

# [***Millions of Americans could soon lose home internet access if lawmakers don't act***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BMC-2VX1-JBSS-S00N-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

March 23, 2024 Saturday 6:00 PM GMT

Copyright 2024 Cable News Network All Rights Reserved

**Length:** 1964 words

**Byline:** By Brian Fung, CNN

**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

Washington (CNN) &#8212; Every week, Cynthia George connects with her granddaughter and great-grandson on video calls. The 71-year-old retiree reads the news on her MSN homepage and googles how to fight the bugs coming from her drain in Florida's summer heat. She hunts for grocery deals on her Publix app so that her food stamps stretch just a little further.

But the great-grandmother worries her critical lifeline to the outside world could soon be severed. In fact, she fears she might soon have to make a difficult choice: Buy enough food to feed herself - or pay her home internet bill.

George is one of millions of Americans facing a little-known but fast-approaching financial cliff, a catastrophe that policy experts say is preventable but only if Congress acts, and quickly.

By as soon as May, more than 23 million US households risk being kicked off their internet plans or facing skyrocketing bills that force them to pay hundreds more per year to get online, according to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

The looming disaster could affect nearly 1 in 5 households nationwide, or nearly 60 million Americans, going by Census Bureau [*population estimates*](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/).

Such broad disruptions to internet access would affect people's ability to do schoolwork, to seek and do jobs, to visit their doctors virtually or refill prescriptions online, or to connect to public services, widening the digital divide between have and have-nots and potentially leading to economic instability on a massive scale.

'I have to account for every penny'

The crisis is linked to a critical government program expected to run out of funding at the end of April. Known as the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), the benefit provides discounts on internet service valued at up to $30 per month to qualifying low-income households, or up to $75 per month for eligible recipients on tribal lands.

Lawmakers have known for months about the approaching deadline. Yet Congress is nowhere close to approving the $6 billion that President Joe Biden says would renew the ACP and avert calamity for tens of millions of Americans.

This past week, congressional leaders missed what advocates say was the last, best legislative opportunity for funding the ACP: The 11th-hour budget [*deal*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/21/politics/government-funding-bills/index.html) designed to avert a government shutdown. The bill text released this week includes no money for the program, heightening the odds of an emergency that will plunge millions into financial distress just months before the pivotal 2024 election.

Now, with time running out for the ACP, the FCC has been forced to begin shutting down the program - halting new signups and warning users their benefits are about to be suspended.

"Because of political gameplay, about 60 million Americans will have to make hard choices between paying for the internet or paying for food, rent, and other utilities, widening the digital divide in this country," said Gigi Sohn, a former top FCC official. "It's embarrassing that a popular, bipartisan program with support from nearly half of Congress will end because of ***politics***, not policy."

Without the aid, low-income Americans like George would be priced out of home internet service. The prospect of losing a critical lifeline to the modern economy has put ACP subscribers on edge. Many tell CNN they are irate at Congress for letting them down and, through inaction, taking away a basic, essential utility.

"My grandkids, they make fun of me," George said with a chuckle. "They say I'm cheap. I go, 'No, Grandma's thrifty.' I don't have any choice; I have to account for every penny. And this would mean that that food bill would have to be cut down. There's no place else I would be able to take it from."

Military families, older Americans and rural residents most at risk

The ACP has quickly gained adoption since Congress created the program in the 2021 bipartisan infrastructure law. It is [*overwhelmingly popular*](https://digitalprogress.tech/acp-poll2024/) with both political parties, surveys show.

Military families account for almost half of the ACP's subscriber base, according to [*the White House*](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/02/06/fact-sheet-as-affordable-connectivity-program-hits-milestone-of-providing-affordable-high-speed-internet-to-23-million-households-nationwide-biden-harris-administration-calls-on-congress-t/?utm_campaign=Newsletters&utm_medium=email&utm_source=sendgrid) and an [*outside survey*](https://www.bsgco.com/acp-fact-sheet) backed by Comcast.

More than a quarter of ACP users live in rural areas, the same survey said, with roughly 4 in 10 enrolled households located in the southern United States alone. As many as 65% of respondents said they feared losing their job without the ACP; 3 out of 4 said they worry about losing online health care services, and more than 80% said they believe their kids would fall behind in school.

Large swaths of the ACP's user base trend older; Americans over 65 account for almost 20% of the program. And as many as 10 million Americans who use the program are at least age 50.

Michelle McDonough, 49, works part time at a tobacco shop in Maine and lives off Social Security disability payments. She is one statistics class away from earning an associate degree in behavioral health. Not only does she go to class virtually, but she also sees a psychiatrist who only meets patients through telehealth visits.

Like George, McDonough also expects she'll have to cut back on groceries if the ACP goes away. There's a library roughly five miles from her home with internet access, but having to go out of her way would cost her even more time and money she doesn't have, she said. Besides, McDonough added, her car is dying and the library is rarely open in snowy weather.

If politicians allow the ACP to collapse, it will be a sign of how out of touch they are with their voters, McDonough said.

"I'm trying to become a productive member of society, something that they say people on low income are not," McDonough said. "I'm trying. And, you know, one of the programs that's helping me, they're talking about taking it away - when there are definitely a lot of other things that they probably could take the funding from."

