

The internet access gap is wide – and has an impact

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

The COVID-19 pandemic has shone a bright and broad light on how much the average American relies on the internet. The gap between who has access to the internet and who doesn't has been highlighted.

"The COVID-19 crisis has revealed that Americans everywhere need universal, reliable, affordable, and high-speed internet to do their jobs and participate equally in remote school learning," said Sally Jewell, former Interior Secretary under President Obama. "Thirty-nine percent of households, roughly 23 million Americans, do not have access to high-speed internet."

In a study done by Microsoft, they found the percentage to be much higher because of the way the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) calculates users, using census blocks which are not terribly accurate for a study like this.

Broadband access, or lack thereof, impacts education, healthcare, agriculture, small and large businesses, social connections, emergency/weather notifications, entertainment and support of sustainable jobs for rural, low-income urban, and tribal inhabitants. For those who can't access the internet due to lack of infrastructure and/or expense of equipment and service, they are at a distinct disadvantage in many areas of their lives. COVID-19 has exacerbated issues of

connectivity.

Telemedicine has proven to be a valuable tool in the field of healthcare during this time of pandemic and will likely change the face of medical care long after the coronavirus pandemic is tamed. For people who live a long distance from their healthcare providers or are unable to leave home due to age or infirmity, telemedicine brings the necessary contact with their doctors into their homes.

The shutdown of the schools from pre-K through college due to COVID-19 has presented a daunting challenge to educators and students. The virtual classroom has become the norm, at least temporarily. But for those teachers and students without available internet service, they are shut out of the classroom.

Some schools have prepared study packets but with no virtual in-class time with their teacher and other students, learning, socializing, and with the ability to ask questions, the education of those students lacking internet connection is greatly hampered.

Based on another study, depending on locale, it is estimated that anywhere from 40-70 percent of residents lack connectivity, illustrating how a public health crisis has brought to light a technological one. Millions of Americans lack basic broadband or simply can't afford it. Nearly one in five students between kindergarten and 12th grade do not

have computers or fast web connections, according to data compiled by the Pew Research Center in 2018. This gap disproportionately plagues low-income families and people of color. The consequences of the gap between those who have access to virtual learning and those who do not may be felt for years to come.

The Sisters School District makes sure that every student without a computer receives a Chromebook, and, if they don't have internet availability, they are provided with a personal hotspot. That program was started several years ago with a grant of \$10,000 from Hoodoo Ski Area and is now a part of the district's operating budget.

This fall, the virtual classrooms will follow a set schedule with attendance taken every day. There are two sections of three core classes that meet online twice a week in the morning. On Friday, teachers are available online to answer questions from students, provide extra help, and provide parent education on how to help their students. Last spring, when the schools first closed due to the coronavirus, a number of local Sisters businesses began offering Wi-Fi access to students who didn't have it available.

Internet connectivity provides farmers and ranchers with important information regarding weather predictions and warnings, government programs, advances in crops and cultivation, new information on plant and animal

diseases, connections to their neighbors, and the ability to do banking and other business functions, avoiding long drives into town. Some of the newer farm equipment has AI (artificial intelligence) embedded, operating entirely from a hand-held device, improving the viability of the farmers' operations.

As COVID-19 spread across the county, the supply chain from farm to consumer began to weaken. Without internet, the farmers who have the food can't easily connect with suppliers. Without internet, they can't turn on a dime to make necessary adjustments.

Government officials and farm and ranch

representatives believe that the food producers' ability to thrive is reliant on reliable access to broadband, not only for their businesses but for healthcare and their children's education. One official stated that internet access is the life blood of their operations, as it is for many businesses.

For those who can do their jobs from home, the internet acts as an economic lifeline. For those unable to go to work during the pandemic, if they could do work online but don't have internet connectivity, working from home is not a possibility. The increased use of home computers during the pandemic has created problems for some users — a story for another day.

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