Here's why you may still experience spotty cell service

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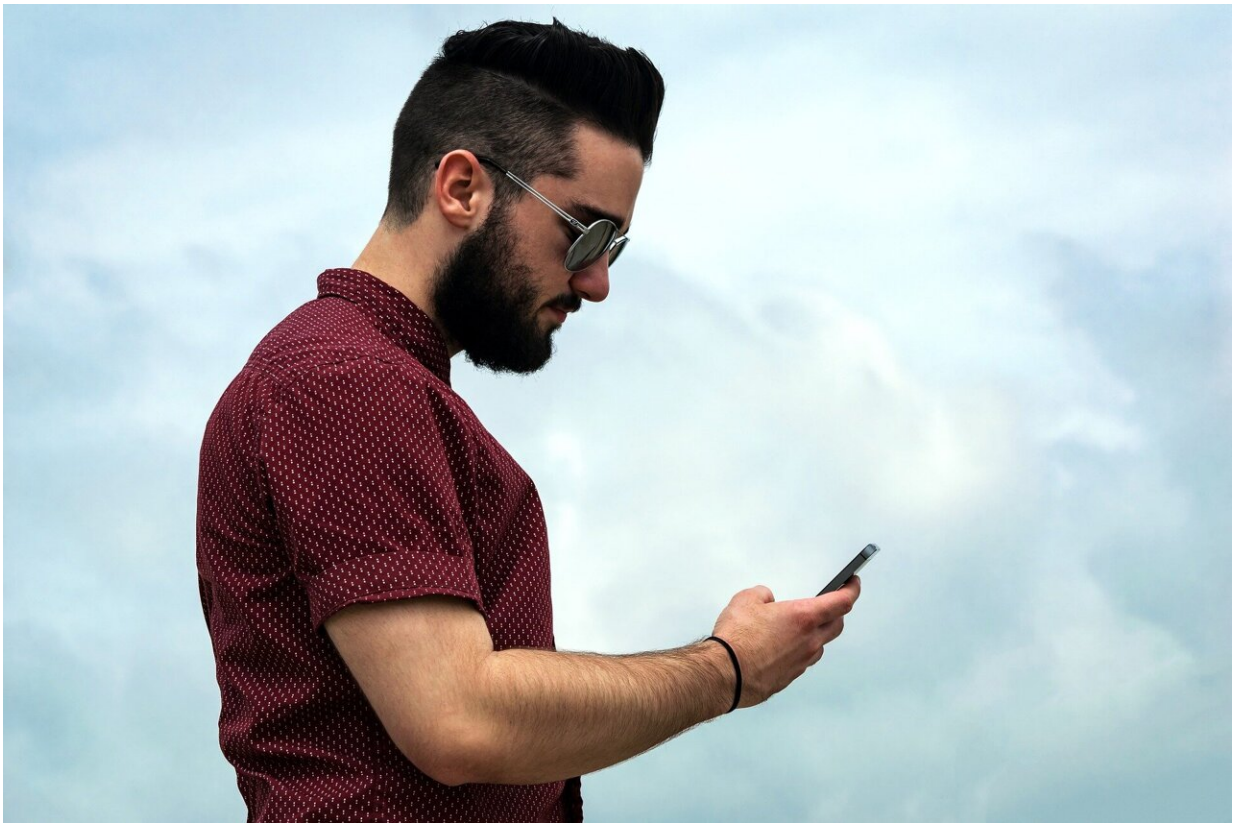

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Many consumers, telecommunications experts, and even reporters nationwide who have been the questions: Why is my cell service still so bad in 2024? And is it getting worse, or am I just noticing it more?

Customers in the mid-Atlantic region—which includes Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware—experienced on average 10 problems per 100 interactions with their cell phones in the past six months, according to J.D. Power's latest study of network quality performance. That number is down from last year, when the region's consumers reported 11 problems per 100 interactions, but higher than the nine issues per 100 interactions reported in 2022 and 2021.

"In all honesty, the network is amazing compared to what it used to be," said Carl Lepper, J.D. Power's senior director of technology, media and telecom. But even the major carriers, Verizon, AT&T, and T-Mobile, "they do get taxed at times. I've not seen them get worse. I've seen us get more demanding."

Why is my cell reception bad?

Younger, digital-native consumers, who spend more time on their cell phones, report more issues than older users.

Nationwide, members of Gen Z—people under 28—reported being on their phone five hours a day on average, according to J.D. Power's latest study, and had about 15 network problems per 100 interactions, compared with the seven or fewer issues reported by those 60 and older, who have a fraction of the phone-screen time.

