLETCHER**

It’s the type of cold that makes people’s shoulders hunch up while they walk, shielding against the piercing, bitter gusts. D.C. resident Ferman Fletcher spent the day on a roof working, exposed to the weather like clothes on a line. His hands are splattered with dried paint and adhesives, and it looks like he’s given up trying to scrub them free.

A seasoned carpenter, Ferman’s real passion is music, but up until a few months ago, he never thought he could make a serious go at being a musician – that is, until he discovered the Internet.

After stumbling upon a flier for an introductory training class on computers and the Web – the Boot-Up Camp offered at the People’s Media Center – Ferman enrolled. The center is a grassroots community organization working to empower disadvantaged and disenfranchised people in the D.C. metro area through media training. Upon graduating, everyone in the class will get a free computer.

As Ferman began to get more confident exploring the Internet, a light bulb went off: The Internet could help him radically change his life.

“If I can pursue this music thing in earnest in my spare time, that’s a possibility that I won’t have to do the carpentry on much of a full-time basis.”

Already, he’s created his own Web site: “I punch that joint into any computer anywhere, anytime, and it’s my Web site. It’s thrilling.”

He’s been quickly learning how to record his own songs and spread them across the Web.

“It’s the possibilities that someone, somewhere, however remote that place may be, may see something that I have to offer and be interested in it,” he says. “You’re not just limited to the block or two that you live in, or the city, or even the state.”

Relying on Public Computers

Although Ferman is excited – “The Internet has opened me up to a whole new world” – he faces a serious limitation: He can’t afford high-speed Internet in his home. It’s simply too expensive. And while he could subscribe to cheaper dial-up service, almost all of the applications on the Internet today demand a high-speed connection.

Instead, Ferman has to rely on the community center and the public library to get online, his music dream dependent on when these places are open, and computers are available. And that’s not always easy, considering that thousands of other people across D.C. face the same situation, priced out of a service that has become a necessity.

In D.C. alone, 240,000 people do not have high-speed Internet access at home, while 160,000 have no access at all. In the shadow of the Capitol, where decisions are being made about creating a national broadband plan, the digital divide is glaring.

And the effects of having a two-tiered nation – divided between those who have high-speed Internet, and those who don't – are having dramatic repercussions in the city and across the country.

"It's a negative situation when you have that many people excluded from what so many others have access to," Ferman says. "You have segregation, basically, and it's just not fair."

The Losing Half

Young entrepreneur Sahil Sinha has been working to level the playing field in D.C., starting the organization INO Solutions and creating the Boot-Up Camp that Ferman attended. Like Ferman, Sahil sees the digital divide leaving some people out in the cold.

"The people who aren't connected are losing," Sahil says. "They don't have the same opportunities afforded to those who are connected; they don't have the same pleasures that the people who are connected have. It's a quality of life issue. On some levels, it might even be a survival issue."

With the unemployment rate reaching 9.3 percent in D.C. in January, Sahil sees the Internet as a revolutionary tool to revive local economies, create unprecedented opportunity, and give overlooked communities a voice.

"[The Internet] connects people," he says, "and that's one of the major functions of any business, being able to connect and get one product from one person to the people who need it."

Yet in order for everyone to be able to capitalize on the Internet, Sahil says the government needs to step in to create fast, affordable and universal broadband.

"It's part of our infrastructure," he says. "We need our roads, and we need our information superhighway."

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