

Low-Income People's Use of Technology in Connecticut

A report prepared to assist legal services programs in
assessing expansion of the use of technology
to assist the low-income client population
in accessing legal information and legal assistance

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Executive Summary/Conclusions

The legal services programs in Connecticut, with the support of the Connecticut Bar Foundation, are entering into a technology planning process to evaluate the expansion of the use of technology to assist low-income people with their civil legal needs.

National data suggests that as access to technology spreads throughout American society, the percentage of low-income households using technology to gain increased access to information and communication is also rising.

The data from this report confirms that a very significant portion of low-income people in Connecticut have access to technology; and that systems to provide legal assistance and legal information to low-income people should take advantage of this community's access to technology.

The report is based on self-reported data from 469 low-income people calling Statewide Legal Services, Inc., seeking civil legal assistance. Surveys were conducted in English or Spanish, depending on the primary language of the caller. (To the extent there is bias in the report, it results from the fact that all callers had telephone access, and were able to call Statewide Legal Services. It is likely that those whose physical, mental health, and economic conditions prevent them from calling Statewide Legal Services, have less access to technology than those represented in this survey. People who do not have their own phone may not, however, be underrepresented in this sample: 17% of callers reported not having a phone of their own.)

Specifically:

- 51% of callers had access to a computer.
- 42% of callers had internet access.
- 35% of callers had an e-mail account, and 31% check e-mail at least once a week.
- 58% of callers had a cell phone
- Callers were almost evenly divided among categories of phone access: between having a landline only (25%); a cell phone only (26%); both landline and cell phone (32%); and no phone of their own (17%).
- Of the callers relying on a cell phone, almost all (87%) are using minutes from a limited or prepaid plan.
- 32% of callers use text messaging from a cell phone.

While technology access lagged somewhat for certain demographic groups, there was significant access to most technologies among all demographic groups surveyed. The technology most limited for certain populations is cell phone text messaging; while over half of all groups use cell phones, only 16% of those over age 50, and 15% of those with mental health disabilities, use text messaging.

The data suggests that while low-income people in Connecticut have **less** access to technology than the population as a whole, they do have **significant** access to technology. Longitudinal data

for the general population demonstrates that technology access is increasing significantly over time; follow-up surveying of the low-income population is likely to reveal the same trend.

The legal services programs provide a broad range of assistance to low-income people. Many of those whom the programs represent in adversarial settings face multiple life barriers and are among the least able to help themselves. The legal services programs provide legal information (on paper and over the internet) to assist the large population that (because of resource limitations and priorities) cannot be assisted directly.

The survey data suggests that the internet provides a very useful means of providing information to a very large proportion of low-income people who cannot be assisted directly. In addition, the data suggests that legal services providers are increasingly likely to be able to communicate with clients by e-mail and text messaging (although confidentiality concerns will need to be taken into account). Finally, the data suggests low-income people are in wide-ranging situations with regard to phone status, requiring sensitivity to client phone status in working with clients.

Methodology

Technology staff and program executive directors began talking about the need to better understand client access to technology in the fall of 2007. The programs were exploring a possible technology innovation process to be undertaken during 2008; the value of some expansions of technology depended on whether clients would be able to make use of new or expanded services.

The client technology survey (attached as Appendix A) was created in the fall of 2007. It was originally administered in a variety of ways, including by staff at local social service agencies, and self-administered by clients in the New Haven Legal Assistance waiting room. While the responses indicated a significant level of access to technology among low-income people, the data are not included here because the variety of ways in which the survey tool was administered made the results inconsistent,

The data reported here includes only information from 469 low-income people who called Statewide Legal Services, Inc., seeking civil legal assistance, during November 2007. Surveys were conducted in English or Spanish, depending on the primary language of the caller.

