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Digital Divide Brief

**Community Strategies
to Address California's
Digital Divide and Its
Impact on Children and
Families**

Digital Divide Brief Outline

The way we think about health and wellbeing has evolved with advances in access to computers and the Internet. However, the lack of health equity in already underserved populations has been made particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the inability to use the Internet contributes to less access to mental and medical health providers, social services, school education, and job opportunities.

This brief aims to highlight key elements and themes from the report titled [Community Strategies to Address California’s Digital Divide and Its Impact on Children and Families](#) report that was developed by [PACEs Connection](#) with funding and partnership from the [Essentials for Childhood \(EfC\) Initiative](#). The EfC Initiative is funded by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) and is led in partnership by the [California Department of Public Health \(CDPH\), Injury and Violence Prevention Branch \(IVPB\)](#) and the [California Department of Social Service \(CDSS\), Office of Child Abuse Prevention \(OCAP\)](#). This brief is intended to:

- Assist state and local public health programs, child-serving systems, non-profits, and philanthropic organizations in their efforts to educate about the digital divide and its impact on child wellbeing.
- Identify where opportunities exist for communities to utilize strategies that reduce the divide through policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change.

What is the Digital Divide?

The digital divide is defined as “the gap between those Americans who use or have access to telecommunications and information technologies and those who do not.”¹ People who experience the digital divide may lack adequate computing devices, high-speed Internet, digital literacy, or experience some combination of the above.

In the past three decades, the use of computers and the Internet has become widespread in the United States. Access to these technologies affects educational attainment, economic status, community development, and access to health care and health-related information. Given the complex interplay of digital access, health, wellbeing, and equity, some have called for broadband access to be considered a social determinant of health (SDoH).^{2,3,4,5}

Addressing the digital divide and its impacts is critical to strengthening the health and wellbeing of California’s children and families.

There are multiple ways for users to access the Internet through Internet service providers (ISPs). Internet connections offer different speeds or bandwidths that depend on the type of connection. Faster speeds allow data to be downloaded and uploaded faster. Broadband or high-speed Internet allows much faster access to the Internet than dial-up services.

Disparities in the Digital Divide

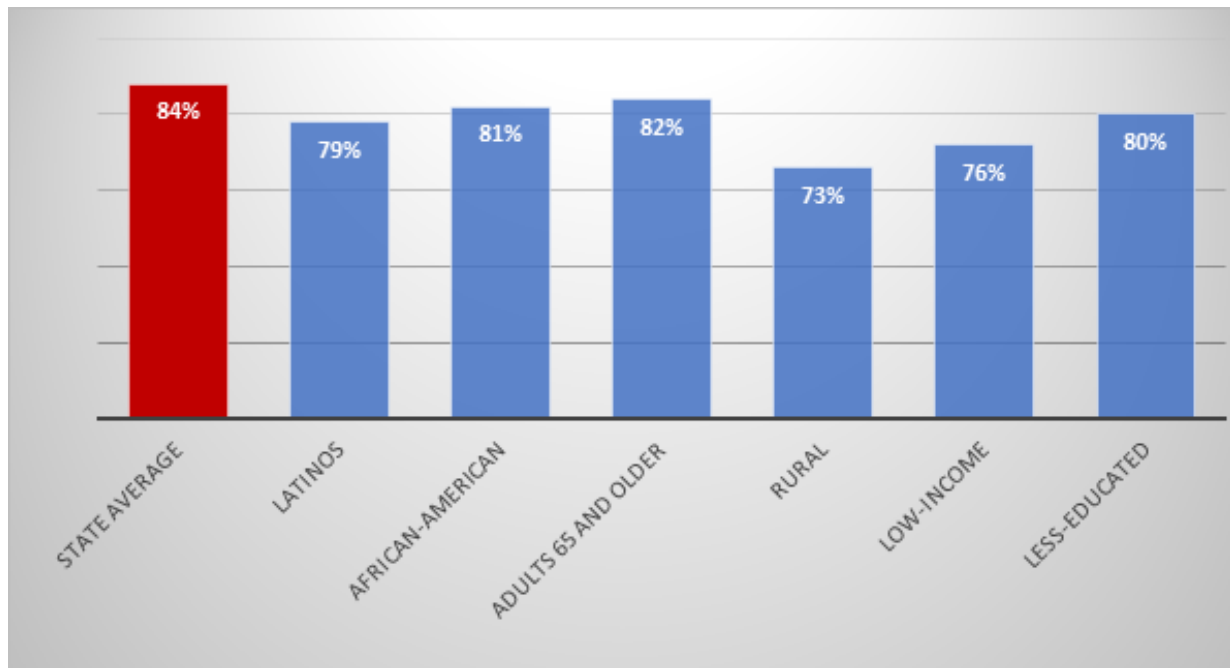
Disparities exist in accessing digital resources, which may lead to gaps in wellbeing and health outcomes. Many Californians do not own computing devices. In 2019, over 10% of all Californians did not have a computing device at home.⁶ The following groups had bigger gaps in digital device ownership:

