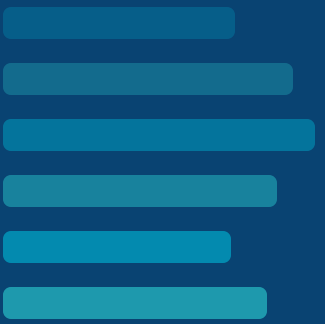
NaLA
National Lifeline Association

2026 Annual **Subscriber Survey**

Understanding the needs, challenges, and experiences of Lifeline subscribers across America.

83,370	20	2026
TOTAL RESPONSES	QUESTIONS ANALYZED	SURVEY YEAR



KEY FINDINGS

CONFIDENTIAL

Survey at a Glance

83,370 Lifeline subscribers responded to this annual survey across 20 questions covering service needs, financial access, demographics, and digital access.

72%
say all Lifeline services — talk, text, and data — are equally important

96%
cannot afford to pay any monthly fee for Lifeline service

43%
had no access to the internet before enrolling in Lifeline

91%
prefer mobile wireless with hotspot over fixed broadband

69%
actively ration their data to avoid running out each month

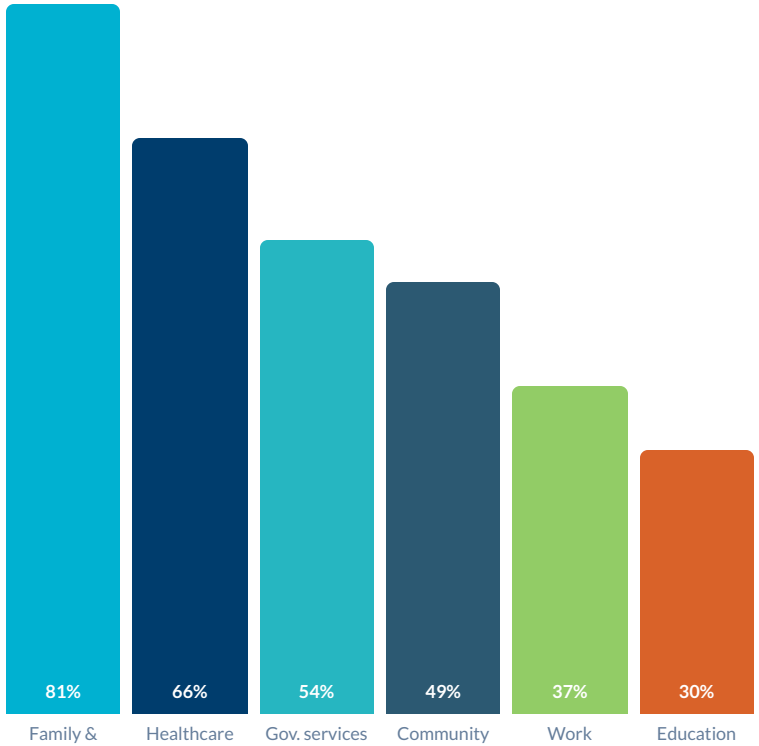
80%
report making less than $20,000 annually

Highlights for Policy Makers 1 of 2

Q4

In the past year, what have you used your Lifeline service for?

81% used Lifeline to connect with family and friends

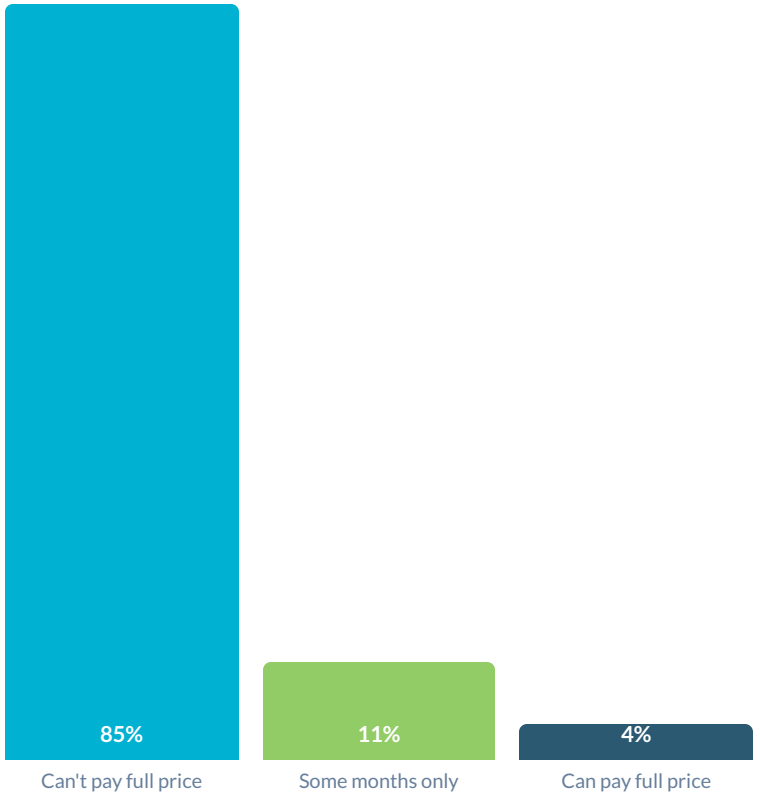


n = 83,375

Q6

If you did not have your Lifeline service, what would happen?

