

Many low-income New Yorkers rely on costly cell plans for internet access

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The number of New York households with high-speed internet access rose from 725,000 to 1.3 million between 2017 and 2022, but much of that increase comes exclusively from cellular plans, which could mean

that as many as 1.5 million households remain "underconnected," new Cornell research shows.

Russell Weaver, director of research at the Cornell ILR Buffalo Co-Lab, recently integrated new data into the [New York State Digital Equity Portal](#), which he created in December 2021 in collaboration with the New York State Library, Community Tech New York and other partners.

"Conditions are improving, but we still have work to do to move toward digital equity," Weaver said. "So many more households have [broadband connections](#) at home compared to a half-decade ago, but focusing just on the number of connections—and not connection types—can be misleading."

Weaver said nearly 810,000 households in New York state have broadband access solely through mobile phones and cellular data plans. This is a problem because numerous websites and online activities are still not mobile-friendly, including many news websites where advertisements dominate screen space and make it difficult to view informative content quickly. As a result, mobile-only users can't always participate in digital spaces as fully as users who can tap into high-speed internet from a variety of devices.

The portal also shows that roughly 21% of New York households do not have a desktop or [laptop computer](#), compared with just 14% of households lacking a smartphone.

In a [fact sheet](#) released by the Cornell ILR Buffalo Co-Lab to accompany the 2024 Digital Equity Portal updates, Weaver notes that this result marks a technological shift. Desktop and laptop computers were the most common computing devices in New Yorkers' homes throughout the 2000s and 2010s, but smartphones have taken over the

top spot in the 2020s.

The data shows that the most significant barrier to digital equity is the ability to pay for a home-based broadband internet subscription. Almost 30% of households with annual incomes below \$35,000—roughly 500,000 households in all—do not have broadband internet at home, while the rate for those who make over \$75,000 is below 5%. Based on fine-resolution pricing data, the minimum typical price in New York for a broadband package with a speed of at least 25 megabytes per second is \$49.95.

Ethnicity also plays a factor, as households headed by Black New Yorkers are the least likely to have broadband internet subscriptions, followed by households headed by Latino people. White households (90.7%) subscribe to broadband internet at roughly the statewide average rate (90.5%), while Asian-headed households are the most likely group to have a broadband package at home (94.0%).

According to Weaver, more troubling than the differences in subscription rates by ethnicity is that Black and Latino-headed households are now further below the statewide average than they were in 2021. These uneven gains in at-home broadband subscriptions suggest that advancing digital equity in New York state will require new digital inclusion activities intentionally designed to ensure that affordable, accessible broadband is universally available to all households.

Finally, the updated data shows that the lack of broadband internet at home affects both rural and urban households. The two locations where households are least likely to have broadband subscriptions at home—Chautauqua and Cattaraugus counties in the southwest section of the state—are rural. However, the densely populated Brooklyn Public Library System service area in New York City has the third-highest share of unconnected households in the state.

To increase [equity](#), Weaver suggests the state design and fund programs that make it easier for households to acquire internet-enabled devices that meet their computing needs, as well as programs that deliver broadband subscriptions to households at no or almost no cost.

"We are making progress, but we're still well short of achieving [universal access](#) for all New Yorkers," Weaver said. "During the pandemic, so much of everyday life was migrated into virtual spaces that it became apparent to almost everyone that high-speed internet is no longer a luxury; it's a necessary utility to which everyone should have access.

"We at the Buffalo Co-Lab hope that the updated Digital Equity Portal can start to inform new policies, programs and campaigns that seek to get us to that point of universal connectivity."

Provided by Cornell University

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