

People in Low-Income Households Have Less Access to Internet Services – 2019 Update

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Many human services agencies and health providers rely on virtual communication with clients to provide services. In particular, in response to the current COVID-19 pandemic, agencies and service providers in many states have closed their offices to prevent transmission of the virus. To continue serving clients, many have transitioned to remote casework and to providing medical care through telehealth services. While much of this can be done over the telephone, some may require access to the internet. In these situations, access to the internet may be a factor in accessing critical benefits to support families dealing with the economic consequences of the response to the pandemic. In addition, populations with worse internet access also tend to have higher rates of chronic conditions and worse health outcomes, suggesting that they may be particularly vulnerable to the consequences from lapses in care.

This factsheet updates [previous estimates](#) of access to internet services for low-income families, as well as differences by demographic characteristics and geography. The data in this brief come from the Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey (ACS), the most recent national data available.¹

More than one in six people in poverty had no Internet access in 2019. People with higher incomes were more likely to have internet access in their households. As shown in Figure 1, 17 percent of people below 100 percent poverty lacked access to the internet.² For people at or above 400 percent poverty, only three percent lacked internet access. Likewise, people below 100 percent poverty were 28 percentage points less likely to have access to broadband than people at or above 400 percent poverty (57 percent compared to 85 percent).

Access to the internet varied by race and ethnicity.

Asians and Whites were more likely to have internet access, and have access to broadband, than other race/ethnic groups, as shown in Figure 2. Compared to other groups, American Indians and Alaska Natives were the least likely to have access to the internet (80 percent) and to broadband services (54 percent).

Figure 1. Fastest Household Internet Connection, Percent of People by Poverty Status, 2019

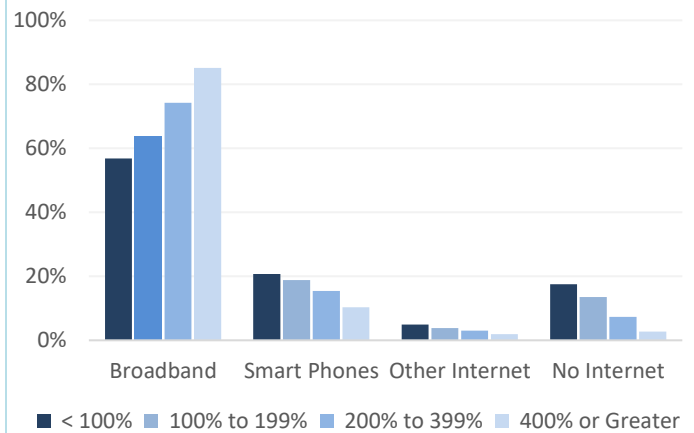
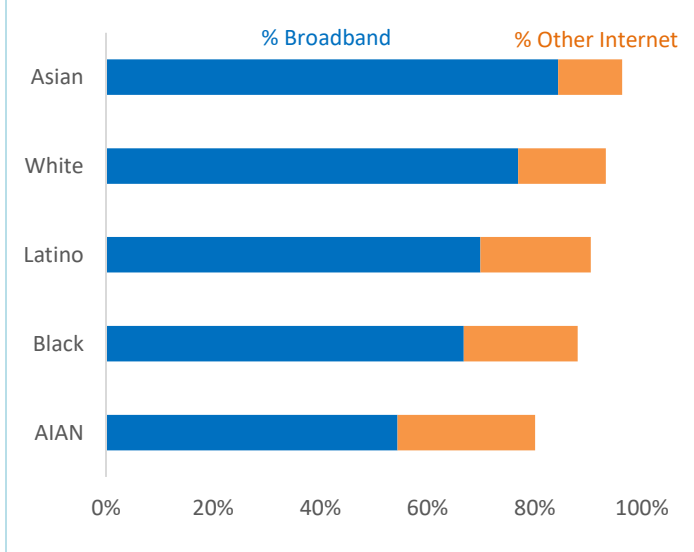