85% could not afford the full undiscounted price for service

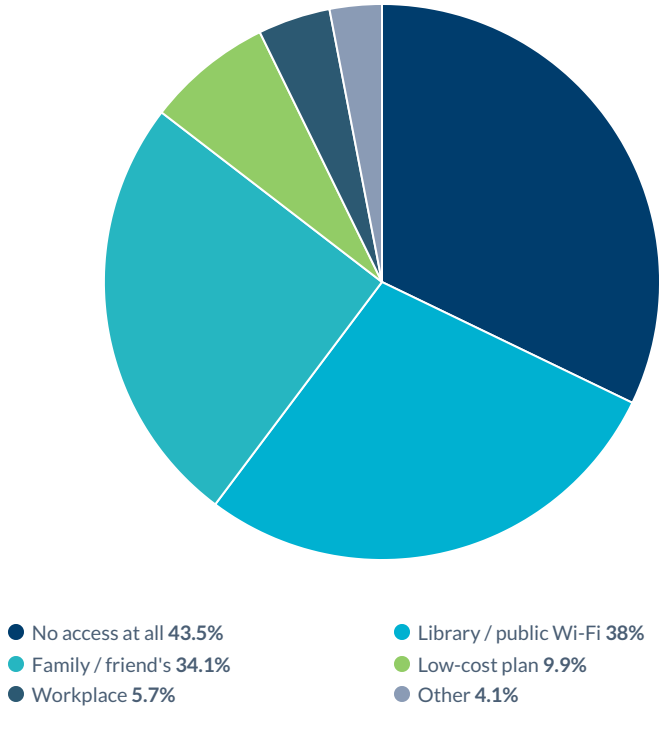


n = 79,775

Q7

How did you access the internet before enrolling in Lifeline?

43% had no access to the internet before enrolling in Lifeline



*multi-select, shown proportionally

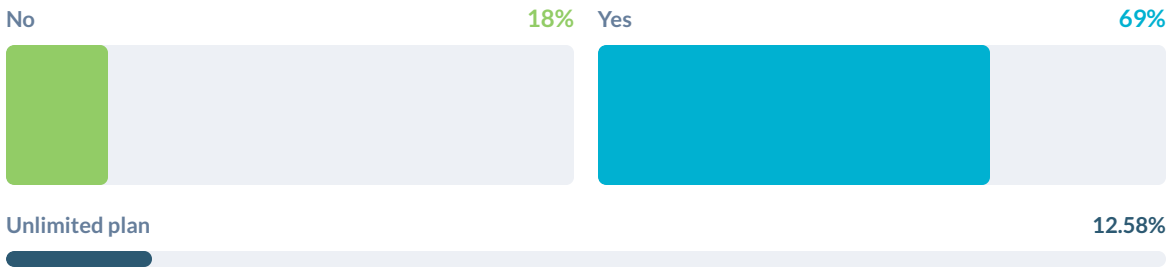
n = 79,775

Highlights for Policy Makers 2 of 2

Q9

Do you limit your data use to make sure you don't run out?

69% actively ration their data every single month

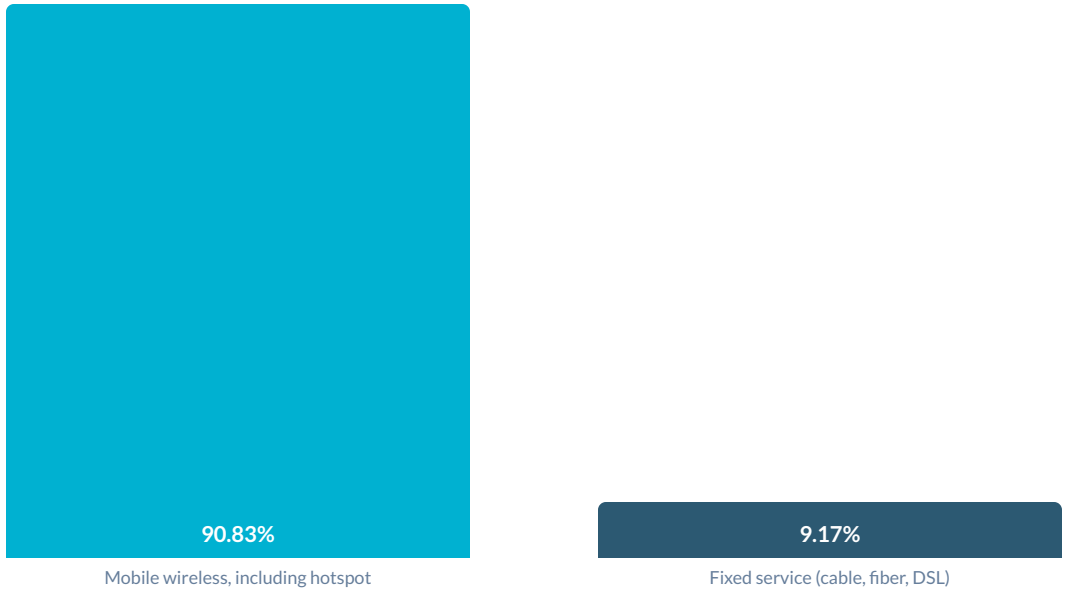


n = 79,775

Q2

Which type of Lifeline service best meets the broadband, internet access, and data needs of your household?

