

BRIDGING THE GAP:

What Affordable, Uncapped Internet Means for Digital Inclusion



BACKGROUND

Digital inequality is a persistent challenge in our increasingly online society. Though more content and services continue to be driven online, there are still 34 million Americans without access to the internet. While there are multiplex barriers to connectivity, the two main drivers that affect a person's ability to participate online are the *availability of service* and the *ability to afford it*. With average broadband costs in the United States soaring to \$90/month (per a 2013 study by the BBC (Geoghegan, 2013)), the price tag for internet access remains out-of-reach for many low-income Americans.¹

People's access to technology has become an important part of every effort to fight hunger, poverty, inequality, and countless other social causes. Thousands of community anchor institutions providing resources and services to help people become self-sufficient are finding innovative ways to help more families get online. One such nonprofit-led program is Bridging the Gap. Created by PCs for People and Mobile Beacon, this program provides refurbished computers and \$10–\$13/month uncapped, unthrottled, high-speed mobile broadband service to individuals and families below the 200% poverty level.²

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

We conducted a survey to investigate who the Bridging the Gap program is reaching, which members of a household are using the internet most (and for what), and whether this program is driving high-value online behaviors such as skills/education acquisition and workforce development outcomes. We also analyzed whether the use of data caps by other internet service providers limits the ways low-income subscribers are able to use the internet, and in what new ways they are using the internet since switching to an unlimited data plan.

A random sample of 2,930 Bridging the Gap subscribers in the Twin Cities, Minnesota was drawn and a phone survey using VOIP phone lines in a CATI lab setting was conducted during December 2016–January 2017. 415 responses were recorded digitally using a computer-programmed interface. This scientifically-designed survey meets all criteria for statistical significance within less than a $\pm 5\%$ margin for the population and can thus be generalized to represent Bridging the Gap's national subscriber base.

*“Low income families need low cost internet.
Can’t do anything without internet!”*

– Bridging the Gap Subscriber

BEFORE BRIDGING THE GAP

83% of respondents never owned a home computer.

73% never had home internet access.

60% of respondents whose previous internet service was subject to a data cap reported difficulty using the internet for online classes or homework.

22% said there were online educational activities they were unable to do due to data caps.

48% of respondents with a previous internet service only had access to speeds of 1-3 Mbps through their DSL connection.

94% of households whose previous internet service was subject to a data cap had access to 8 GB or less of data per month (68% had access to 5 GB or less and 30% had access to 2 GB or less).

AFTER BRIDGING THE GAP

94% of subscribers now use the internet daily (with 83% reporting to use it for several hours a day).

95% of parents said having Mobile Beacon’s internet service has helped them better support their child(ren) academically.

94% of all parents/guardians of school-age students report they can communicate with their child’s teachers more often since enrolling in Bridging the Gap.

54% of parents reported their children spend more than 4 hours per week doing homework online.

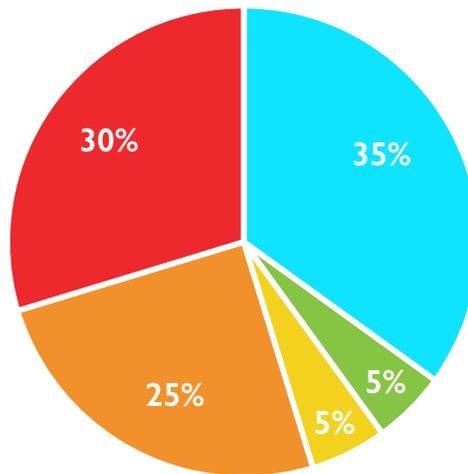
24% started taking daily or weekly online classes after signing up for Mobile Beacon’s internet service. These subscribers use a whopping 19 GB more per month on average than those who do not.

99% of subscribers said they would recommend Bridging the Gap to their friends/family.

“Access is power. The internet can help people better themselves. It’s important.”

