

Extra Feature Story

Pay phones, Phone Booths Quickly Becoming a Thing of Past

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As cell phones increasingly replace landlines and pay phones, phone booths are disappearing from city corners and advocates worry the poor are losing a vital link to the outside world.

Cell phones have come a long way since their introduction in 1970, becoming sleeker, smaller and cheaper.

And because more people have them - 251 million U.S. wireless customers among a population of 301 million - fewer people have the need or desire to use public pay phones. The drop in usage means more companies are pulling out of the pay phone business.

AT&T leaves pay phone business

AT & T, the largest U.S. phone company, announced last week that it will be stopping its pay phone service in 13 states by the end of 2008. The company said it would turn over its phones to independent operators or remove them altogether.

AT&T's decision will impact about 65,000 phones, further depleting the number of pay phones in the United States.

There were 2 million pay phones here in 1997 but by last year that number dropped to 1 million, according to the Federal Communications Commission.

History of the payphone

The pay phone has been a part of American culture since almost the creation of the telephone in 1876 by Alexander Graham Bell.

The first pay phone, which was serviced by an attendant who took a customer's money, was installed in 1878, according to AT&T spokesman Michael Coe.

Coin-operated machines, the ancestors of the modern pay phone, were first installed in Hartford, Conn., in 1889 in the Hartford Bank.

For many years the pay phone was the main way in which many Americans made reliable and inexpensive phone calls.

Phone booths have also been a big part of popular culture -- from Clark Kent entering one to become Superman in the 1940s to the 2002 film, "Phone Booth" in which a man is trapped by a sniper in one of the ubiquitous boxes.

Impact on society

Some worry the decline in pay phones will have a detrimental impact on safety, health and welfare in low-income communities or remote areas where cell phone networks are weak.

The traditional pay phone is "publicly accessible. It doesn't discriminate against income," Mason Harris, of the Atlantic Payphone Association, told the Gazette.net.

"There's still clearly a demand for pay phones," Harris added. "Though it seems everyone in the world has a cell phone, that's not the case."

Mark Thomas, who runs a Web site called the payphone-project.com which records the decline of the device, agrees.

"Pay phones are lifelines for the down and out; their booths are rainy-day cocoons," Thomas wrote to the New York Times in 2004. "You lose those, and you lose a lot of windows into the human condition."

Others in the pay phone business believe their networks are essential public safety tools. During large emergency situations like Sept. 11, 2001 many cell phone networks suffered major disruptions and could not be used.

"We're just trying to survive and provide a good service I think is necessary," Mike Simon, president of Express Telephone Systems that operates 600 public phones in Chicago and Milwaukee, told the Chicago Tribune.

One option for communities potentially harmed by the loss of a phone booth is to apply for a government program called PIPS, or "public interest payphones." Some state governments will help support the service if the application is approved.

-- Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra

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