91% say mobile best meets the broadband, internet access, and data needs of their household



n = 83,374

Key Takeaways for Policy Makers

01

Lifeline is a lifeline — literally

96% of subscribers cannot afford any monthly fee, and 85% would lose service entirely without the discount. For most enrollees, there is no alternative.

02

Digital exclusion was the default before enrollment

43% had zero internet access before Lifeline. The program is the primary — and often only — on-ramp to connectivity for nearly half of all subscribers.

03

Current benefit levels leave subscribers in scarcity

69% actively ration data every single month to avoid running out. Subscribers are managing a benefit shortage and not accessing the internet freely.

04

Mobile access allows for enhanced connectivity

91% say mobile best meets the broadband, internet access, and data needs of their household.

05

Lifeline provides connectivity needed to improve outcomes

66% use their Lifeline service for healthcare, 37% used the service for employment, 30% for educational purposes, and 81% use it to stay connected to family and friends.

Conclusions

1 Lifeline functions as essential broadband infrastructure

With 96% unable to afford any monthly fee and 85% who would lose service entirely without the discount, Lifeline is the foundational layer of digital access — not optional assistance.

2 The digital divide is structural, not incidental

43% had zero internet access before Lifeline and 60% are unemployed or disabled. Lifeline is the primary policy instrument bridging that gap.

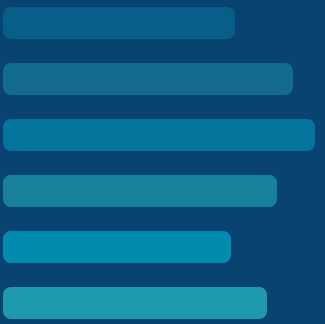
3 Benefit levels fall short of real-world data demands

69% ration data monthly and 37% don't know how much they need. The current benefit level enables incremental access, but not the sustained connectivity required for healthcare, work, and education.

4 Mobile solutions meet consumer preferences and are a necessity

91% prefer mobile wireless with hotspot over fixed broadband. For a population that is disproportionately homeless or transient, being mobile is a necessity, and policy must reflect that reality.

2026 Annual
Survey Data



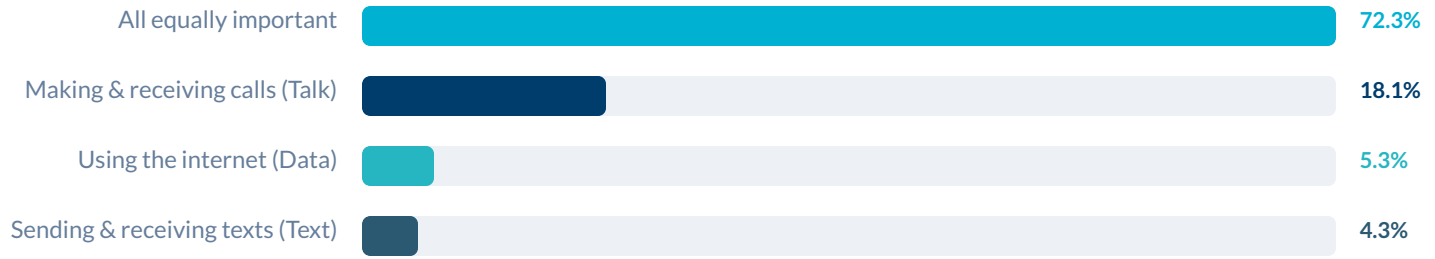
SURVEY RESULTS

Q1

What is the single most important part of the Lifeline service you receive? (choose one)

72%

say all parts of Lifeline are equally important to them



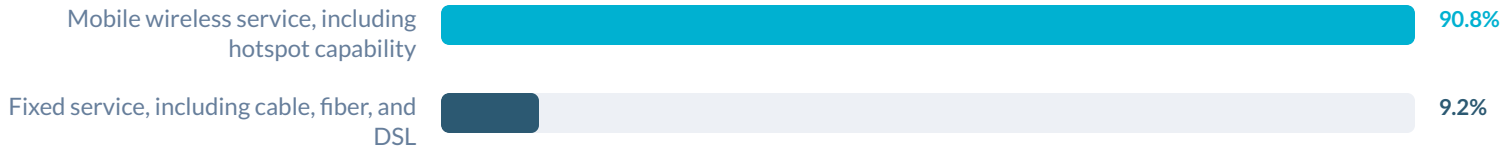
n = 83,375 responses

Q2

Which type of Lifeline service best meets the broadband, internet access, and data needs of your household? (choose one)