The survey methodology is valid for the population polled – low-income people who are able to get through to a busy telephone hotline service. We believe (but do not have data to prove) that the survey population is representative of a very large percentage of low-income households in Connecticut. However, the methodology necessarily excludes people with no access to telephone; people unable to make a phone call during normal business hours; and people whose physical health, mental health, or other circumstances prevents them from being able to use a telephone hotline service. Further research could be undertaken to identify the extent of these populations, and the extent to which they also have access to the technologies discussed here.

Data Previously Available

What follows is not a comprehensive survey of all available data, but rather a sampling of previously conducted surveys on technology access.

National Data: The Pew Internet & American Life Project has tracked computer use and internet access since approximately 2000. The Pew national data suggests certain groups – including African-Americans, Hispanics, the elderly, and people with less than \$30,000/year income¹ -- have less computer and internet access than the general population. All of these groups, however, have had very significant increases in computer/internet access, and this is particularly true of the elderly and people with less than \$30,000/year income.

% who use a computer	2000	2006
White	63%	72%
African-American	52%	61%
Hispanic	62%	71%
18-29	78%	84%
30-49	74%	83%
50-64	57%	70%
65+	20%	33%
% who access the internet		
White	50%	72%
African-American	35%	57%
Hispanic	45%	68%
18-29	65%	84%
30-49	58%	81%
50-64	41%	66%
65+	13%	32%
		49%
Less than \$30,000/year income	31%	(61% by late 2007)

Source: www.pewinternet.org

A recent survey described in Public Opinion Quarterly suggests that nationally low-income households have great variety in their phone access:

Land line and cell phone	33%
Land line only	29%
Cell phone only	32%
No phone	6%

¹ Households with less than \$30,000 per year may, or may not, be considered low-income based on poverty standards, depending on family size. As of 2008, the Federal Poverty Guidelines for a family of 6 is \$28,400.

Source: "Coverage Bias in Traditional Telephone Surveys of Low-Income and Young Adults," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 2007 (71(5), Blumberg & Luke. Table 1 – data on low-income respondents. <http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/71/5/734>

Connecticut Data: The Center for Survey Research at the University of Connecticut conducted a computer/internet access survey for the Connecticut State Library's iConn project, and reported data in 2005 and 2007. The data reported is for the general public, not sorted by demographic (and only a very small percentage of the sample reported being low-income). The data does, however, suggest the same trend of increasing access to computers and the internet in Connecticut, especially among older, lower income, and less educated people:

% of sample using the internet at least once a week	2005	2007
Age:		
18 – 34	88%	97%
35 - 54	81%	93%
55+	76%	61%
Household Income		
Under \$40,000	58%	63%
\$40,000 to less than \$75,000	83%	85%
\$75,000 +	91%	97%
Educational Attainment		
High school or less	64%	75%
Some college	90%	86%
College graduate	93%	93%

Source: "iCONN Market Survey: Measuring Current Awareness, Usage and Interest," http://www.iconn.org/documents/iCONNMarketSurvey_FinalReport2007.pdf

Our Survey Results

1) Access to a computer:

51% of low-income callers reported having access to a computer.

Of these, approximately half own the computer they use (24% of the callers). Surprisingly, even among callers with annual household income below \$10,000, 22% owned a computer.

There was broad access to a computer across demographic groups. Even demographic groups with somewhat less access to a computer still had significant access:

Demographic group:	% with computer access
High school degree or less	44%
Hispanic	43%
Age 50 and over	41%
Mental health disability	39%

Physically disabled callers, African-American callers, and callers living on public assistance (state welfare) did not have significant lower levels of computer access.

2) Access to the internet

42% of low-income callers reporting having internet access.

Again, certain demographics had lower but still significant levels of internet access.

Demographic group:	% with internet access
People living on public assistance (state welfare)	35%
Age 50 and over	34%
Mental health disability	33%

3) Access to e-mail

35% of callers had an e-mail account, and 31% check e-mail at least once a week.

Across demographic groups, over 20% of callers have e-mail accounts, and check them at least once a week.

