

Some cling to landlines, but cell-only homes now dominate

May 4 2017, by Anick Jesdanun



This Wednesday, April 14, 2016, file photo, shows a push-button landline telephone, in Whitefield, Maine. According to a U.S. government survey released Thursday, May 4, 2017, homes and apartments with only cellphone service exceeded 50 percent for the first time, reaching 50.8 percent for the last six months of 2016. On the flip side, 45.9 percent of U.S. households still have landline phones, including newer internet-based services common with cable TV and internet packages, while the remaining households have no phone service at all. More than 39 percent of U.S. households have both landline and cellphone service. (AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty, File)

Deborah Braswell, a university administrator in Alabama, is a member of a dwindling group—people with a landline phone at home.

According to a U.S. government study released Thursday, 50.8 percent of homes and apartments had only cellphone service in the latter half of 2016, the first time such households attained a majority in the survey. Braswell and her family are part of the 45.9 percent that still have landline phones. The remaining households have no phone service at all.

More than 39 percent of U.S. households—including Braswell's—have both landline and cellphone service. The landline comes in handy when someone misplaces one of the seven cellphones kicking around her three-story house in a Birmingham suburb. "You walk around your house calling yourself to find it," she says.

It's also useful when someone breaks or loses a cellphone and has to wait for a replacement.

THE PATTERNS

Renters and younger adults are more likely to have just a cellphone, which researchers attribute to their mobility and comfort with newer technologies.

The in-person survey of 19,956 households was part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Health Interview Survey, which tracks landline use in order to assure representative samples in ongoing health studies. The survey has a margin of error of plus or minus 1 percentage point.

Cellphone-only home have other commonalities. "Wireless-only adults are more likely to drink heavily, more likely to smoke and be uninsured," even after factoring for age and income, says Stephen J.

Blumberg, the study's co-author (and a landline user himself). "There certainly is something about giving up a landline that appeals to the same people who may engage in risky behavior."

Why that's so will require further research.

The survey doesn't get into why people ditch or keep landlines, though landline users cited a number of reasons for hanging on in phone interviews and email exchanges with The Associated Press.

NO CHOICE IN THE MATTER

Plenty of people would get rid of their landlines if they could. It goes beyond complaints about cellular reception at home.

Joe Krkoska, a supply chain director, needs a traditional copper wire for his home security system in Zionsville, Indiana. Getting rid of the line would require crews to drill holes in his home and put batteries in the bedroom. No thanks, he says.

Chris Houchens, who works in sales and marketing, says his phone company forces him to get a landline with internet service. There's no cable TV alternative where he lives in rural Smiths Grove, Kentucky.

And those who could drop phone service might pay more after losing package discounts. Martin Axel, a retired hospital administrator in Seal Beach, California, says dropping the landline would increase his cable bill by more than \$40 a month.

EMERGENCIES

Traditional copper phone lines have their own power supply, so those landlines still work during blackouts. Internet-based phones through the

cable or phone company aren't true landlines, although the CDC counts them that way. The internet modem for these phones still needs power.

Both kinds of landline phones are more dependable for 911. Even if you can't give dispatchers your home address, they would often have that already. Cellphones primarily use GPS for location, which means the dispatcher might know which building you're in, but not the specific apartment.

For that reason, Trey Forgety of the nonprofit National Emergency Number Association recommends landlines for those who live alone and have a disability or medical condition. He says cellphone location accuracy is improving, but there's still work to be done.

SPAM MAGNETS

In many households, the landline is a honey trap for telemarketers.

"We never use the landline, and the only calls I get on it are from someone looking to sell me something," says Matt Lawrence, a management consultant in O'Fallon, Missouri.

On the other hand, it's comforting to have a device just for calls—without "all of the irritating bells and whistles of smartphones," says Brad Cooney, a Navy veteran in Brandon, Mississippi. "I can shut the (cell) phone off and still have a landline if someone needs to call me."

PHONE NOSTALGIA

The landline harkens to an era in which a number is tied to a family and not an individual. You can call your parents' home and not play favorites in choosing Mom or Dad. Children can talk to Grandma at once from

separate phone extensions.

"My parents had landlines, as did their parents," says Axel, the landline user in Seal Beach. "It's probably a habit. It just feels more comfortable to me."

Cynthia Dibblee, a retired teacher in Merced, California, has elderly parents who "can't remember our cell numbers but know the landline by heart."

THE FUTURE

USTelecom, a trade group for traditional phone companies, estimates that true landlines—the copper kind—now connect fewer than 20 percent of households. The group says companies have adapted by offering other types of services, including video and, for some, cellphones.

Even so, phone companies get new landline customers now and then.

Shawn Fisch, a 37-year-old teacher in New York, got his first landline after becoming a dad. When his son is old enough, he says, he'll need "an extra way to phone home."

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