91%

prefer mobile wireless service with hotspot capability

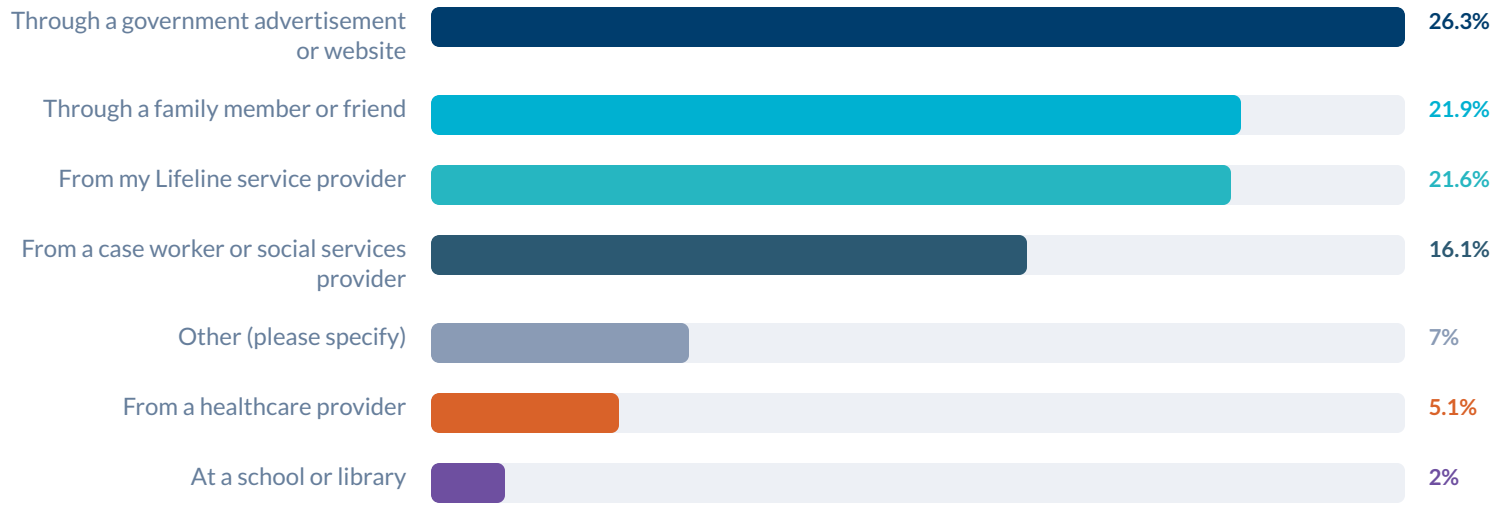


n = 83,374 responses

Q3

How did you first hear about the Lifeline program?

Lifeline service providers are a key driver of Lifeline program awareness



n = 83,369 responses

Q4

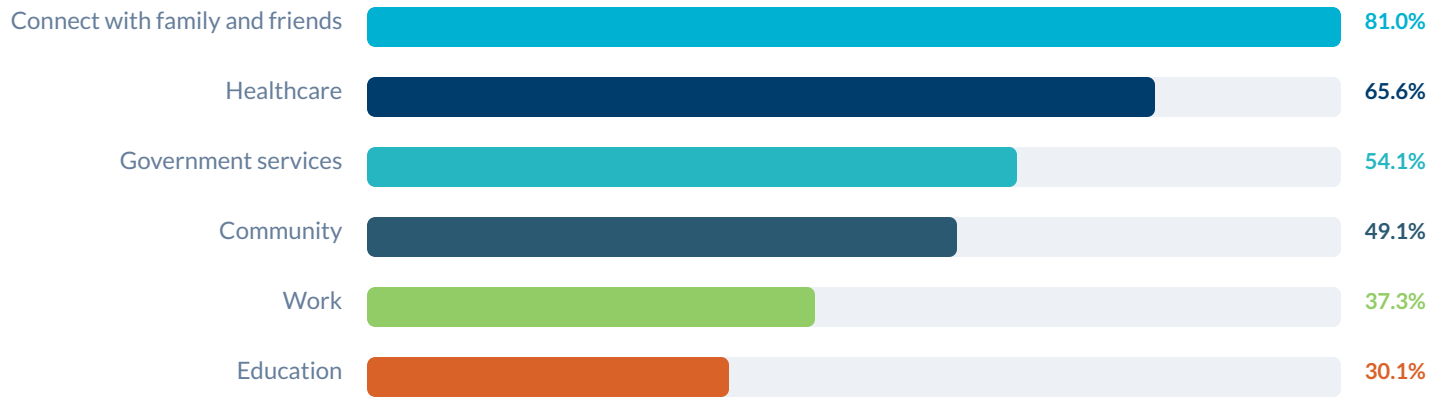
In the past year, what have you used your Lifeline service for? (choose all that apply)

81%

used Lifeline to connect with family and friends

66%

used Lifeline to connect to healthcare



n = 83,375 responses

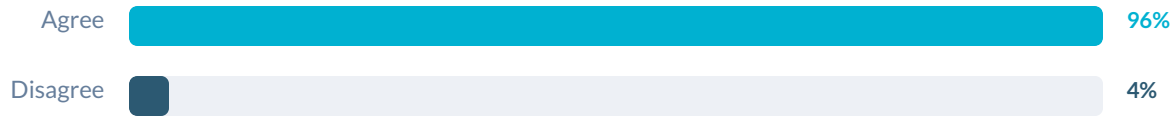
Multiple responses allowed — percentages exceed 100%

Q5

I cannot afford to pay any monthly fee for my Lifeline service.