- Households with low incomes (22%)
- African American households (20%)
- Households in rural areas (19%)
- Latino households (20%)
- Households with less education (19%)

Almost 200,000 households with school-age children (7%) had no access to a device at home.⁶

In 2019, there were also disparities among households with broadband subscriptions (Figure 1). There was a statewide average of 84% of households with broadband subscriptions, while the following households had lower broadband subscription rates: Latino households (79%); African American households (81%); adults 65 and older (82%); households in rural areas (73%); households with low incomes (76%); and households with less education (80%).⁶

Figure 1: Broadband Subscription Rates in California by Various Groups in 2019⁶



Child Wellbeing and the Digital Divide

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the impact of the digital divide on child wellbeing, as children lacking adequate access to devices and the Internet have been disproportionately affected by school closures and the increased use of telehealth and tele-mental health services.¹¹

As the COVID-19 pandemic has led to children and families in California experiencing extreme economic hardships, social isolation, and increased stress, childhood adversity is on the rise and instances of child maltreatment (i.e., child abuse and neglect) are going unreported.⁷

It is important to acknowledge that the digital divide has impacted child wellbeing and adversity, including Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.^{8,9,10}

Contributors to digital divide disparities include:

- Systemic discrimination
- Economics and geography
- Socioeconomic status of individuals and communities^{8,9,10}

Community Strategies to Address California’s Digital Divide and Its Impact on Children and Families

The EfC Initiative conducted a series of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to delve deeper into the challenges that Californian children and families are facing as a result of the digital divide and the COVID-19 pandemic. For more information about methods utilized to learn about the impacts of the digital divide and COVID-19 in California, please see [Community Strategies to Address California’s Digital Divide and Its Impact on Children and Families](#).

After reviewing suggestions from the KIIs, subject matter experts from the EfC Initiative coalition and California Campaign to Counter Childhood Adversity (4CA) suggested the following strategies and recommendations to decrease the digital divide and increase access to telehealth and tele-mental health in California. Communities can consider adoption and/or implementation of these strategies and recommendations through means such as General Plans, local ordinances, or voluntary organizational policies.

Telehealth is at the intersection of technology, the digital divide, and health. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services defines telehealth or telemedicine as “the use of electronic information and telecommunication technologies to provide care when [the patient] and the doctor are not in the same place at the same time.

Telemedicine involves contact via phone or video and can be used for medical and mental health appointments.

Strategies and Recommendations to Address the Digital Divide

- Adopt and implement local policies that support access to high-speed Internet for all Californians. Consider models that treat Internet access as a public utility and, where possible, are funded by sources that offset or eliminate the cost for consumers (e.g., monthly subsidies, tax reimbursements, employer incentives, inclusion in General Plans).
- Adopt and implement organizational practices and/or local policies that ensure equitable access to technology for people with low incomes. Prioritize policies that provide technology that exceeds Chromebook and smartphone capabilities as those devices are oftentimes insufficient for the users’ purposes.
- Adopt and implement organizational practices and/or local policies that teach and support programs or practices that provide education on the topic of digital literacy to the Californians they serve. Ensure that trainings and materials are consumer tested with the target audience and follow [Section 508](#) rules on accessibility for individuals with disabilities.
- Adopt and implement organizational practices ensuring that digital materials and applications are provided in languages representative of the local population. Ensure that trainings and materials are [consumer tested](#) with the target audience.
- Involve and engage community members and staff who represent local organizations and/or agencies in local and state-level coalitions to identify where telehealth and tele-mental health barriers exist beyond connectivity and support the coalition as it works to create policy change around the digital divide, such as expanding broadband access, developing municipal networks, addressing digital redlining, making the Internet affordable, working to adequately reach and serve populations, and supporting implementation of those services.

