

How do we stop people falling through the gaps in a digitally connected city?

February 16 2016, by Justine Humphry

Popular visions of the "smart city" promise that with digital technology the [power of the city "as a platform"](#) is put in users' hands. Whether real or imagined, digital connectivity 24/7 is a fundamental part of the city-fabric. Yet this is not the case for the city's most marginalised and excluded.

Much of this digital dimension is hidden. Shopping, banking, job searches, trip planning, government service transactions, entertainment and contact with friends and family are carried out online and through an increasing array of [mobile apps](#).

Such activities are now essential for navigating and participating fully in city life. Cultural activity is [increasingly hybridised](#), reliant on [social media](#) and location-aware devices for co-ordinating collocated gatherings and events.

Struggling to stay connected

Yet some groups are not automatically included in this experience of connectedness. Despite the fact that [95% of people](#) experiencing homelessness have a mobile phone, staying connected is an everyday struggle.

In [research](#) carried out for the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network ([ACCAN](#)), a common reported experience of

homelessness was having lost or broken a mobile phone, or had it stolen. Service restrictions, number changes and credit shortages also meant internet and telephone access was partial and discontinuous.

There is also the issue of access to power. The assumption that city dwellers have a place to go to recharge their device batteries is so ingrained as to be unremarkable. Yet the same study found that 32% experienced difficulty recharging their mobile handset.

Through the project, [Making Connections](#), we set out to find out more about these connectivity barriers and to come up with creative solutions. Supported by the [Young and Well Co-operative Research Centre](#) and [Western Sydney University](#), the project involves working directly with young people who have experienced homelessness and relevant organisations. A series of participatory design workshops is guiding the innovation process.

Stories that the participants shared in the first workshop highlighted the risks associated with not having regular, reliable and affordable access. In some cases the results are life-threatening.

One young man recounted an incident of waking up on the street with his backpack being pulled from under him and a knife in his stomach. His mobile phone was in the stolen bag, so he had no way of dialling emergency services. He waited for hours before someone stopped to see if he needed help.

The difficulties associated with digital connectivity also mean that people who are homeless shape their activities and movements to meet their access needs. This is time and energy that might otherwise be directed to getting the support and assistance needed to move out of homelessness.

The recently launched "[Ask Izzy](#)" app and website, for example, which simplifies and streamlines access to services for the homeless, relies on an internet connection. The patchwork nature of free public WiFi, with inadequate or no access in some places, means users of these services [face new hurdles](#).

Another young man talked of how he would walk around endlessly, trying to connect:

I'm walking around and I just have my WiFi open checking ... Usually you can't even find anything anywhere. It's pretty hard.

City centres are at least easier than suburban areas. If you go further west, especially near Penrith or anywhere between Blacktown and Penrith, there's not much free WiFi. It's more something you have to pay for.

Sociologist Emma Jackson describes experiences such as these as being "[fixed in mobility](#)". Here, the physical and political structure of the city imposes movement simply to access the resources necessary to survive, making it even harder to move out of homelessness.

Urban digital connectivity is highly uneven and subject to rapid change as a result of market forces, new technology developments and planning initiatives. Until recently, internet access was a paid-for service in internet cafes and convenience stores. Now it is more likely to be in the form of charged or free WiFi hot spots.

Working to secure access

Given these challenges, how might we design city spaces better to make it easier and safer for people who are homeless to access [digital technology](#)? The group who attended the first of the Making Connections workshops came up with five creative ideas revolving

around some key principles:

- free and widespread access to power
- availability of free WiFi/mobile internet
- affordable and robust devices and flexible mobile plans
- security of belongings and self
- enhanced access to support services.

The idea behind the second Making Connections workshop, to be held on February 19 at the Parramatta city campus of Western Sydney University, is to bring these ideas and principles to life. Representatives of telecommunication companies, charities, local government, public libraries, universities and related organisations will come together to develop and implement these ideas. The aim is to incorporate these key principles into policies and new programs, and to develop a common approach in all cities.

The shift to a more complex urban internet ecology, with the taken-for-grantedness of mobile connectivity, creates a need to re-engage with issues of digital exclusion in cities. Developing long-term and sustainable responses requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders. They will need to be not only committed to the goal of inclusion but also have the means for co-operating and taking action to achieve this goal.

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