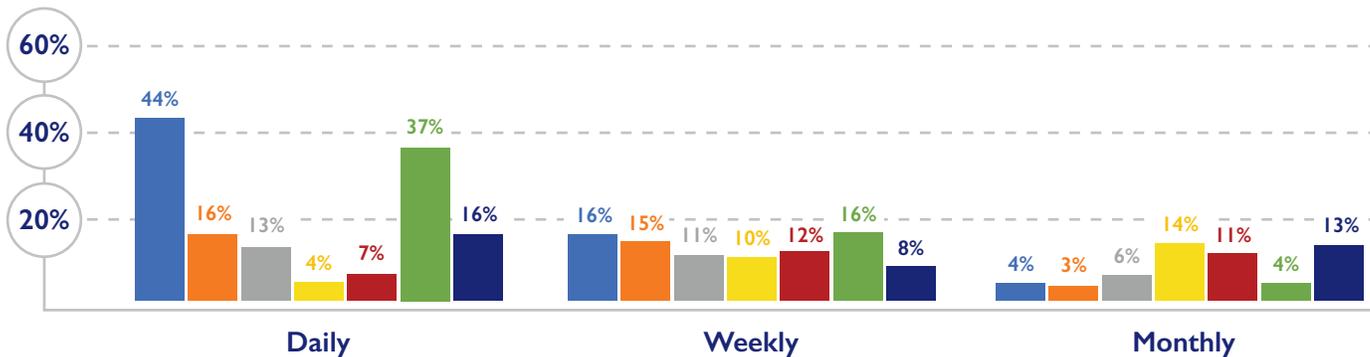
– Bridging the Gap Subscriber

Online activities respondents were unable to engage in, prior to having Mobile Beacon’s unlimited data service:



- Online Classes
- Homework
- How-To Videos
- Other
- Job Searches

Reported time spent online by activity with Mobile Beacon’s unlimited service:



- Basic Online Tools and Applications
- Online Educational Resources
- Workforce-Related Activity
- Health/Wellness Activity
- Financial/Benefit Management
- Social Engagement
- Online Commerce/Entertainment

CONCLUSION

Mobile Beacon's internet service is highly-valued and utilized among Bridging the Gap subscribers. These users are individuals and families below the 200% line. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of users never had a home internet connection before enrolling in Bridging the Gap, which made it more difficult for them to complete homework, apply for jobs, and communicate with others. Now, 94% are daily internet users. Our findings also indicate that data caps make it more difficult for low-income families to engage in certain online activities (60% reported having difficulty completing homework or an online class due to data caps), and 24% only enrolled in a daily or weekly online class after switching to Bridging the Gap's unlimited internet service. The value of affordable, unlimited internet access is clear, and as this research shows, is measurable. We encourage digital inclusion advocates and practitioners to elevate the need for "whole family" broadband adoption as a digital inclusion standard. Digital equity demands that low-income users have the ability to use the internet for the same things their wealthier peers can. It is critical to provide low-income Americans with robust connectivity so they can compete and fully participate in today's world.

The full report is available at
www.mobilebeacon.org/DigitalInclusion.

Additional information on the Bridging the Gap program is available at
www.mobilebeacon.org/BridgingtheGap.



Mobile Beacon strengthens communities across the United States by providing high-speed, low-cost, mobile internet access to the anchors of communities: the nonprofits, schools, libraries, and healthcare organizations that provide vital services to millions of Americans every day. Through this broadband service, these organizations have an essential tool to fulfill their missions and maximize their philanthropic impact. Our anytime, anywhere connectivity and \$10/month unlimited data plans allows our nonprofit clients to access more, reach more, and help more in their communities.

www.mobilebeacon.org

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¹ Geoghegan, T. (2013, October 28). *Why is broadband more expensive in the US?* Retrieved February 6, 2017, from BBC News: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24528383>

² PCs for People offers Mobile Beacon's internet service to eligible program recipients at \$10/month for a 12-month plan, \$12.50/month for a 6-month plan, or \$13.33/month for a 3-month plan. See <https://pcsforpeople.org/recipients/eligibility> for details on eligibility.