San Francisco's Digital Deserts

How San Francisco Chinatown and other neighborhoods are left behind in the digital divide

Access to reliable, high-speed broadband internet is increasingly essential to employment, education, community, and sustainable local economies. Without consistent, fast, affordable internet, many individuals face barriers in working from home, attending classes, completing coursework, and accessing virtual healthcare appointments. Small businesses lose out on economic growth. Unfortunately, in San Francisco, the nation's technological powerhouse, this critical resource is not universally accessible — leaving low-income and limited-English proficient (LEP) communities of color largely cut off from the digital world.

In 2023, Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA) conducted research to better understand the scope and scale of digital inequities in Chinatown and other communities of color in San Francisco. We used multiple methods for our investigation: a review of federal, state, and local policies; interviews with government officials; interviews with dozens of community residents, leaders, and partners; case studies of internet access points; and quantitative analysis of internet prices and speeds for 105 randomly-selected residential and business addresses across all 11 supervisorial districts of San Francisco. Our findings were not surprising but demonstrate the work San Francisco policymakers must make in order to close the digital divide:

Report Findings

Citywide

For AT&T, one of the largest internet service providers in San Francisco, addresses in high-poverty neighborhoods had far less access to plans with 100 Mbps or faster speeds compared to addresses in low-poverty neighborhoods. This means that the slower plans in high-poverty neighborhoods cost about the same as high-speed plans in low-poverty neighborhoods. Higher poverty neighborhoods get less for the same price.

Availability

- Almost half of Chinatown households (44%) do not have an internet broadband subscription and for those who do, a common sentiment among residents and small businesses is that the internet is slow and unreliable in their community.
- High-speed internet service is not widely available. Of the nine broadband internet providers available in the community, only one offers high-speed cable. Although two ISPs offer fiber, the coverage is sparse, if not non-existent.

Cost

- Internet costs $60 a month for one CAA client. The high cost of the internet is a major barrier for families in Chinatown, where 33% live below the poverty line.
- Kai Ming Head Start's survey of 71 Chinatown parents found that 29 (40.8%) of them experience stress about their abilities to pay for internet service.
- North East Medical Services' predominantly low-income patients cannot afford monthly internet costs even with the $30 monthly Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) credit. ACP was a short-term federal program to make internet service more affordable for low-income households.
- Higher speed plans are often priced with an introductory discount, but prices surge after one year. For Chinatown's low-income residents these are predatory practices.
- Our comparison of internet plans at a Chinatown address and a North Beach address shows that residents at the North Beach address are offered maximum internet speeds that are six times higher than the maximum speeds offered to residents at the Chinatown address for the same cost despite being only five blocks apart.

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Speed and Reliability

- Chinatown residents who do have internet access find it slow and unstable, making it difficult to use Zoom and other videoconference or streaming platforms. A resident noted that it takes sometimes 30 minutes to send three photos. These low speeds are especially prevalent in single room occupancy residences (SROs) and increase the difficulty of working from home or attending virtual classes. For example, during the pandemic, children had a hard time maintaining focus with pauses or glitches in their instruction.
- Slow internet means Chinatown businesses lose out on the ability to accept cashless payments, which would allow them to generate more revenue and grow their business. A Chinatown community leader that works with local businesses stated: "One of the reasons restaurants stick to cash is because credit card machines are so slow due to poor internet, causing businesses to lose profits."
- According to federal data, Chinatown's median recorded speeds in 2021 were 59 Mbps download and 10 Mbps upload, well below the the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recommended broadband speeds of 100 Mbps download and 25 Mbps upload.

Accessibility

- Signing up for internet service, including discounted internet plans for low-income households, is a challenge for communities with limited English proficiency due to the lack of internet access, in-language support, and outreach.
- Internet service providers offer income-qualifying internet packages but signing up is a tedious process and requires digital and English literacy. Research shows that government-mandated internet plans designed for low-income families, like Comcast's Internet Essentials plan, are too slow to be relied on.
- Residents and businesses do not receive timely and adequate technical support in-language when they run into issues or service disruptions. According to our conversations, AT&T and Comcast lack adequate customer and technical support in Cantonese, the primary language spoken by Chinatown residents.
- 47% of Chinatown households do not have a desktop or laptop computer.
- In Chinatown, internet service requests can take three months to fix.

Choice

- There are only three high-speed cable and fiber internet options in Chinatown. However, fiber is very limited coverage, meaning residents only have one option for high-speed internet. This lack of choice fuels high prices for Chinatown's residents.

Policy Recommendations

The lack of quality, reliable, and affordable internet in Chinatown functions as an example of how policy decisions, lack of targeted investments, and societal neglect can lead to internet deserts, especially in communities of color and those without full language access. As a result of poor access to reliable internet, children fall behind on learning; families are unable to connect to online essential services, careers, and job opportunities; seniors stay isolated; businesses lose out on profits; and overall, communities miss out on economic mobility. We urge the city to:

1. **Expand San Francisco's Fiber to Housing Program and provide free high-speed fiber internet to all low-income neighborhoods through robust community collaboration.**
2. **Hold internet service providers (ISPs) that service San Francisco residents accountable to providing low-cost, quality internet access.**
3. **Publish a citywide Digital Equity Scorecard and commit to annual data collection and reporting.**