

State's 'digital divide' persists

IN COMPUTER, NET USAGE, INCOME A FACTOR

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The use of computers and the Internet by Latinos and low-income Californians continues to lag behind other groups, according to a survey released Thursday by the Public Policy Institute of California.

Slightly less than half of Latinos surveyed have home computers, compared to rates of 79 percent and above among black, Asian and white Californians, the survey found.

While computer usage by blacks and whites in California has increased, there's been a decline in computer usage by Latinos and Asians, though Asian use remains much higher than that of Latinos.

The drop appears to be correlated with income, with a sharp divide in computer usage between those making less than \$40,000 and those making more.

"The digital divide really is a manifestation of the economic divide," Sunne Wright McPeak, president and chief executive of the California Emerging Technology Fund, said during a discussion of the survey held at Joint Venture Silicon Valley.

"This is an alarming issue for all of us," said Nora Vargas, executive director of the Latino Issues Forum. Latinos are expected to be a majority in California by 2030, she said, yet "our young children are not being provided with the things they

need" to join the state's high-tech economy.

But the use of mobile devices may be a bridge for this divide, the institute said. Three-quarters of all adults in California and "solid majorities" among all ethnic groups have cell phones, and a quarter use them to go online.

The San Francisco institute surveyed 2,503 adults reached by land line and cell phones throughout California, interviewing them in multiple languages.

"Overwhelming majorities" of households with higher incomes have high-speed Internet access, the institute reported. Three in four Californians use a computer at home, school or work, a statistic that is unchanged since 2000 and that also mirrors nationwide usage. But of households with incomes of less than \$40,000, only half have computers, 40 percent have Internet access and only a third have a broadband connection.

The persistence of the "digital divide" means that Californians have very unequal access to information important to their quality of life, said the institute's president and chief executive Mark Baldassare.

Among other findings:

- Since 2000, Internet use has grown among those 55 and older, from 42 percent to 49 percent. Those under 35 are most likely to use the Internet, and almost everyone - more than 90 percent - with household incomes of \$80,000 or more use computers and the Internet.
- White and black Californians expanded their use of use of computers since 2000, with whites jumping from 79 percent to 85 percent and blacks from 76 percent to 83 percent.

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But Asians and Latinos have seen declines in use of computers. Latinos' computer use has declined from 64 percent to 58 percent since 2000, while Internet use remained unchanged. Asians' use of computers was much higher, but also declined from 91 percent to 81 percent; Internet use went from 84 percent to 80 percent.

Only 48 percent of Latinos have home computers compared with 86 percent of whites, 84 percent of Asians and 79 percent of blacks Californians, the institute reported.

The Bay Area has the highest concentration of computer and Internet users in the state, and Los Angeles County has the lowest rate of computer and Internet use, the survey found.

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