IN THE NEWS

IN COMCAST’S HOMETOWN, THE CHASM BETWEEN INTERNET HAVES AND HAVE-NOTS LOOKS INTRACTABLE, NEW CENSUS DATA SHOWS

Bob Fernandez | December 10, 2018

Nicetown-Tioga Library manager Debra E. Johnson sees daily the lack of computers and high-speed internet access in her impoverished corner of Philadelphia: People hungry for access hang outside the library door to tap into the branch’s WiFi. Others rush to the library’s public-access terminals to go online for pay stubs while children peck away at homework.

“They usually come in to look for jobs” on one of eight public-access computers, Johnson said. At her tidy branch on Broad Street near Erie Avenue 6,000 to 7,000 people use computers a month, more than double the number of books checked out.

New census data released last week confirms what many in the city have long suspected: Big swaths of Philadelphia are nearly off the grid, with minimal access to fast internet services in their homes.

Policy officials say the disparity between those with internet access and those without has become another nexus of inequality in American society because so much economic activity now occurs online.

Across the United States in 2017, the national broadband penetration rate by household was 83.5 percent in 2017. And in the Philadelphia suburbs, including South Jersey, it was 88.1 percent.
In Philadelphia, the rate was 71.6 percent, the second-lowest among the 25 largest cities.

The city’s internet penetration rate actually fell 2.7 percentage points between 2016 and 2017 for both wired services like Comcast and wireless data plans.

Philadelphia was the only large city to record a decline in internet access, the Inquirer’s analysis found.

Just around the corner from Johnson’s library is a neighborhood of 4,000 rowhouses where only one in four residences, or 25 percent, had access to the internet through a broadband connection, the new data show. Overall, the entire Tioga-Nicetown neighborhood had Philadelphia’s lowest internet penetration rate by household: 37.1 percent.

Fairhill, a neighborhood traumatized by poverty and violent crime like Tioga-Nicetown, had the second-lowest access, with 41.4 percent of connected households.

Wealthier parts of Philadelphia fared more favorably, the data showed. Neighborhoods with internet penetrations of slightly more than eight in 10 homes, or at least as good as the national average, were Center City, Northern Liberties/Fishtown, Manayunk, Roxborough, Chestnut Hill, and Fairmount/Spring Garden.

Philadelphia’s Digital Divide

About seven in 10 Philadelphia neighborhoods fare worse than the national average in the percentage of households that are connected to broadband internet, according to new census data covering the five years between 2013-17. Rates range from a low of 37 percent of households in Tioga-Nicetown to a high of 89 percent in Center City. Use of broadband internet is much higher in the suburbs, where 75 municipalities have connection rates of 90 percent or higher, a standard not met by any Philadelphia neighborhood.

Click and zoom in or out on the map for more information on Philadelphia neighborhoods and suburban municipalities.

While multiple mayors have made literacy a priority in Philadelphia, it continues to be an unsolved problem. The cycle of poorly educated youth growing into low-literacy parents is compounded by adults feeling stigmatized with labels of lazy or dumb for dropping out or graduating with low literacy.

Smart phones with data plans are now considered one way for families to bridge the digital divide, giving them computer access at least on a small screen. Fairhill had one of the highest levels of smart phone-only homes -- with about 12 percent of homes saying they are smart phone-dependent. The only other areas more dependent on smart phones were Kingsessing and Southwest Philadelphia.

Pew Research Center senior researcher Monica Anderson said that Pew’s January phone survey showed that 31 percent of Americans who earned less than $30,000 a year relied only on smart phones for internet access, a percentage that has doubled since 2013.

“We are seeing smart phones help more people get online,” she said, adding that data caps and data plan costs lead people to cancel or suspend services.

Among the 25-largest U.S. cities, residents in San Diego, San Jose, and Seattle reported the highest internet access, with more than 91 percent of homes connected via high-speed broadband.

Philadelphia essentially tied Memphis, Tenn., for second-worst among the 25 cities, consistent with previous data released by the U.S. Census Bureau in recent years and updated last Thursday. The Memphis internet access rate was 71.8 percent. Detroit brought up the bottom with 67.5 percent.

Detroit’s internet penetration rate rose 6.7 percentage points between 2016 and 2017. Officials cautioned that the short-term trends are not as reliable as longer-term ones that show improvements.

Among the Largest U.S. Cities, Broadband Use in Phila. Near the Bottom

Only 72 percent of Philadelphia households had broadband internet in 2017, a rate far below the national average of 83 percent. Only one other city among the nation’s 25 largest ranked lower. Philadelphia was also the only city in the group that saw a decline in broadband usage from 2016.
Both the city government and Philadelphia-based Comcast Corp., one of the nation's largest internet providers, say they are working to close the digital divide through computer skills training and discounted internet services.

Mayor Kenney's administration has taken a keen interest in expanding internet access. The city-funded Keyspot program invests more than $500,000 annually to support public technology centers and digital literacy training. The Digital Literacy Alliance also uses $1.1 million in grants from Comcast and Verizon to offer innovation grants to community organizations.

In August, Comcast reported that 49,000 low-income households in Philadelphia have enrolled in the Internet Essentials program over the life of the program. This was a substantial improvement from the prior year when Comcast said 31,000 Philadelphia households had been connected. Comcast tracks the program over the academic year, from August to August.

“Comcast is proud of our commitment to bridge the digital divide in Philadelphia and across the country through our Internet Essentials program. We have now connected more than six million low-income Americans, in more than one and a half million households, to the internet at home, most for the very first time in their lives,” Comcast spokeswoman Jennifer Bilotta said in a statement. She estimates that more than 452,000 Pennsylvanians, including 196,000 city residents, have taken advantage of it at some point.

Angela Siefer, executive director of the nonprofit National Digital Inclusion Alliance in Columbus, Ohio, said that nationally “it’s hard to say there’s been progress” in closing the digital divide. “There has been no big push to fix this. So why would we see big changes?”

“Imagine your life without daily access to the internet and how hard it would be,” Siefer added.

After getting her GED with help from the Center for Literacy and taking professional development classes with Urban League, Shaquanda Clemons got a job at the Center for Literacy. Starting with answering phones and sitting at the front desk, she soon was given more responsibility and is now a Senior Data Specialist for the organization. The staff worked with her to teach her what was expected at a job and she has since become a real asset to the team.

Philadelphia residents without traditional broadband connections seem to be making do with a combination of smartphones, libraries, and nonprofit access points. Free Library spokeswoman Sandy Horrocks said that in the past year the library connected users with 1.7 million WiFi or computer sessions on the 1,000 public-access computers at its branches.

Near the Nicetown-Tioga Library, the Shane Victorino Boys & Girls Club opens its doors for kids after school.

There’s a basketball court and game room -- and 16 computers. Any day there can be 150 children there, with more than half of them eager to get on the computers. “There’s usually a waiting list,” said Libby Lescalleet, executive program officer.

To help close the digital divide in its franchise areas, Comcast launched its discounted Internet Essentials in 2012, selling $10-a-month high-speed internet service to low-income parents with school-age children. Comcast has expanded the program to other groups, among them low-income veterans and senior citizens.