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Digital gaps still divide Minnesota and the nation along racial, economic and geographic lines, even as high-speed Internet becomes more widespread and indispensable to people's lives.

Nationally, about 77 percent of Americans have a high-speed internet connection, served up via broadband networks either on their home computers, tablets, phones or other devices, [according to 2015 data](#) released this month by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. Minnesota, while slightly ahead of the national rate, lags behind many states on the West Coast and Northeast where home broadband is most common.

Measuring whether someone has broadband at home – which the survey defines as either cable, DSL, fiber optic, satellite, mobile broadband, or fixed wireless online connections on any device – has basically become a proxy for whether they have internet at all. Older forms of online connectivity have become relatively rare. (About 14,000 households still use dial-up in Minnesota.)

New Hampshire boasted the highest connectivity with 85

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percent, followed closely by 12 other states. Minnesota came in at about 80 percent, according to the survey conducted in 2015. More recent studies limited to Minnesota yielded slightly higher estimates for the state. Many of the states with the lowest rates are in the south, with Mississippi resting at the bottom with 61 percent. Minnesota's neighbors – Wisconsin, Iowa, North Dakota and South Dakota – fall just below the national average.

Lower connectivity rates among certain demographic groups raises concerns because the internet has increasingly become crucial to seeking jobs, taking classes, finding places to live, monitoring bank accounts, using government services and staying informed on current events. About a third of black and Hispanic households nationally and a quarter in Minnesota don't have home broadband on any device. Asians, however, have the highest rates of home broadband, just outpacing white households.

Nationally, about half of households making less than \$20,000 a year lack broadband internet. Meanwhile nearly everyone making \$75,000 or more reported having it. Similar trends are visible among those without a high school diploma when compared to those with college degrees. Residents of metro areas also tend to have more broadband internet than those in non-metro regions, according to the 2015 American Community Survey data. More recent data made public this summer by [Connect Minnesota](#) found that 98 percent of Twin Cities area households have broadband compared to 84 percent of outstate households.

While there's still [an urban/rural digital divide in Minnesota](#), broadband connectivity has increased statewide across different speed tiers, including in outstate Minnesota. For instance, though rural counties like Marshall, Yellow Medicine and Aitkin have less than half their households with wired broadband, outstate areas like Red Lake, Cook and Rock now have nearly complete coverage, according to the 2017 Connect Minnesota data.

The disconnect for some of these counties seems at least partially rooted in the number of companies providing internet access in their communities. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) data shows many areas with only one or no broadband providers for home connections. (This doesn't include mobile phone connections.)

As for why some people have broadband internet and others don't, research reveals a variety of reasons related to educational and economic challenges, with availability playing only a small role. Among Minnesotans who don't have home broadband, 41 percent said they viewed it as irrelevant, [according a 2013 Connect Minnesota study on technology use](#), while about 19 percent saw cost as the biggest barrier and 13 percent blamed a lack of digital literacy. Only 6 percent said it had to do with availability issues.

It's also worth noting that the FCC changed the definition of high-speed, or broadband, internet in 2015 from a minimum of 4Mbps download/1Mbps upload to 25Mbps download/3Mbps upload, increasing the number of Americans without connections considered as broadband. Regardless, faster broadband speeds have become increasingly common throughout Minnesota in recent years, and in a relatively short period of time. It remains to be seen whether U.S. internet speeds, which [the FCC reports](#) lag behind many other countries in certain ways, will eventually catch up internationally. – *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

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NFL's ratings woes continued in Week 2, and Wall Street is taking notice, given there are fewer excuses for falling viewership than there were a year ago when Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were distracting TV-watching Americans.

While NFL games remain some of the most-watched content on television, ratings slid 12 percent in the NFL's opening weekend, with many blaming Hurricane Irma. But without dramatic weather, the second weekend was off 15 percent year-over-year. This comes after an 8 percent ratings slump last season. Guggenheim Securities analyst Michael Morris said he had been optimistic heading into the new season because audiences would appreciate some changes, including fewer commercial breaks and allowing players to creatively celebrate touchdowns. Now, though, he says, "early results do not support this optimism."

Jefferies analyst John Janedis figures CBS, ESPN, Fox and NBC will generate about \$2.5 billion in NFL advertising revenue this season, but a 10 percent shortfall could translate to a \$200 million cut in earnings. Since the NFL season opened Sept. 7, shares of NBC parent Comcast are off 9 percent, ESPN parent Disney has seen its stock drop 3 percent and shares of CBS are down 5 percent. Only shares of 21st Century Fox have risen in that time frame, up 2 percent. "Continued declines in NFL ratings again this season will likely place further downward pressure on media stocks," said Morris.

He added, in fact, that "the NFL is an indicator of overall primetime programming ratings performance."

Pundits, meanwhile, continue to opine on the reason for the fall, with some trying mightily to dismiss a J.D. Power survey in July that put most of the blame on players who protest the National Anthem, the most prominent of them being Colin Kaepernick, who does not currently play for an NFL team. That survey indicated 30 percent of the viewers who watched less football in 2016 than they did the season prior said they did so because they were offended by players protesting the anthem. Broadcasters know it's a storyline that has continued into the current season and the networks usually point their cameras at the players who kneel during the anthem.

The second-most cited reason for tuning in less was "game delays, including penalty flags" (24 percent), followed by a three-way tie at 18 percent between "off-field image problems with domestic violence," "excessive commercials and advertising" and "presidential election coverage." The league and broadcasters have cut back on ads but domestic violence is front and center in 2017 again, this time courtesy of Dallas Cowboys superstar running back Ezekiel Elliott. The league alleges Elliott physically abused a former girlfriend and is trying to suspend him for six games while representatives for Elliott are duking it out with the NFL in courtrooms, generating headlines every step of the way.

Way down on the list of survey results is the bugaboo that has been distressing all Hollywood lately: "cord cutting, i.e. canceling my subscriptions to cable or satellite TV." That answer was cited 6 percent of the time on the J.D. Power survey. Consumers without cable or satellite package can still view NFL games via streaming on online services like CBS All Access, Sling TV, Amazon Prime and the like, which, of course, siphons viewers away from traditional outlets. "When the dust settles, it looks like the (virtual pay-TV providers) may have gained more traction than consensus expectations, even with modest marketing spend," Janedis said.

It's not all doom and gloom of course. Last year, 31 of the Top 100 programs on TV were NFL games, and Michael Nathanson of MoffettNathanson predicted last week that NBC's *Sunday Night Football* and ESPN's *Monday Night Football* would grow their audiences this year over last year based on better matchups. Fox, meanwhile, says viewership for its Cowboys vs. Denver Broncos game Sunday, which was delayed due to lightning, was up 18 percent over a game it broadcast a week before. And 12.3 million viewers ages 18-49 watched the Detroit Lions beat the New York Giants on Monday, up from 11.4 million who watched *Monday Night Football* on ESPN a week prior.

Plus, NFL Network says its *Thursday Night Football* broadcast of the Houston Texans beating the Cincinnati Bengals drew 8.1 million viewers, up 32 percent over the average of four Thursday night games on the network last year. The exclusive presentation of that contest was also the most-streamed regular season game ever across NFL Mobile by Verizon and the NFL's digital properties.

Also working in favor of the NFL and its broadcast partners is an explosion in the popularity of fantasy sports. According to the Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 53.5 million people participate in the U.S., with 66 percent of them playing fantasy football — and they watch NFL games and visit websites like ESPN.com and CBSSports.com far more frequently than those who do not play fantasy. — **Hollywood Reporter**

