

Survey: Elderly, poor narrow broadband service gap

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(AP) -- Some groups that have lagged in signing up for high-speed Internet service, like the elderly, the poor and rural residents, have started to gain on those who have had a head start, according to a new survey.

Those conclusions come as the government is set to decide how to spend \$7.2 billion in stimulus money on expanding the availability of [broadband](#).

Broadband usage among those 65 or older grew from 19 percent in May 2008 to 30 percent this April, the Pew Internet & American Life Project said Wednesday.

Among households with annual income of less than \$20,000, 35 percent subscribed to broadband this year, compared with 25 percent last year. By contrast, broadband penetration for households that earn more than \$75,000 per year, already well connected, remained roughly unchanged at 85 percent.

In rural America, a target for the broadband stimulus money, broadband penetration is now 46 percent, up from 38 percent.

The nationwide average was 63 percent, up from 55 percent a year ago, suggesting a resilient demand for broadband even through a recession.

Industry figures contradict the survey somewhat, showing a slowdown in

sign-ups over the past year. Leichtman Research Group Inc. put the number of broadband subscribers of the largest U.S. providers at 69.3 million at the end of March, up from 64.1 million a year earlier. That's a smaller increase than Pew found. Leichtman's tally includes 94 percent of the Internet provider market and includes subscriptions by some small businesses in addition to homes.

The discrepancy between the survey and the industry tally could result from the vagaries of phone surveys - in the past, Pew's figures have shown greater year-over-year variations than Leichtman's tallies. Pew's survey of 2,253 adults, conducted March 26 to April 19 via landline and cell phones, has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 2 percentage points.

Notably, one group with historically lower broadband use remained slower than others in adopting high-speed service. Black households increased their broadband penetration by just 3 percentage points, within the margin of error for their group, to 46 percent.

The Pew study also found that people pay less for broadband where there is competition. The average was \$44.70 per month for those with only one available provider, compared with \$38.30 for others.

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