96%

of subscribers cannot afford any monthly service fee



> *Affordable internet access and lifeline is important to me because I am disabled and I receive a monthly allotment from the government on a fixed income and I don't have enough money every month for Wi-Fi phone or using the Internet.*

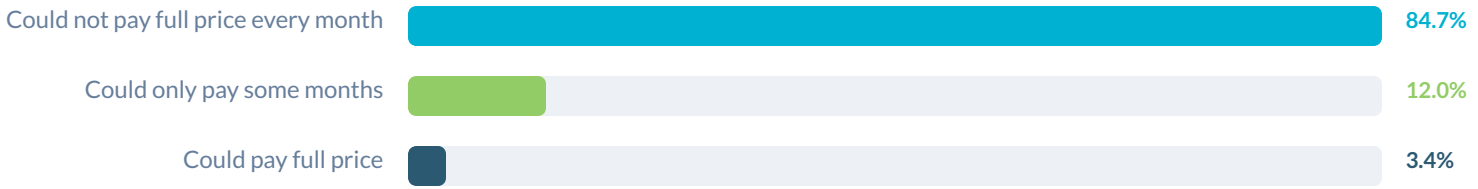
n = 79,775 responses

Q6

If you did not have your Lifeline discounted or free service, what would happen? (choose one)

85%

could not afford the full undiscounted price for service



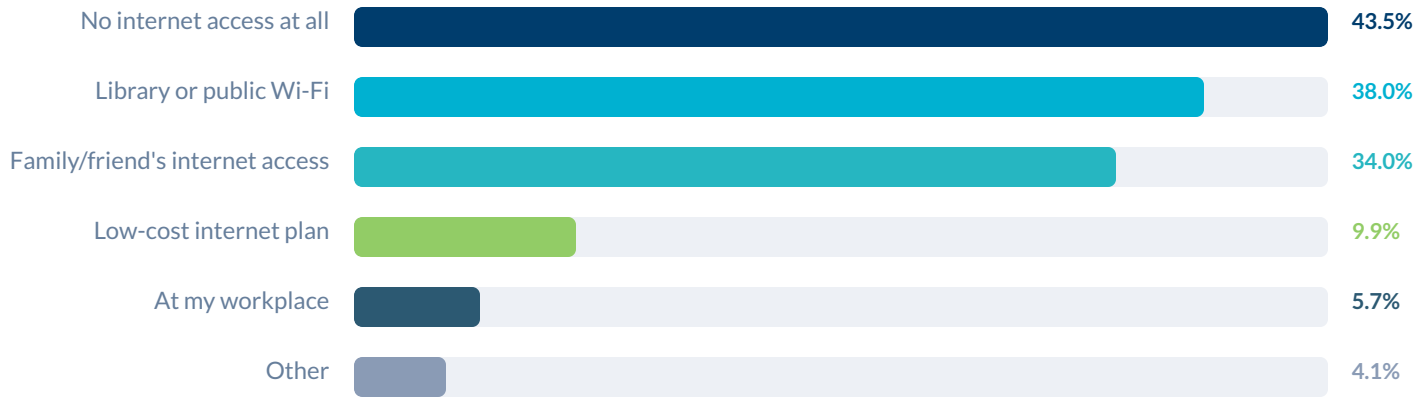
n = 79,784 responses

Q7

Before you had Lifeline, how did you access the internet? (choose all that apply)

