

Phone home and call likely answered on the cell

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FILE - In this July 1,2008 file photo, Austin Calderon examines mobile phone accessories in Los Angeles. For the first time, the number of U.S. households opting for only cell phones outnumber those that just have traditional landlines in a high-tech shift accelerated by the recession. (AP Photo/Ric Francis, FILE)

(AP) -- In a high-tech shift accelerated by the recession, the number of U.S. households opting for only cell phones has for the first time surpassed those that just have traditional landlines. It is the freshest evidence of the growing appeal of wireless phones.

Twenty percent of households had only cells during the last half of 2008, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey released Wednesday. That was an increase of nearly 3 percentage points over the first half of the year, the largest six-month increase since the government started gathering such data in 2003.

The 20 percent of homes with only cell phones compared to 17 percent with landlines but no cells.

That ratio has changed starkly in recent years: In the first six months of 2003, just 3 percent of households were wireless only, while 43 percent stuck to landlines.

Stephen Blumberg, senior scientist at the CDC and an author of the report, attributed the growing number of cell-only households in part to a [recession](#) that has forced many families to scour their budgets for savings. People who live in homes that have only wireless service tend to be disproportionately low-income, young, renters and Hispanics.

"We do expect that with the recession, we'd see an increase in the prevalence of wireless only households, above what we might have expected had there been no recession," Blumberg said.

Six in 10 households have both landlines and cell phones. Even so, industry analysts emphasized the public's growing love affair with the versatility of cell phones, which can perform functions like receiving text messages and also are mobile.

"The end game is consumers are paying two bills for the same service," said John Fletcher, an analyst for the market research firm SNL Kagan, referring to cell and landline phones. "Which are they going to choose? They'll choose the one they can take with them in their car."

In one illustration of the impact these changes are having, Verizon Communications Inc. had 39 million landline telephone customers in March 2008 but 35 million a year later. Over the same period, its wireless customers grew from 67 million to 87 million, though 13 million of the added lines came from the firm's acquisition of Alltel Corp., according to figures provided by Verizon spokesman Bill Kula.

Another Verizon spokesman, Eric Rabe, said he wasn't sure the overall drop in landlines was directly related to the stalled economy, though he said the company has lost some landline business customers because companies are shuttering some of their locations.

Further underscoring the public's diminishing reliance on landline phones, the federal survey found that 15 percent of households have both landlines and cells but take few or no calls on their landlines, often because they are wired into computers. Combined with wireless only homes, that means that 35 percent of households - more than one in three - are basically reachable only on cells.

The changes are important for pollsters, who for years relied on reaching people on their landline telephones. Growing numbers of surveys now include calls to people on their cells, which is more expensive partly because federal laws forbid pollsters from using computers to place calls to wireless phones.

About a third of people age 18 to 24 live in households with only cell phones, the federal figures showed, making them far likelier than older people to rely exclusively on cells. The same is true of four in 10 people age 25 to 29.

About three in 10 living in poverty are from wireless-only households, nearly double the proportion of those who are not poor. Also living in homes with only cell phones are one in four Hispanics, four in 10 renters and six in 10 people living with unrelated adults such as roommates or unmarried couples.

One in 50 households have no phones at all.

The data is compiled by the National Health Interview Survey, conducted by the CDC. The latest survey involved in-person interviews

with members of 12,597 households conducted from last July through December.

On the Web: <http://www.cdc.gov>

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