

Testimony of John B. Horrigan, PhD
on SB 66, the Digital Connectivity Act of 2021

“Disconnected in Maryland”

February 2021

As the author of the report [“Disconnected in Maryland”](#), I am pleased to offer my perspective on Maryland’s digital divide. With school, health care appointments, and work going online in light of the pandemic, reliance on the internet has grown. Lacking online access has gone from being a costly inconvenience to a debilitating disadvantage. This has put “digital inclusion” – whether people have the digital tools and the tech support to use the internet – squarely in the spotlight. “Disconnected in Maryland” is an empirical analysis of the nature and size of internet gaps among Maryland households. The report’s findings align with the goals of the Digital Connectivity Act of 2021. They also point to additional steps to ensure that the internet is a force for equity and opportunity for more Maryland households.

Addressing digital connectivity gaps starts with metrics. Should we focus on whether people have sufficient network connectivity where they live, that is, whether their homes are served by network infrastructure that is fast enough to carry out online tasks? Or should the attention be on subscriptions and computers, that is, the rate at which people subscribe to high-speed internet service at home and whether they have computing devices for access?

Both access (whether a network of sufficient quality serves a household) and adoption (whether a household subscribes to service) are important. In recent years, policymakers at the national level have viewed the digital divide as a problem of network deployment in rural areas. This overlooks another (and substantial) dimension of the digital divide – household subscriptions to service and home computer ownership. That is the story that the “Disconnected in Maryland” tells.

Two-thirds of those without meaningful online access live in cities and metro areas

Hundreds of thousands of households in Maryland do not have a foundational tool for internet connectivity – a wireline high-speed internet subscription for their home. Such internet service plans have the speed and data allotments that allow people to log on for school, work from home, or have a telehealth session – all without worrying whether they will hit a monthly limit on the amount of data they can consume (a feature of most wireless data plans). “Disconnected in Maryland” demonstrates how the digital divide is more prevalent in metro and urban areas, as well as for low-income and African American Marylanders:

- 520,000 Maryland households do not have a home wireline broadband subscription. That is nearly one in four (23%) homes.
- Two-thirds – or 342,000 – of the disconnected live in metro counties or Baltimore City.
- 206,000 African American households without a wireline broadband connection in Maryland. This means 40% of the disconnected in Maryland are African American.
 - Two other groups – Hispanics and Native Americans – also have wireline adoption rates below the state average.
- 178,000 households in rural Maryland do not have wireline broadband subscriptions at home.

- Some 108,000 Maryland households with children under the age of 18 do not have wireline internet service at home. These households suffering from the “homework gap” are disproportionately poor, African American, and Hispanic.

Internet access means very little without a computing device to log on and there are sizable gaps in computer ownership in the Maryland.

- 391,000 Maryland homes do not have either a desktop or laptop computer, or nearly one in five (18%) homes.
- Nearly 290,000 Maryland households lack either a desktop, laptop, or tablet computer (or 13% of all homes).
- As with wireline broadband subscriptions, the weight of these gaps falls heavily in urban and metro areas and among African American households.

Reasons for gaps

Shortfalls in home broadband subscription and computer ownership rest on two factors: affordability and digital readiness.

Affordability

Income is the most prominent predictor of whether a household has a high-speed internet subscription at home. Fewer than half (46.8%) of all Maryland household whose incomes are \$25,000 per year or less have a high-speed subscription – far below the rate for well-off households (90.8% of households whose incomes exceed \$150,000 annually have service). The gaps are greatest in Baltimore City, where just 31.8% of low-income households subscribe to high-speed service. Low-income rural areas are also hard hit. Some 42.2% of low-income households subscribe to high-speed service in Allegany, Caroline, Cecil, Dorchester, Garrett, Queen Anne’s, Somerset, Talbot, Washington Wicomico, and Worcester counties.

Digital readiness

The second issue with broadband adoption at home is “[digital readiness](#).” Digital readiness refers to the skills needed to use digital tools to find, evaluate, create, and share information. It includes information literacy – the ability to interpret online content and judge the reliability of it. Insufficient digital readiness is widespread. As much as [half of the population](#) exhibit some level of reluctance to use online educational resources because they lack confidence on how to use such applications. [Research shows](#) digital skills training can improve digital readiness; those with digital skills training use the internet for education and job search at significantly higher rates than those who have not had such training. Investment in community institutions such as local non-profits and public libraries is the way to reach populations in need of this training.

Recommendations: Prioritizing digital inclusion

The “Disconnected in Maryland” is not just about identifying gaps. It also provides recommendations on how Maryland can foster digital inclusion in the state. Establishing an Office of Digital Inclusion, as HB97 proposes, is an ingredient in a larger set of initiatives Maryland policymakers should consider.

Statewide planning: The state should embark on a statewide broadband planning process to address all dimensions of the problem, i.e., promoting internet adoption and computer ownership, as well as network deployment.

Partnerships for digital inclusion: Maryland should consider investments in digital inclusion, perhaps in partnership with philanthropic organizations. The state should also consider creating an Office of Digital Inclusion to manage initiatives throughout the state and serve as a conduit for community grants to address the skills gaps that are part of people's deficiencies in digital readiness.

Increasing public awareness of affordability programs: Many carriers offer discount internet service for qualifying low-income homes. Stakeholders should promote awareness of them and explore ways (e.g., working with school districts or housing authorities) to make signing up for service easier.

Improving the pipeline of computing devices: Affordability of computers is commonly cited as a reason people do not subscribe to home wireline service and initiatives exist (nationally and in Maryland) to help get computers to low-income households. Stakeholders should explore ways to expand them to all parts of the state to meet demands that the pandemic has spurred.

Although interest in the digital divide has grown since the pandemic, the problem will not fade when the pandemic does. Economic recovery will take time, which means affordability of service will continue to be a problem among low-income Marylanders. The recovery will also depend upon widespread adoption and use of digital tools. The COVID recession is a "reallocation shock" in that as many as [one-third of jobs](#) lost during pandemic may not come back at all. This means those who have lost jobs will need to switch occupations. Many [in-demand jobs](#) require digital skills and come with the expectation that workers have robust home connectivity. Building the state's capacity to help people gain connectivity and digital skills will contribute to a healthier and more equitable Maryland.

About the report and the author

John B. Horrigan, PhD is Senior Fellow at the Technology Policy Institute, with a focus on technology adoption and digital inclusion. Additionally, he has served as an Associate Director for Research at the Pew Research Center, where he focused on libraries and their impact on communities. During the Obama Administration, Horrigan was part the leadership team at the Federal Communications Commission for the development of the National Broadband Plan. Views expressed in this testimony are his own.

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