How the ACP works to bring American communities online

Congress authorized the ACP with an initial $14 billion in funding in 2021. That money has now spread to virtually every congressional district in the country. It is the largest internet affordability program in US history, the government has said, describing it as working hand-in-glove with billions of dollars in new infrastructure spending.

Building out high-speed internet cables is costly; even more so to places that internet providers have traditionally overlooked as unprofitable or hard to reach. Historically, that has left millions of people with no or spotty service or facing sky-high prices just to get a basic internet plan.

Investing in infrastructure is a first step, but it means nothing if Americans cannot afford the connectivity it provides. So the ACP helps bridge that price gap for consumers while also benefiting internet providers, many of whom say the program ensures a base of demand to support building in otherwise money-losing markets.

"I can think of lots of examples where we're boring under a river to get to two customers, and that was extremely costly," said Gary Johnson, CEO and general manager of Paul Bunyan Communications, a Minnesota-based telecom cooperative serving some of the furthest reaches of the state. "To get fiber in the most rocky areas, we're literally using a rock saw and we're cutting, slicing a path through that rock so we can put our fiber cable in. The fact you're dividing that [cost] over a very small number of customers? That's ultimately challenging."

In a recent [*FCC survey*](https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-400836A1.pdf), more than half of rural respondents - and 47% of respondents overall - said the ACP was their first-ever experience with having home internet.

Extra shifts, grocery cuts: What an ACP collapse would mean

If the ACP collapses, some, like George and McDonough, will make cuts to their budget to stay online.

Kamesha Scott, a 29-year-old mother in St. Louis who works two jobs delivering Amazon packages and handling restaurant takeout orders, told CNN she would have to pick up extra shifts to make ends meet. And that would mean seeing her two kids even less, she said.

Expect others to resort to a mishmash of ad hoc solutions, policy experts say.

That could include using the free Wi-Fi at fast-food restaurants, school parking lots, and other public spaces. Or it could mean falling back on cellphone data service, at least where it's available and plans are still affordable.

Roughly a third of the country's 123,000 public libraries offer mobile hotspot lending, allowing visitors to borrow palm-sized devices that pump out a cellular signal that can substitute for home internet service in a pinch, said Megan Janicki, a policy expert at the American Library Association. But they aren't a perfect solution: The cell signal may be weak, or users could have to wait to check one out.

"Depending on how long the waitlist is, they're waiting at least three weeks, if not longer," Janicki said.

ACP subscribers could turn to other government aid. The FCC's [*Lifeline*](https://www.fcc.gov/lifeline-consumers) program, which dates to the Reagan administration, similarly gives low-income households a monthly discount on phone or internet service. But the benefit pales in comparison: It's worth only $9.25 a month, or $34.25 for tribal subscribers - a fraction of what ACP subscribers are currently eligible for.

Turning low-income Americans into political pawns

Despite the ACP's popularity, routine congressional gridlock and the ***politics*** of an election year have turned low-income Americans into unwitting - and in many cases unwilling - pawns in a much larger battle.

Earlier this year, a bipartisan group of Senate and House lawmakers [*unveiled legislation*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/09/tech/us-lawmakers-propose-usd7-billion-extension-for-expiring-federal-internet-discounts/index.html) to authorize $7 billion to save the ACP - that's $1 billion more than the Biden administration asked for.

The bill has not moved.

"The House Republicans attempting to demonstrate that they are cutting back on government spending makes re-funding the ACP very difficult," Blair Levin, a telecom industry analyst at New Street Research, wrote in a research note in January. "It is unlikely the House Republican leadership will allow the bill to go to the floor."

But there is growing evidence that money spent through the ACP ends up saving taxpayers in the long run. In a recent study, [*Levin said,*](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-end-of-the-affordable-connectivity-program-is-almost-here-threatening-to-widen-the-digital-divide/) researchers estimated that every $1 of ACP spending [*increases US GDP*](https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/2311/2311.02431.pdf) by $3.89, while [*other research*](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2800164) has outlined how telemedicine can lead to substantial savings in health care.

Even though extending ACP benefits could help lawmakers from both parties as they head home to campaign, perhaps the biggest political beneficiary may be Biden as his campaign touts the administration's economic record ahead of the election.

Jonathan Blaine, a freelance software engineer in Vermont and an ACP subscriber, pins the blame on certain Republicans that he says would rather hurt working-class people than give Biden a political victory.

"You guys seem to promote that you're for the working-class people, but realistically, the working-class people are the ones that you're screwing over most of the time," Blaine said, speaking directly to GOP lawmakers. "You're taking ACP away from the farmers that can check the local produce prices and be able to reasonably negotiate their prices with retailers. You're removing disabled people's ability to fill their prescriptions online."

Lawmakers are likely to feel voters' wrath in November if the ACP falls apart, Blaine added.

He called it "sickening" that lawmakers keep removing these benefits for poorer Americans from legislation "left and right."

"But the fact that you sit there and smile to our faces trying to say you're for the working class? You're for the poor? You're for the less fortunate? It's absolute bulls\*\*t," he added. "And most of us see right through your bulls\*\*t, and that is why you're losing seats."

By Brian Fung, CNN

TM & © 2024 Cable News Network, Inc., a Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

**Load-Date:** March 23, 2024

**End of Document**