Increased phone usage and more reliance on cellular data can strain the network, especially in areas where the population increases but the number of cell towers stays the same.

Overall, Philadelphia's population has decreased in recent years, though more 20-somethings have moved in. In the coming decades, the city and its western suburbs are expected to see substantial population growth.

The cell network "can only handle so much," Lepper said. "At certain times, it will be overrun by heavy usage."

Verizon has seen an increase in data use recently, Hemlin said, with customers streaming high-definition video on their phones and using the devices for work collaboration and gaming.

RootMetrics, an Ookla company, tests cellular network performance by driving through metro areas across the country, and officials there say service has only improved in recent years with the increased availability of 5G, which they say they've found to be faster and more reliable (though that's not always the case).

Of the three major carriers, Verizon has consistently ranked first in J.D. Power's studies and has the best overall quality in 121 of 125 metro areas, including Philadelphia, in RootMetrics' analyses.

A spokesperson for AT&T, which ties Verizon for best performance the Mid-Atlantic in J.D. Power's latest study, said they "continue to look for ways to improve our network and provide better wireless service" and have made $2.2 billion in improvements in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, including almost $600 million in the Philadelphia market, from 2020 to 2022.

T-Mobile covers "practically all of the city" with its 4G network, a spokesperson said, and more than 98% with its faster 5G. More than 95% of New Jersey is also covered by its 5G, which has beaten out the other providers in terms of speed the past six months, according to Speedtest by Ookla.

"We design our network to meet the needs of an area based on population and usage," Verizon's Hemlin said. "We're constantly monitoring our network to ensure the best performance possible for our

customers."

Still, 'dead zones' persist.

"There are a variety of reasons as to why some customers report 'dead zones' even in populated areas," Stephen Wampler, RootMetrics' director of products and programs, said in a statement. "Some of these reasons can potentially include lack of cell sites nearby, and misconfigured or congested networks."

"The age of smartphone models is another potential reason," he added. "Consumers who use older device models may experience 'dead zones' because some mobile devices may not be able to support all the bands a carrier has deployed."

Because 5G networks can connect to a wider range of frequencies, your network performance could be affected if it's not running on a frequency that produces the highest speeds.

In the Mid-Atlantic, snow storms and other weather events are also known to cause network issues, most of which are temporary, Lepper said.

Searching for cellular solutions

Some local consumers said they sometimes experience poor cell service in the middle of Philadelphia's Center City.

"Actually my phone works better underground on the Broad Street Line than above ground," said Bridgette Henry, 28, of Philadelphia.

In Lower Merion, township commissioner Gilda L. Kramer said she

wants all the major carriers to address the issues in her ward, which includes part of Bala Cynwyd and Merion Station. She'd be up for any solution—even more cell towers in her area.

"I would love to see this problem solved for the neighborhood, It is one thing residents ask me about constantly and I can't do anything about. I cant solve this one, except with patches, which I try to share with people."

Those patches include what Kramer calls a "protocol" developed her husband, who has an IT background. It's a multi-step process, which the couple wrote out after they found it mitigated the issues in their Bala Cynwyd home. The steps include turning on the Wi-Fi calling setting on your phone, making sure the router is in a central location, and extending the Wi-Fi signal across multiple floors with a mesh network, which can cost between $70 and $1,000, or with a wiring system installed by an electrician.

In recent years, Kramer has forwarded the protocol to dozens of neighbors who have complained about having virtually no connection in their home.

"We shouldn't have to do this," she said. "We should have adequate cell service and the providers really need to step up and improve their network of towers to be able to get cell service to the whole neighborhood."

"It's particularly important with people working from home right now," she added, "and it's important for people who are leaving their home to not have their calls drop."

At Fulmer's Bala Cynwyd home, he's spent years trying to address the service problems himself and with his carrier, Verizon. The company

recently gave him a free LTE Network extender, valued at $250. The device has helped a bit, Fulmer said, and he and his family have also tried workarounds, such as using Wi-Fi calling, with mixed success.

Nearby in Merion Station, Jill Ringold, 47, who also has Verizon, said she and her husband have spent thousands of dollars rewiring their home, trying in vain to get a strong and consistent cell signal. They keep a landline, she said, so her husband, a physician, can be reached when he is on call. When someone calls his cell phone at home, it often doesn't ring and goes straight to voicemail.

She feels the landline is necessary "for safety," said Ringold, a public health professional. "I don't trust my cell phone if there was some kind of 9-1-1 emergency."