43%

had no access to the internet before enrolling in Lifeline



n = 79,784 responses

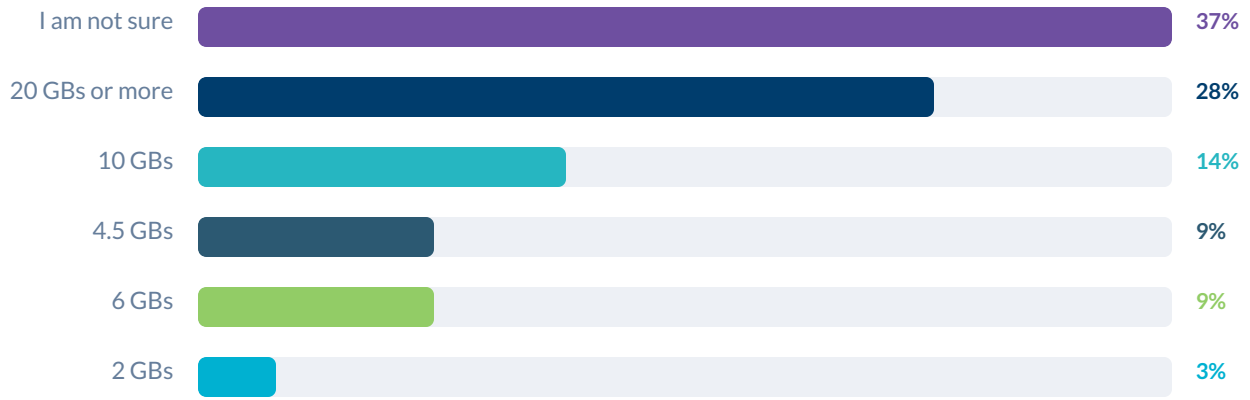
Multiple responses allowed — percentages exceed 100%

Q8

How much data/internet service is enough each month to ensure your family can access online services?

37%

are unsure — 28% say they need 20 GBs or more monthly



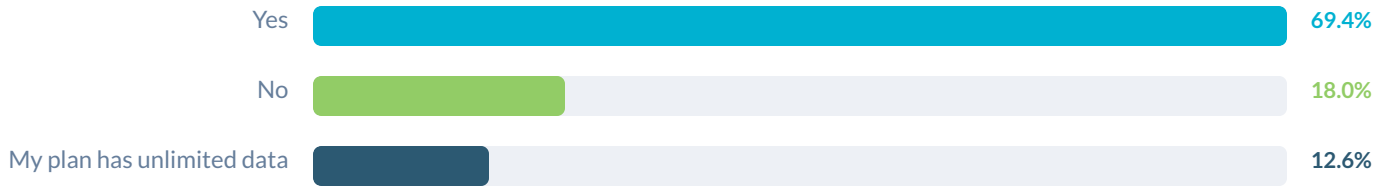
n = 79,775 responses

Q9

Do you limit your data use during the month to make sure you don't run out? (choose one)

69%

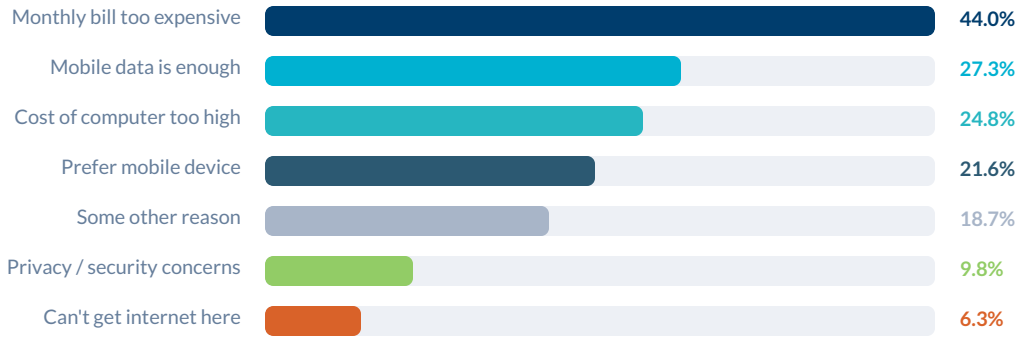
limit their data use to make sure they don't run out



n = 79,784 responses

Q10

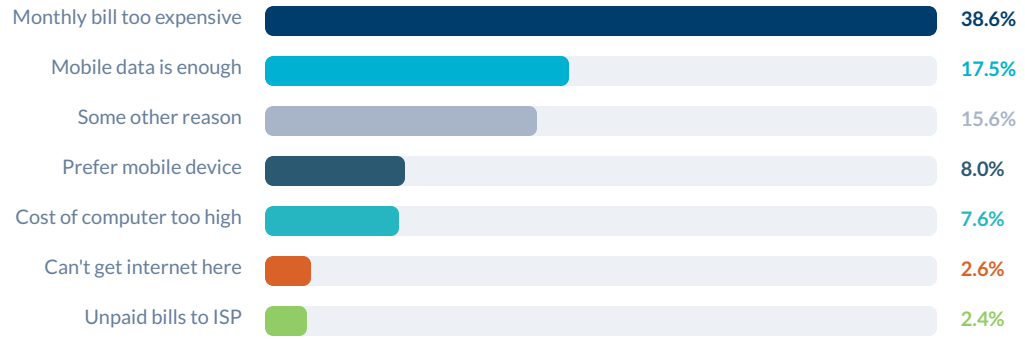
If you do not have high-speed internet at home, why not? (choose all that apply)



n = 76,885 responses

Q11

Which of the reasons below is the most important reason you do not have home internet? (choose one)



n = 76,886 responses

Affordability is the primary reason why Lifeline subscribers do not have home/fixed internet service

