

Issues

in Labor Statistics



U.S. Department of Labor
Bureau of Labor Statistics
Summary 99-4 March 1999

Computer Ownership Up Sharply in the 1990s

Graphical user interfaces, multimedia CD-ROMs, and the Internet have increased accessibility and people's understanding of computers. And greater understanding has brought substantially greater ownership. Between 1990 and 1997, the percentage of households¹ owning computers increased from 15 percent to 35 percent. During this time, the amount spent by the average household on computers and associated hardware more than tripled. This report briefly examines the demographics of computer ownership (also see table) as reported by households participating in the interview component of the Bureau's Consumer Expenditure survey.²

Education A household's level of education significantly affects computer ownership: Those households with the highest levels of education had the greatest percentage of computer ownership. In 1997,

66 percent of American households whose reference person³ had attended graduate school reported owning a computer, compared with less than 12 percent of those headed by one who did not graduate from high school. College graduates had the largest increase in ownership, more than doubling from 24 percent in 1990 to 56 percent in 1997 (see chart). High school graduates also showed a significant increase in computer ownership, from 9 percent in 1990 to 23 percent in 1997.

Age. Consumer units in the age 45-54 group were the most likely to own a PC, with a 46-percent ownership rate in 1997, an increase of 26 percentage points from 1990. As a result, the 45-54 age group had surpassed the 35-44 age group, which was most likely to own a computer in 1990. By 1997, the 35-44 age group was in second place, with 44 percent of them owning computers. Relatively few consumer units

over the age of 65 owned computers in either year, but consumer units with reference persons aged 55-64 had the largest increase in computer ownership.

Race. Between 1990 and 1997, all racial groups increased their ownership of personal computers, however, there was a large disparity among the different groups in both years. Ownership among blacks more than doubled between 1990 and 1997, from 7 percent to 18 percent. Asians showed the largest percentage point change in ownership, growing from 25 percent in 1990 to 49 percent in 1997. In both years, Asians showed the highest ownership and blacks the lowest ownership among all the groups. Ownership among whites grew from 16 percent in 1990 to 36 percent in 1997.

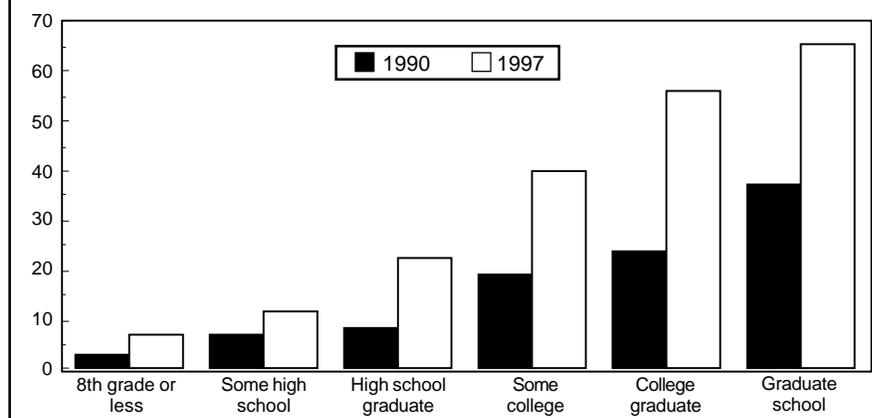
Income. It's almost axiomatic that the highest income groups will have the largest percentage of computer ownership. Al-

¹ In this report, a "household" is defined as a consumer unit that includes members of a household related by blood, marriage, adoption or other legal arrangement; a single person living alone or sharing a household with others but who is financially independent; or two or more persons living together who share responsibility for at least two out of three major types of expenses—food, housing, and other expenses. Students living in university-sponsored housing are also included in the sample as separate consumer units. The terms "consumer unit" and "household" are used interchangeably in this summary.

² Inventory of durable goods is collected during the first interview; any purchases of computers after the first interview are not reflected in these data.

³ The reference person is the first member mentioned by the respondent when asked to "Start with the name of the person or one of the persons who owns or rents the home." It is with respect to this person that the relationship of other consumer unit members is determined.

Percent of households owning computers by education level of the reference person, Consumer Expenditure Survey, 1990 and 1997



most two-thirds of the households in the top 20-percent income group (quintile 5)⁴ own computers, as do almost half in the second highest income group. The second highest income group also showed the fastest growth in ownership, more than doubling between 1990 and 1997. Households in the lowest two income groups also had the lowest rate of computer ownership, with less than 1 in every 5 owning PCs in 1997. But they also showed significant growth in computer ownership—almost tripling over the 1990-97 period—as computer prices have declined.

Region. Over two-fifths of the households in the West owned computers, more than in any other region. The Midwest and the Northeast mirrored the national average, with about one third of the consumer units

⁴ Complete income reporters are ranked in ascending order, according to the level of total before tax income reported by the consumer unit. The ranking is then divided into five equal groups. Incomplete income reporters are not ranked and are shown separately.

owning computers. At slightly less than 30 percent, the South's share of PC ownership was the lowest among the regions, but only marginally so when compared with the Midwest (see table). The ownership patterns by region in 1997 also existed in 1990, with similar growth rates in ownership across the regions.

Additional information

For more information about the data presented here, contact Tom Rubey in the Division of Consumer Expenditure Surveys at (202) 606-6900, or by E-mail at Rubey_T@bls.gov. To find Consumer Expenditure Survey data on the Internet, go to <http://stats.bls.gov/csxhome.htm>, the BLS Consumer Expenditure Survey home page.

Material in this publication is in the public domain and, with appropriate credit, may be reproduced without permission. This information is available to sensory impaired individuals upon request. Voice phone: (202) 606-7828; Federal Relay Service: 1-800-877-8339.

Percent of households owning computers by demographic characteristics, Consumer Expenditure Interview Survey, 1990 and 1997

Characteristic	1990	1997
All consumer units	15.2	34.6
Education		
8th grade or less	2.8	6.9
Some high school	6.9	11.5
High school graduate	8.6	22.5
Some college	19.4	39.9
College graduate	23.7	56.2
Graduate school	37.2	65.6
Age		
Less than 25	13.4	31.6
25-34	14.8	37.6
35-44	24	44
45-54	20	45.8
55-64	12.3	32.2
65-74	6.3	15.7
75 or over	2.3	6.6
Race		
White	16.0	36.1
Black	6.7	17.9
Asian	25.0	49.1
Income		
Quintile 1	6.9	17.1
Quintile 2	6.6	17.8
Quintile 3	11.7	28
Quintile 4	17.7	44.6
Quintile 5	33.2	65.4
Region		
Northeast	15.3	36.2
Midwest	13.3	32.6
South	12.8	29.8
West	21.0	41.2

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
 Bureau of Labor Statistics
 Postal Square Building, Rm. 2850
 2 Massachusetts Ave., NE
 Washington, DC 20212-0001

Official Business
 Penalty for Private Use, \$300
 Address Service Requested

FIRST CLASS MAIL
 Postage and Fees Paid
 U.S. Department of Labor
 Permit No. G-738