Homeless and Connected

Mobile phones and the Internet in the lives of Homeless Australians
Research Findings Summary, August 2014

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Mobile phones are an essential technology for people experiencing homelessness. Yet while most have mobile phones, and many have smart phones, this doesn't mean they are able to make and receive calls or access online services reliably.

This study aimed to find out how people experiencing homelessness are accessing and using mobile phones and the Internet. Key questions were whether and how mobiles and other Internet-enabled devices are used to connect with support, government and other online services, and what are the social and economic benefits and risks that mobile technologies represent for this diverse group.

Mobile phone ownership

The study found that 95% of participants had a mobile phone. This is higher than the figure recorded by ACMA of 92% of Australians over 18. The results confirm previous studies which have found a high rate of mobile ownership in the homeless population (see for example Goodwin-Smith and Myatt 2013). The results are also higher than that recorded by Anglicare Victoria/ACCAN (87.5%) in their 2013 Hardship survey of 325 clients accessing Anglicare Emergency Relief and Financial Counselling services. Despite the high ownership the study found a large overall variation in the models and ages of phones and a variety of ways these were acquired - 45% said that they received their phone as a gift, second-hand, stolen or borrowed.

Smartphone ownership and use

Smartphones were held by 77% of participants, 8% feature phones and 15% had basic phones (Figure 1). This figure exceeds the percentage of smartphones in use in the Australian population, which ACMA estimated s 64% at May 2013. Smartphone ownership was also significantly higher than that recorded in the 2013 Anglicare Victoria Hardship survey, which found that the majority of mobile phone users (57.4%) did not have a smartphone. While the leaning in the sample towards youth (at 60%) may explain these variations, the high figure of 77% was also found to be due to the special value of smartphones for this group for Internet access and a general shift to smartphones recorded in the overall mobile service market by ACMA.

Mobile phones are essential

The results showed that mobile phones are essential for survival and safety, for gaining new skills and for moving out of homelessness. Respondents identified using their phone to contact emergency services (52%), support services (49%) and medical assistance (48%) as the most important uses of their phones after contacting friends and family. The Internet played a lesser role for contacting emergency services and for safety but was identified as more important for finding accommodation, employment and for maintaining professional ties, with 47% using the Internet to look for a job, 33% for being contacted by employers and 33% for learning new skills.

Differences between smart and non-smartphone users underscores the importance of the smartphone as a facilitator and extender of Internet use and social participation. 29% of smartphone users used their phone to access the Internet and 63% used it in combination with another Internet source compared to 30% of non-smartphone users who used their mobile phone to access the Internet in combination with another Internet source and 15% who did not use the Internet at all.

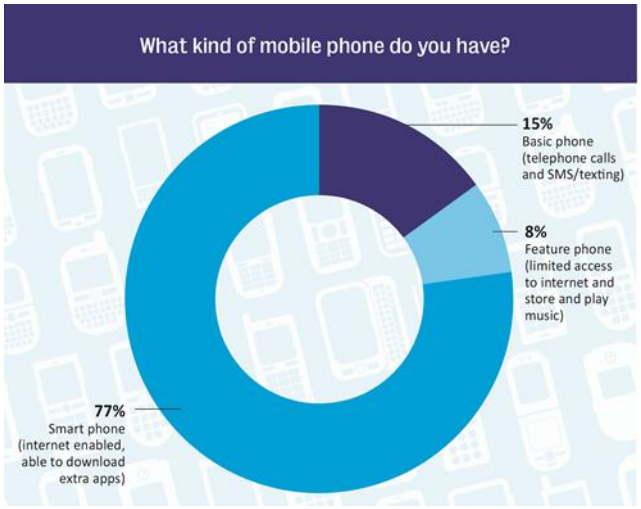

Figure 1 – Mobile phone type

Smartphone users also performed a wide range of activities making use of social media and online services: 51% used online banking, 64% downloaded apps, 69% played games and 76% used social networking sites (this compared to 44%, 54%, 60% and 67% of all mobile users – see Figure 2).

The smartphone is also important for maintaining contact with family members and coordinating family life. Of the 21 families involved in the study, (single persons with children and couples with children), only 3 did not have a smartphone. There are some parallels with findings by Anglicare in their 2013 Hardship survey which found that clients with dependent children had better access to home Internet than clients without dependent children and a strong link to an improved standard of living.

This research was supported by a grant from the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network.
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No guarantee of access

While most had mobile phones, this did not mean users were always able to make and receive calls or access online services. Many respondents reported having recently lost, broken or had their mobile phone stolen. Service restrictions, lack of power to recharge the battery, changes in phone number and shortage of calling credit for one or more mobile services meant that access was partial and discontinuous. 32% of participants reported difficulty recharging their handset battery, a basic condition of access that most people take for granted. Some went for lengthy periods without being able to make calls or use the Internet. A sizeable proportion (53%) reported some difficulty with their mobile payments while 3.5% found them very difficult. These difficulties staying connected could have significant impacts: support staff reported problems getting hold of their clients and in some instances, individuals and their children in situations of immediate risk were without the ability to reach help.