Figure 2. Household Internet Access, Percent of People by Race, 2019



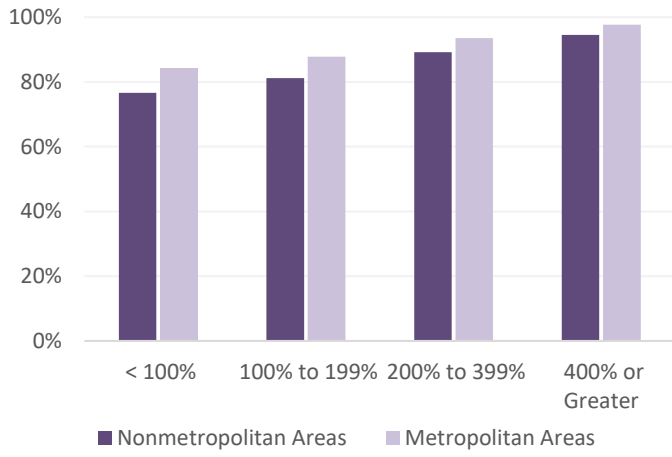
¹ Data were accessed via IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

² For this figure, broadband services are assumed to be the fastest internet connection, followed by smart phones, and then other internet services such as satellite and dial-up connections. People without internet access in their households may or may not have access outside of their households from libraries, businesses, homes of relatives, or other places.

People living in nonmetropolitan areas had less access to the internet than those in metropolitan areas. People in low-income families living in nonmetropolitan areas were less likely to have access to the internet than those in metropolitan areas. As displayed in Figure 3, people below 100 percent of poverty were seven percentage points less likely to have access to the internet than people in poverty living in metropolitan areas.

Internet access was less common among older people in poverty. The access gap between lower and higher income people was much starker for adults age 65 and older than for other age groups, as shown in Figure 4. Among adults age 65 and older (light orange bars), 60 percent of those in poverty had access to the internet, 22 percentage points lower than those between 200 and 399 percent poverty. This gap was larger than the gap across poverty status for younger age groups. When focusing just on people in poverty, older adults were 15 percentage points less likely to have access than adults age 18 to 64. This gap was more than double the gap between different age groups in the 200 to 399 percent poverty group.

Figure 3. Household Internet Access, Percent of People by Geographical Location and Poverty Status, 2019

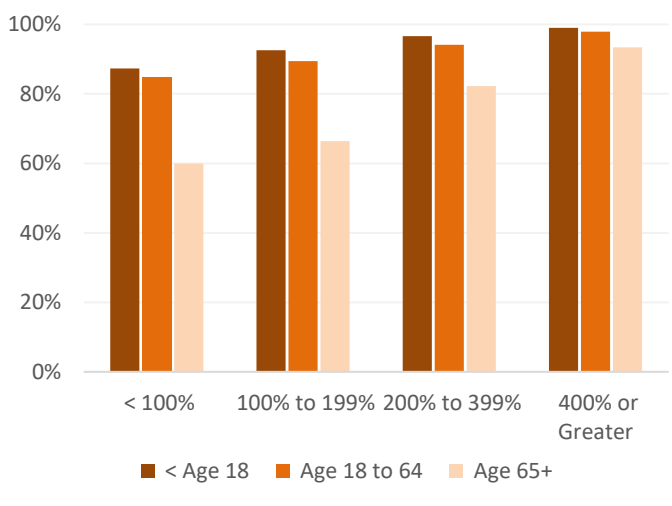


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Access to the internet among people in poverty varied across states. In all states, access to the internet among people in poverty was lower than people not in poverty. However, there were important differences across states (Figure 5). For example, the percentage of people in poverty without access to the internet was 28 percent in New Mexico compared with 10 percent in Utah, a difference of 18 percentage points.

Internet access generally improved for poor Americans between 2016 and 2019. In 2019, the percent of people in poverty without internet access dropped from 24 percent to 17 percent, and the percent with broadband access increased from 51 percent to 57 percent.

Figure 4. Household Internet Access, Percent of People by Age and Poverty Status, 2019



For detailed estimates from these tables, and more information on internet access in specific states see <https://aspe.hhs.gov/pdf-report/low-income-internet-access>.

Figure 5. Percentage of People in Poverty Who Have No Internet Access in their Households by State, 2019