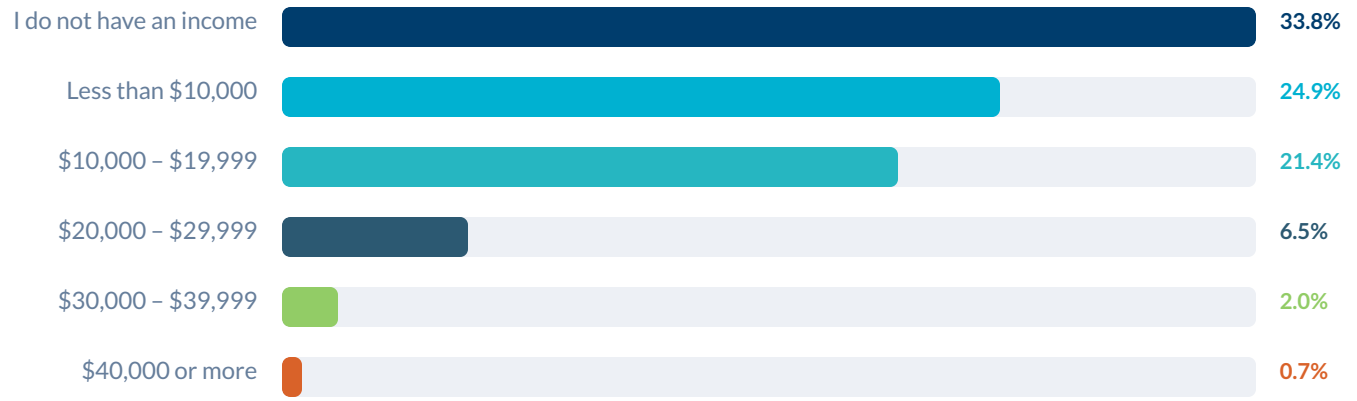
Q12

What is your total yearly household income? (choose one)

80%
earn $20,000 or less annually

58%
earn $10,000 or less annually

n = 72,036 responses

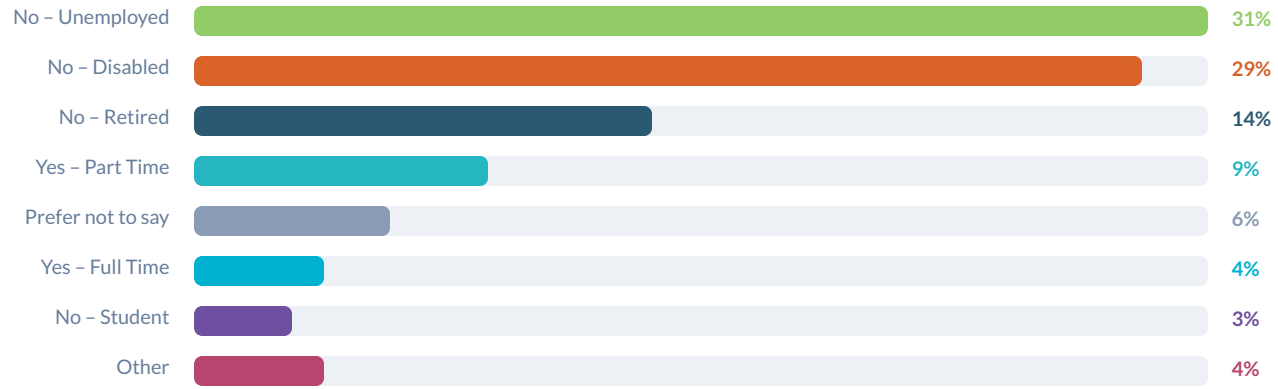


Q13

Are you currently employed?

60%

are not employed due to unemployment or disability



> *Because I don't have any income at all and I'm homeless so I can't afford to get a phone and service on my own thats why I'm so grateful for the Lifeline government free phone service that they have available to people that is struggling like me Thank you all so much!! God bless.*

n = 72,036 responses

Q14

Do you currently have a checking or savings account?



53%

do not have a checking or savings account

n = 72,036 responses

Q15

Do you currently have a credit card (not including EBT or debit cards)?



73%

do not have a credit card

n = 72,036 responses

Q16

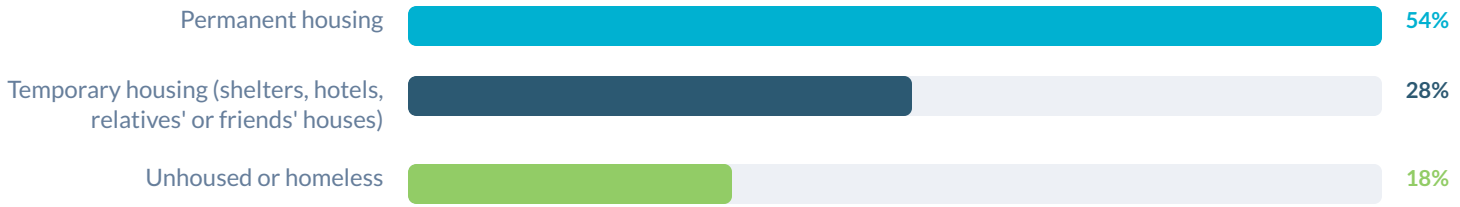
How would you describe your household's housing status?

