

Internet Access in New Hanover County by Socioeconomic Status: Before, During, and After Hurricane Florence

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During and After Hurricane Florence

Background

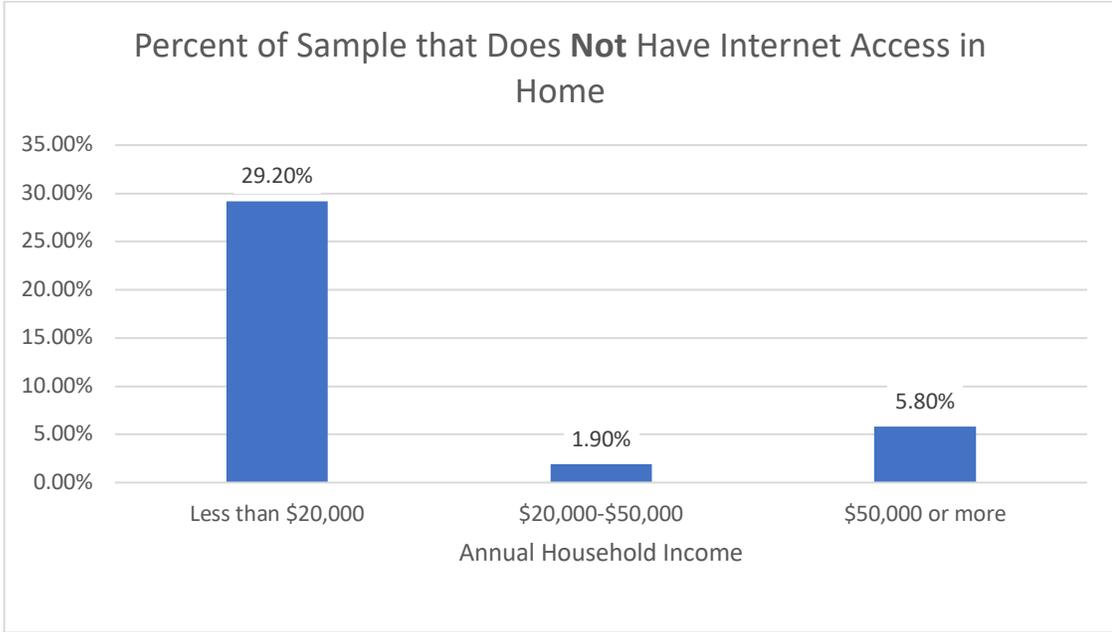
The purpose of this study is to evaluate what the levels of access to internet are in New Hanover County (NHC), and how internet access varies across socioeconomic classes in this community. To support this research question, I also investigated the percent of our sample that evacuated during Hurricane Florence, how long they evacuated for, and how that varied by socioeconomic class. These research topics are becoming increasingly important to study as our society at large becomes more dependent on technology and internet for education/school, work, and daily interactions. A lack of internet access can limit opportunities such as finding work, obtain an education, accessing news and government information, and creating social support networks (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson 2001). It is especially important to investigate during times of natural disaster because sociological research has shown that natural disasters increase economic inequalities - with the wealthy gaining money and the poor losing money (Howell and Elliot 2018). As those who live in Wilmington and surrounding areas well know, New Hanover Country is still recovering from fall 2018's Hurricane Florence, making this study very relevant to the time and place we are in.

