

# Broadband internet isn't equally available to LA County's low-income residents, report says

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The pandemic proved how crucial it is to be connected to the internet.

Without it, students couldn't learn online, residents had a harder time making COVID-19 vaccine appointments and loved ones found it more

difficult to stay in touch.

But not everyone in Los Angeles County has [equal access](#) to the kind of high-speed broadband that makes these everyday tasks doable. And [low-income residents](#) often pay more for the same or worse service than their neighbors in higher-income areas, according to a new report from the California Community Foundation and Digital Equity L.A., a coalition of local community groups.

In particular, the report alleges that Charter Communications, which operates Spectrum, offers lower prices for higher speeds of service, along with better promotional offers, to residents in wealthy neighborhoods compared with what's offered to lower-income neighborhoods. (Spectrum partners with the Los Angeles Times on a nightly TV show.)

The report said Spectrum offers service to census tracts covering about 97% of L.A. County. That coverage area can overlap with Frontier, which offers service to about 21% of L.A. County, and AT&T, about 15%.

The report found that, on average, a resident in a neighborhood with a poverty rate of more than 30% would pay \$70 a month for Spectrum's Internet Ultra service, which has download speeds of up to 500 Mbps. A resident in a neighborhood with a [poverty rate](#) of less than 15% would typically pay \$54 per month, according to the report.

Spectrum also offered a deal for that service for \$30 a month with a guarantee that the price would not go up for two years, but the offer was available only in census tracts with poverty rates ranging from 2% to 19%, the report said. The report said researchers did not find any example of this deal in a high-poverty census tract.

The report found that comparable service from AT&T was available at 16 of the 165 residential addresses in the study for a standard price of \$65 per month for one year, and that the locations were split "about evenly" between high-poverty and low-poverty neighborhoods.

Similar service from Frontier for a standard price of \$40 a month was available at 39 of the addresses studied, with most of those located in census tracts with low poverty rates and none in high-poverty neighborhoods, according to the report.

"The reason most people don't have internet at home is because it's too expensive or what they can afford is not fast or reliable enough to make the investment worth it," said Shayna Englin, director of the California Community Foundation Digital Equity Initiative and lead author of the report. "The places where it needs to be most affordable is actually where it is least affordable."

The report's analysis was based on data collected three months ago and reconfirmed last week from the internet service providers' websites after inputting residential addresses to buy service. Researchers took screenshots of the service pricing and options.

Spectrum disputed the report as "intentionally misleading" and said the report focused on short-term promotional discounts that change regularly.

"The vast majority of customers pay the regular price," Spectrum spokesperson Dennis Johnson said in an emailed statement. "New or upgrading customers can often receive a short-term promotional discount while they evaluate the right Spectrum services for their family, before the nationally consistent regular price takes effect."

The company did not see the report before it was released and was

responding to a summary of its findings from The Times as well as a recent public presentation about the report by California Community Foundation staff.

"Spectrum Internet speeds are nationally consistent: we offer the exact same speed plans in every market we serve across 41 states," Johnson said. "And we work continually to upgrade our network and offer faster speeds—which we launch across entire communities at a time, not neighborhood by neighborhood."

Spectrum, AT&T and Frontier noted their participation in the federal Affordable Connectivity Program, which provides monthly broadband discounts to qualifying, low-income households.

Like Spectrum and Frontier, AT&T did not see the report before it was released but said it had invested nearly \$2.6 billion in the Greater L.A. region over a three-year period.

"We are committed to offering affordable, fast connectivity to consumers and businesses in Los Angeles County with standardized pricing based on the technology and service provided to the customer," AT&T spokesperson Megan Ketterer said in an emailed statement. "Low-income, high-income, rural, and urban neighborhoods all have the same pricing plan for comparable service available to them."

Access to affordable and reliable broadband is a long-term issue of equity, said Paul Ong, director of the UCLA Center for Neighborhood Knowledge, who was not involved in the [report](#).

"By the time our [young people](#) graduate from [high school](#) and either move to college or to the [labor market](#), they're severely disadvantaged because we have moved to a system where we believe access to the computer and internet and broadband is taken for granted by most

people," he said. "People who don't have that access, they are left behind."

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