45%

live in temporary housing or are unhoused

> *Without it I'm cutoff from the world more than I already am. As a homeless Veteran I've tried to keep my phone line going but I spend so much extra being homeless you can't buy in bulk so pay more for single serving size and bleeds over to every aspect of life. I spent my life as a Marine and then in Aerospace to defend my country and this how I end up. Thank God for lifeline it's the only thing that keeps me connected...*

n = 72,036 responses



Q17

How would you describe the area in which you currently live?



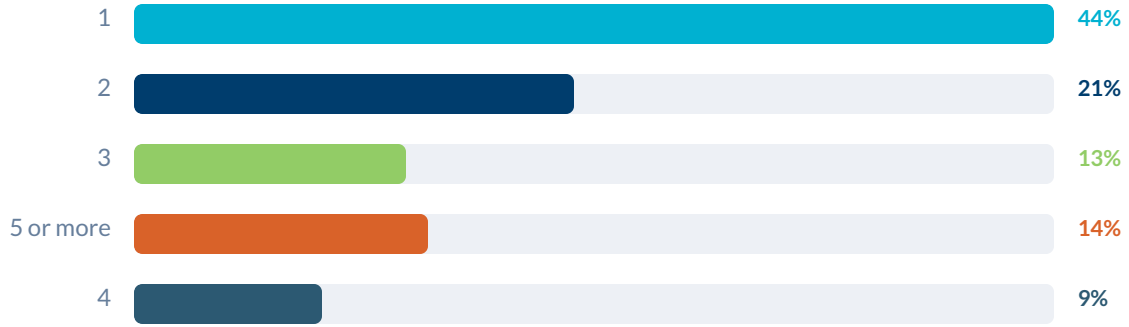
33%

identify as living in rural areas

n = 72,036 responses

Q18

How many people reside in your household?



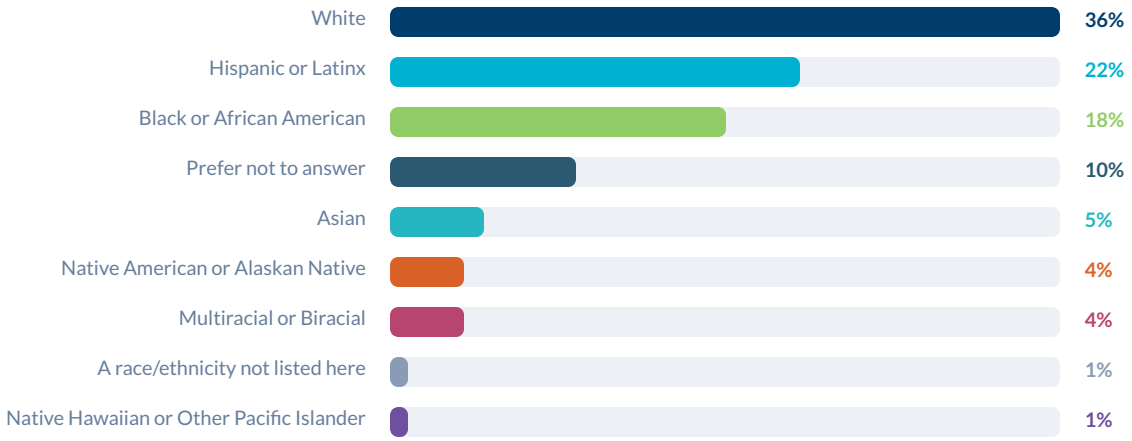
55%

of Lifeline households are multi-member households

n = 72,036 responses

Q19

Which of the following best describes your race/ethnicity?

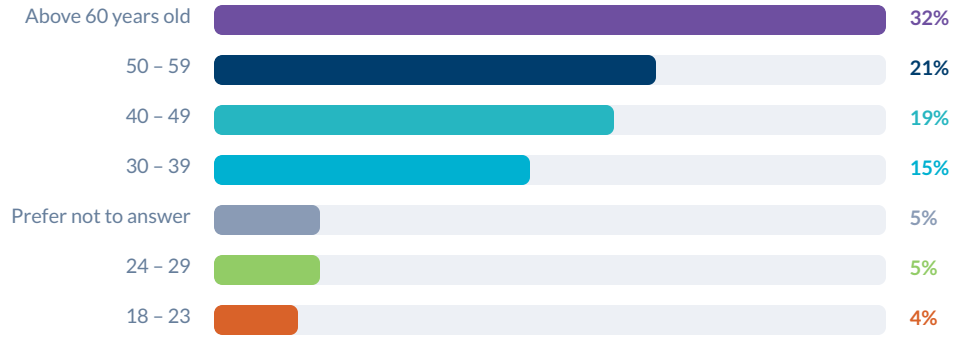


Lifeline serves a highly diverse racial and ethnic population

n = 72,036 responses

Q20

Which age range do you belong to?



53%

of subscribers are 50 years old or above

n = 72,036 responses