Methods

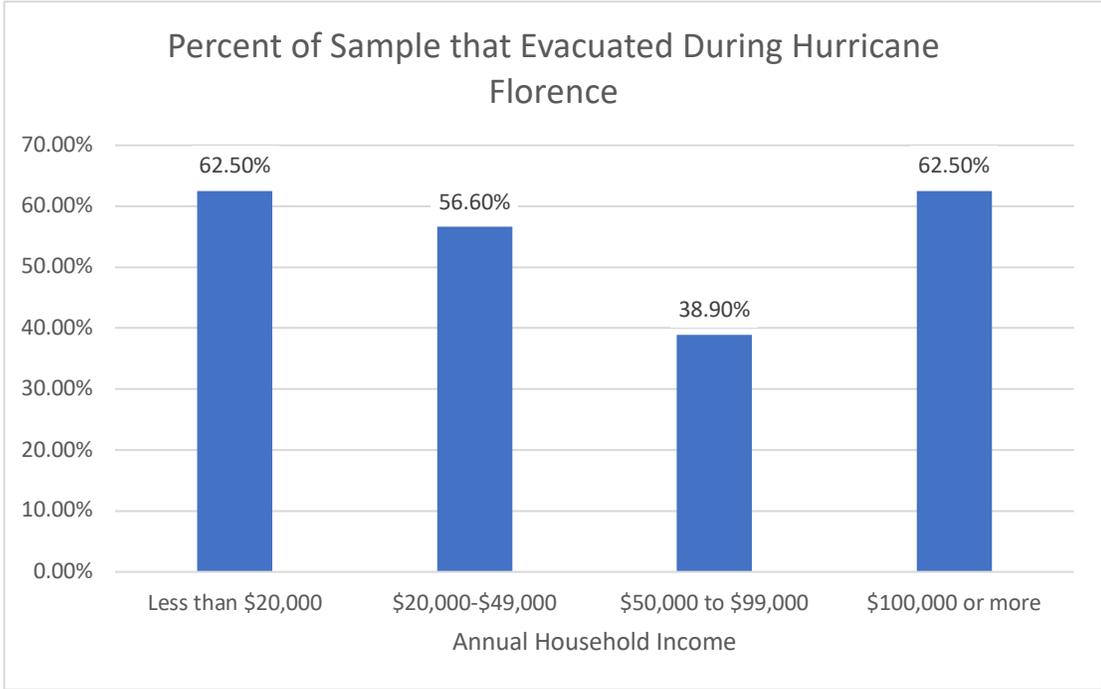
The research question my partner and I looked at together was, simply, what are the levels of access to internet in New Hanover County? The county we are focusing on has been chosen purposively, because our community research partner, Support the Port, exists in New Hanover County and supports the residents here. The research question I have addressed on my own is, what is the relationship between socioeconomic status and internet access before, during, and after Hurricane Florence in New Hanover County? Socioeconomic status would be conceptualized as total household income. All surveys were completed by participants through Qualtrics software, and taken through online links, telephone interviews, or in-person interviews at Support the Port events. IRB approval was obtained before prior to survey distribution. All data was analyzed using SPSS software, and various appropriate statistical tests were used to analyze survey data.

Results

It was found that the overall internet access for those in our sample that 89.1% of residents have internet access within their homes, and 10.9% do not. The relationship between internet access and socioeconomic status was found to be statistically significant ($F(2, n = 153) = 20.785, p < .05$). See graph below to view the percent of internet access in the home of those within the different socioeconomic status categories among those within our sample.



See graph below to view the percent of individuals within our sample that evacuated during Hurricane Florence compared to the different socioeconomic status categories.



No statistically significant relationship was found between household income and likelihood of evacuating during the hurricane. Also, no statistically significant relationship was found between household income and how long it was before an individual returned from their evacuation. However, *where* individuals evacuated to (family/ friend's house, hotel, etc.) was not investigated in this project, and doing so may reveal differences among the different socioeconomic status'.

For after the hurricane, household income was compared with if an individual had internet access when they returned from their evacuation. No statistically significant relationship was found between these two variables.

Discussion/Implications

That there was a statistically significant relationship between household income and internet access, and that almost one in three of those earning a household income of less than \$20,000 do not have access to internet are important findings from this project. Although no statistically significant relationship was found between household income and evacuation, the statistical test still showed that those with an income of less than \$20,000 were more likely to evacuate (62.5% of sample evacuated) than those with higher incomes (56.6% of individuals within income of \$20,000-\$40,000, 46.2% of those with an income of \$50,000 or higher). It is an interesting finding in and of itself that household income and likelihood to evacuate, as well as *how long* it is before one returns home after evacuation, had no significant relationship – implying that household income is not a determining factor of how long one will be gone after evacuating or if they will evacuate. However, it is important to note that this was a convenience sample and therefore is not representative of the population we are studying. Had the study

been conducted with a representative sample, the results may have been different and there may have been a statistically significant relationship between socioeconomic status and likelihood to evacuate and length of evacuation.

References

DiMaggio, P., Hargittai, E., Neuman, W.R., & Robinson, J.P. (2001). Social implications of the internet. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 307-336.

Howell, J., & Elliot, J.R. (2018). Damage done: The longitudinal impacts of natural hazards on wealth inequality in the United States. *Social Problems*.