

Internet access: A black-and-white issue

One commonly cited estimate holds that at some point in their lives, roughly 1 million African Americans have logged onto the Internet. A new study suggests that the actual number is five times that—with more than 1 million having used the World Wide Web in the previous week.

Nevertheless, this is only a small fraction of the African Americans who would like Internet access and could benefit from it, say Donna L. Hoffman and Thomas P. Novak, marketing analysts at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. In the April 17 *SCIENCE*, they note “a persistent racial divide on the Internet” and observe that unless this unequal access to the Information Revolution is redressed, it may limit the workforce available for jobs requiring computer literacy and exacerbate racial differences in income.

Hoffman and Novak analyzed data from a recent survey of Internet use among nearly 6,000 U.S. respondents. Not surprisingly, as education climbs, so does workplace access to the Internet—by blacks and whites. However, regardless of education, whites were significantly more likely to own a computer and to have used the Web recently than were blacks.

The investigators also found that as income rises, so does computer ownership, though not equally. For households earning less than \$40,000, whites were twice as likely to have a computer. Above \$40,000, African American households were slightly more likely to have a computer at home—and at work.

The latter “suggests a very powerful bias,” Hoffman contends. “To achieve parity [in home access to the Internet], African Americans have to be much better educated, wealthy, and work in computer-related professions”—a very narrow slice of society. Among those who are not online, more blacks than whites said they desired Web access.

“The most shocking finding,” Hoffman argues, “is one not explained by income or education.” High school and college students were the group most likely to

have used the Web, and black and white students with computers at home had logged onto the Internet about equally in the last 6 months (64 versus 67 percent, respectively). In homes without computers, however, black students were only half as likely as white students to have used the Internet (16 versus 38 percent), even if their schools have computers.

This means that “white students are finding [Web] access that blacks are not enjoying,” she says. So “if we have limited resources, we need to first be sure students have [Internet access] at home,”

Listening to faith as a balm for depression

Antidepressant drugs, such as Prozac, garner much scientific attention as potent depression-busters, as does short-term psychotherapy aimed at altering self-destructive thinking habits. Now, a new study calls attention to a more traditional form of mood raising—religious devotion.

Deeply held religious faith hastens recovery from mild to moderate depression, regardless of treatment with drugs or talk therapy, according to psychiatrist Harold G. Koenig of Duke University Medical Center in Durham, N.C., and his colleagues.

In a group of elderly people suffering from both depression and any of a variety of physical illnesses, those citing firm religious convictions achieved marked mood improvements in the shortest amount of time. The highly religious individuals who displayed the fastest remissions from depression were also those who had the most severe or intransigent medical problems, the researchers found.

“Religious faith may provide such persons with a sense of hope that things will turn out all right regardless of their problems and thus foster greater motivation to achieve emotional recovery,” Koenig says. Mental health clinicians treating depressed patients should inquire about their religious beliefs and incorporate devout faith into treatment, he adds.

Koenig’s group recruited 87 people age 60 and older who received hospital care for heart or other health problems. All of the volunteers exhibited symptoms of mild to moderate depression in psychiatric interviews conducted during their hospital stays. Each participant completed four telephone interviews at 12-week intervals after leaving the hospital.

During that period, depressive symptoms such as apathy and constant sadness largely cleared up in 47 individuals. Those who initially cited a high level of “intrinsic religiosity” recovered

she maintains—before society worries about getting the public schools wired.

“I think the Internet is really the wave of the future, and all homes should be so equipped,” especially if they have children in third grade or above, says Francis I. Molina of Project 2061, an educational program run by the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, D.C.

“Personally, I agree with that,” says Gerald Wheeler, president of the National Science Teachers Association in Arlington, Va. “But that’s not the only solution,” he says. Such home access “needs to be reinforced by teachers cognizant of how to use this technology.” —J. Raloff

most quickly, the scientists report in the April *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHIATRY*. This measure, based on responses to 10 statements about religious belief, reflects the extent to which someone’s life is organized around and motivated by faith in God.

However, frequent churchgoing and private religious activities such as prayer were not linked with a speedier recovery from depression. Such behaviors don’t necessarily signify that a person’s life revolves around religious faith, Koenig says.

About half of the participants whose depression lifted received no antidepressants or psychotherapy. High intrinsic religiosity heralded a quickened pace of recovery whether or not participants received such treatment, the scientists hold.

Other factors contributed independently to shedding depression, they add. These consisted of improvements in physical functioning, lack of a family history of psychiatric disorder, and high quality of life. This last measure takes into account the presence of supportive relationships and ability to care for oneself.

Further research is needed to establish whether links exist between religious faith and mood improvement in depressed older adults who seek psychiatric help or who have severe forms of the disorder, Koenig notes.

“This study is consistent with relatively limited prior research and supports the sensible notion that religious faith is a helpful coping mechanism for many people facing life adversities,” comments psychiatrist Kenneth S. Kendler of the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond.

Studies conducted by Kendler indicate that devout adherence to a religious faith serves as a buffer against depression following stressful events for women between the ages of 20 and 50. —B. Bower



Blacks from households earning at least \$40,000 a year were slightly more likely than whites to have computer access.