**Minneapolis: a patchwork quilt of digital inequality**

While Minnesota and the Twin Cities are highly ranked for tech access nationwide, the digital map of Minneapolis is a patchwork of inequality.

Though plenty of neighborhoods across Minneapolis saw improved Internet access the past three years, about 15 percent of households – roughly 25,000 in all – don’t have Internet connected computers at home, a divide cut along racial and socioeconomic lines. And 9 percent don’t have Internet connections at all.

“The [digital] divide has gotten much finer”, it’s more “shades of gray,” said Jennifer Nelson, director of State Library Services with the Minnesota Department of Education, adding that “the gaps are narrowing but getting deeper.”

With only six percent of whites lacking home connectivity compared to about 24 percent of black people and 10 percent of other minorities, the city’s poorest and most racially segregated areas are two to five times less connected than everyone else.

These trends are outlined in the annual Minneapolis Community Technology survey, which the city’s chief information officer Otto Doll says points to digital gaps related to education, race, age and income.

And it’s not just about a lack of technology, since only about half of survey takers in the Hawthorne and Jordan neighborhoods said home Internet access was essential -- sentiments shared among older, less educated and poorer respondents across the city.

Cellphones with mobile Internet are increasingly common, though the north side still lags behind, where households lacking mobile Internet connections still ranged between 22 percent and 35 percent.

Even those with smartphones may find those devices aren’t quite smart enough for tasks like applying for jobs or running complex applications, Nelson said, situations where laptops or desktops would fare better. And that’s a significant challenge since the survey reports about a third of the unemployed seeking work don’t have Internet connections.

While every public library has at least one Internet-connected computer, according to Nelson, the survey shows about a quarter of respondents didn’t use them or other publicly available devices, a trend that’s even greater in some poorer areas of the city.

And though USI Wireless offers more than 100 free Wi-Fi hotspots throughout Minneapolis, along with paid plans people can use at home, only about 28 percent of survey respondents said they used that or similar services.

**Minneapolis’ quilt of digital inequality**

While Minnesota and the Twin Cities often rank highly in national measures of technological access, the digital map of Minneapolis is a patchwork of inequality.

Digital connectivity improved overall across Minneapolis from 2012 to 2014, according to data from the annual Minneapolis Community Technology Survey. But 15 percent of households – nearly 25,000 – don’t have Internet-connected computers at home, a technological divide cut along racial and socioeconomic lines that persisted particularly in north and central neighborhoods.

“The [digital] divide has gotten much finer”, it’s more “shades of gray,” said Jennifer Nelson, director of State Library Services with the Minnesota Department of Education, adding that “the gaps are narrowing but getting deeper.”

Citywide, only 6 percent of whites lacked online connectivity in their homes, compared to about 24 percent of black people and 10 percent of other minority survey respondents. Northern and central regions of Minneapolis – which have more diverse populations – often saw two or three times the percentage of households lacking connected computers than other regions of the city.

Otto Doll, the city’s chief information officer, pointed to digital equity gaps related to education, race, age and income. For instance, older and less educated respondents placed lesser value on digital technology, while those making less than $50,000 per year were more likely to be unconnected – including about a third of the unemployed seeking work.

Only about 55 percent of survey takers in the Hawthorne and Jordan neighborhoods said Internet access was essential to have at home, an answer that scored more than 70 percent nearly everywhere outside central and northern parts of the city.

And despite high percentages of cellphone ownership in Minneapolis, households lacking phones with mobile Internet connections still ranged between 22 percent and 35 percent among north side neighborhood clusters.

Nelson explained a further divide where people leaning on smartphones may find those devices aren’t quite smart enough to step in for Internet-connected desktops or laptops, which are better for running complex applications, searching for jobs, submitting documents and the like. Every public library has at least one public computer and Internet access, she said, which can help fill those needs.

But about a quarter of survey respondents said they didn’t use public computers like those found at the library, a trend also seen to an equal or greater degree among northside and central neighborhoods.

And though USI Wireless offers more than 100 free Wi-Fi hotspots throughout Minneapolis along with paid plans people can use at home, only about 28 percent of survey respondents said they used wireless Internet at home as of 2014.

The city’s technology survey, which is entering its fourth year, is slated to release 2015 data later this year.