- Review existing policies and practices in organizations and communities for opportunities to address equity issues related to the digital divide.
- Utilize non-digital (i.e., analog) along with digital outreach strategies to share how community members can access free devices, technical assistance, and/or free or low-cost Internet services.
- Coordinate and collaborate with initiatives, coalitions, and advocates who are working to reduce the digital divide.

Strategies to Improve Access to Telehealth and Tele-mental Health

- Adopt and implement organizational policies and practices that support patient access to telehealth and tele-mental health services during and after the pandemic.
- Dedicate resources to support development of and access to quality electronic health records (EHR) that are linked with telehealth and tele-mental health services. Ensure that a wide range of mobile devices are able to access and support the mobile applications.
- Educate decision makers and community members about the need for adapting laws and policies to support telehealth and tele-mental health.

Conclusions and Next Steps

- Communities cannot control all elements necessary to address the digital divide. National and state public health policy initiatives and infrastructure can also play a role. In addition, there are many steps that can be taken at the regional and local levels to improve access and address the digital divide and its impact on child wellbeing. For example, communities can adopt and implement local policies that support access to affordable, high-speed Internet for all community members.
- This factsheet can be used by state and local public health programs, child-serving systems, non-profits, and philanthropic organizations to educate their communities about the digital divide and its impact on child wellbeing and to identify opportunities to reduce the digital divide through policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change.

Resources

The following resources may be helpful for those who are interested in learning about more ways to engage and create change to address the digital divide.

Resource	Description
<u>Community Strategies to Address California's Digital Divide and Its Impact on Children and Families</u>	<i>Community Strategies to Address California's Digital Divide and Its Impact on Children and Families</i> is a report that is intended to assist state and local public health programs, children and family service providers, non-profits, and philanthropic organizations in their efforts to educate about the digital divide and its impact on child wellbeing. It can also support identification of where opportunities exist for communities to utilize strategies that reduce the digital divide through PSE change.

<p><i>Essentials for Childhood Initiative's California Child Wellbeing Coalition e-Guide</i></p>	<p>The <i>California Child Wellbeing Coalition e-Guide</i> was developed for all those who are serving Californians and interested in collaborating or connecting with local coalitions, boards, and other organized bodies who are working to achieve child wellbeing through PSE change.</p>
<p>California Children's Trust, No Going Back: Providing Tele-mental Health Services to California Children and Youth After the Pandemic</p>	<p>This brief provides recommendations for ongoing tele-mental health implementation based on interviews with providers at Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC), children's hospitals, school-based health centers, and non-profit community-based organizations in different parts of the state serving a large number of young people covered by Medi-Cal.</p>
<p>Emergency Broadband Benefit</p>	<p>The Emergency Broadband Benefit is an FCC program to help families and households struggling to afford Internet service during the COVID-19 pandemic. An Emergency Broadband Benefit Outreach Toolkit can be found here. Flyers and handouts can be printed and disseminated to Californians.</p>
<p>EveryoneOn</p>	<p>EveryoneOn is a non-profit dedicated to creating social and economic opportunity by connecting low-income families to affordable Internet service and computers and delivering digital skills trainings.</p>
<p>National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA)</p>	<p>The National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) is a unified voice for home broadband access, public broadband access, personal devices, and local technology training and support programs. NDIA is a community of digital inclusion practitioners and advocates that works collaboratively to craft, identify and disseminate financial and operational resources for digital inclusion programs while serving as a bridge to policymakers and the general public.</p>

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