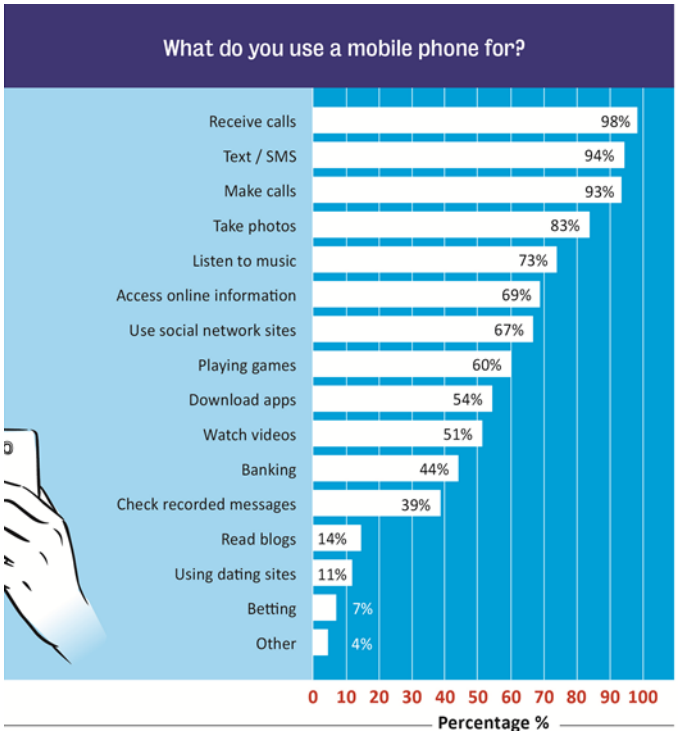

Figure 2 – Mobile phone use

Smart ways to keep costs down

Users had a variety of strategies for managing the upfront and ongoing costs associated with a mobile. The main strategy was combining a pre-paid mobile service with a mobile handset either purchased, borrowed or gifted. 82% of respondents adopted this method compared to 18% on mobile plans. Most preferred this mode of access not solely for cost reasons but because it made the ongoing expense easier to manage on a low income. Other cost savings were made through budgeting tools and apps, usage monitoring, avoiding downloads and features that used up data, using Facebook, Instant messaging, Skype and SMS for cheaper messaging, using available sources of power to recharge and limiting or avoiding voicemail. Using free WiFi and other Internet sources to reduce data spend was another key cost saving measure - 50% of smartphone users and 43% of users in total relied on WiFi hotspots.

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Still falling through the gaps

Mature male single adults who are chronically homeless made up 60% of those with no mobile phone access. This group relied on public pay phones, phones provided by government and welfare services and borrowed phones for making and receiving phone calls. They also had little or no Internet access – with 2 of the 5 reporting that they don't use the Internet at all and 3 reporting that they access the Internet from a public library or from a friend's or family member's computer. It was also found that participants with multiple support and health needs, were more likely to report difficulty paying bills and experiences of debt. Of the 23 who reported a debt with their mobile phone, 12 (57%) also reported having or having had a mental illness compared to 39% of all participants. The results are evidence that some of the most marginalised Australians are struggling to manage or are without access and receive few, if any, of the benefits of digital services.

Who was involved in the study

The study involved 7 accommodation and support services located in inner and outer metropolitan Sydney and Melbourne. A survey of 95 clients of specialist homelessness services was carried out from February to April 2014. There were 20 followup interviews with clients and support service staff.

Of those surveyed: 57 were youth aged 15-24 (60%), 21 were families (22%) (single parents with children and couples with children) and 17 were adults over 24 (18%). The gender breakdown was: 53 (56%) female and 42 (44%) male. 30 (41%) participants were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD), 10% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders, 19 (20%) identified as having a disability and 38 (43%) reported having or having experienced a mental illness.

The study adopted the ABS (2012) statistical definition of homelessness with the housing arrangements of recruits encompassing emergency housing (8%), supported housing (32%), staying (temporarily) with a friend or family member (11%), living on the street, squatting or living in a park (12%), living in a boarding house (4%) and in private rental (22%). Private rental covered living situations such as overcrowded rented accommodation or living with a threat of eviction or violence.

Recommendations

Telcos

- Recognise unique issues of people experiencing homelessness in hardship policies, contact methods and staff training.
- Create and extend aid and subsidy programs to support mobile and data services and make mobile credit recharge/discount options available to services supporting people who are homeless and in crisis.

Government Agencies and Support Services

- Improve community phone and Internet facilities to assist telephone/online access by people experiencing homelessness.
- Ensure cost-effective access points to government services from mobile devices such as 1800 numbers, call back, live chat and text.
- Preserve alternate contact and service points for non-digital and digital customers without online access.
- Build digital capacity of staff and services to support clients better online and via mobile.

Recommendations are detailed in the full report available from the ACCAN website. www.accan.org.au