Demographic group:	% with e-mail account	% checking e-mail at least once/week
African-American	34%	23%
Hispanic	28%	24%
Age 50 and over	43%	26%
High school degree or less	29%	23%
Mental health disability	25%	22%
People living on public assistance (state welfare)	28%	24%

4) Use of cell phones

58% of callers had a cell phone.

26% of callers had only a cell phone.

32% of callers use text messaging from a cell phone.

Callers were almost evenly divided among categories of phone access:

25% had a landline only;

26% had a cell phone only;

32% had both a landline and cell phone; and

17% had no phone of their own.

Of the callers relying on a cell phone, almost all (87%) are using minutes from a limited or prepaid plan.

32% of callers use text messaging from a cell phone.

Over half of all demographic groups used a cell phone; those age 50 and over, and those with mental health disabilities are significantly less likely to use text messaging.

Demographic group:	% with a cell phone	% using text messaging
High school degree or less	56%	26%
People living on public assistance (state welfare)	55%	31%
Age 50 and over	53%	16%
Mental health disability	51%	15%

APPENDIX A

CLIENT TECHNOLOGY SURVEY

- Date _____ Site _____ Town _____
1. Do you have access to a computer? Yes___ No___
 2. If yes, do you: Own___ Public Use___ Borrow / Share___ Other___
 3. How often do you use the computer?
Daily___ 2-6 times a week___ Once a week___ Less than once a week___
 4. What do you use the computer for most often?
Email___ Research___ Entertainment___ Word Processing___
Other_____
 5. Do you have internet access? Yes___ No___

If yes, how easy is it for you to access it?
Very easy___ Somewhat easy___ Somewhat difficult___ Difficult___

If no, do you have any way to gain internet access?
Library___ Friend___ Agency___ School___ Other_____
 6. If you have internet access are you familiar with how to browse the internet?
Yes___ No___
 7. How often do you browse the internet / use the web?
Daily___ 2-6 times a week___ Once a week___ Less than once a week___
 8. Do you have email access? Yes___ No___

If yes, do you have an email address?
Yes___ No___

If yes, how often do you access your email?
More than once a day___ Daily___ 2-6 times Weekly___
Once a week___ Less than once a week___

If no, why not?
Not interested___ Don't know how to use email___
Expense___ Other_____
 9. Do you have a cell phone? Yes___ No___

If yes, do you send and receive text messages? Yes___ No___

Do you have a plan with:

unlimited minutes_____ fixed minutes per month_____ prepaid card_____

Do you have a home phone other than your cell phone?
Yes___ No___

We appreciate your cooperation in taking the time to fill out this survey.

We would also appreciate your answering some additional questions so that we can better learn how these answers may be different for different groups of people.

What is your Gender?

Male___ Female___

What is your age?

Under 22___
22-29___
30-39___
40-49___
50-59___
60-69___
70 and over___

To which racial or ethnic group(s) do you most identify? (Mark more than one if applicable) (Note: categories are defined by the federal government).

African-American (Non-Hispanic)___
Asian/Pacific Islanders___
Caucasian (Non-Hispanic)___
Hispanic___
Native American, Aleut or Aboriginal Peoples___
Other___

Highest level of education:

Less than 9th grade___
9th grade___
High School Degree___
Associate Degree, some college or no college___
Bachelor___
Education beyond college___

Do you have a disability?

Yes___ No___

If so, what is the nature of your disability?

Physical___ Mental___

Number of people in your household?

1-2___ 3-5___ More than 5___

Number of children living with you?

None___ 1-2___ 3-5___ More than 5___

Current Income? (check all that apply)

State welfare (TANF)___

GA / SAGA___

Federal disability___

Federal retirement___

Alimony/child support___

Work:___

Household Income

Under: \$10,000___

\$10,000 - \$19,999___

\$20,000 - \$29,999___

\$30,000 - \$39,999___

\$40,000 - \$49,999___

\$50,000 - \$59,999___

\$60,000 or more___