

Poll: California's digital divide still gaping

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Patrons use computers at the Hayward Library Tech Lab on Monday, July 7, 2014 in Hayward, Calif. (Aric Crabb/Bay Area News Group) (ARIC CRABB)

Araceli Barron, the bilingual mother of three young children in Sunnyvale, has seen California's digital divide up close. Until recently, the family had no Internet access at home and as more and more schoolwork required an online presence, her sixth-grade daughter was starting to fall behind.

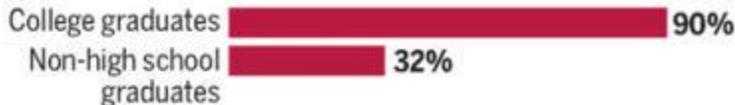
"In January we finally got Internet and it's made a huge difference in all my kids' grades," said Barron, whose household income is not much more than \$20,000 a year. "And that's really helped my kids' self-esteem."

Who has broadband Internet access

Annual household income



Education level



Age group

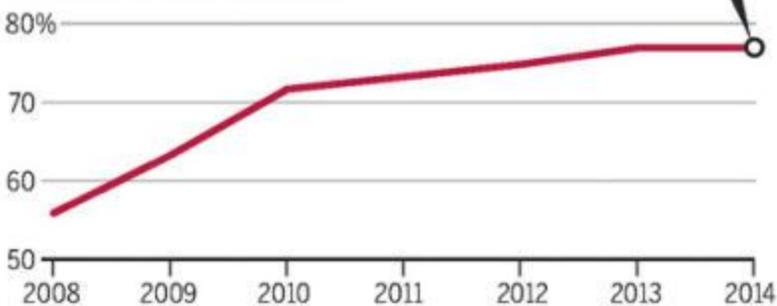


Nationality



Access to broadband Internet stagnates

Percentage of adults in California who are connected to the Internet via broadband:



Source: Field Poll survey of 1,402 California adults, conducted June 5-22.
Margin of error: +/- 2.2 percentage points

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Despite living in the tech-rich heart of Silicon Valley, Barron and her children have straddled a stubborn gap between the state's digital-haves and have-nots that shows little sign of closing anytime soon. According to a statewide Field Poll released Tuesday, broadband adoption rates have stagnated over the past few years, with access by Latinos, seniors and others lagging behind that enjoyed by younger adults and those with higher incomes.

According to the poll, 75 percent of adult Californians have broadband Internet connectivity at home. While that's up from 55 percent when the first poll was done in 2008, this year's number was unchanged from 2013 as growth appears to have stalled.

Perhaps even more troubling, usage patterns vary significantly across different segments of the state's population. For example, while nearly 90 percent of Californians age 18-29 and those who have graduated from college or who earn annual household incomes of \$60,000 or more report having broadband Internet access at home, significantly smaller slices of other groups were able

to say the same.

They include adults who have not graduated from high school (32 percent of whom have broadband Internet access), Spanish-speaking Latinos (46 percent), seniors 65 or older (47 percent) and residents with annual household incomes of less than \$20,000 (53 percent).

"These findings are a sobering reminder that while we live in a state renowned for technology and innovation, the digital divide is real and impacting millions of Californians," said Sunne Wright McPeak, president and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund, which partnered with Field on the poll. "Fully one-quarter of California households do not have high-speed Internet at home. This is not acceptable."

One of the more intriguing findings from the poll was the growth among adults who are now connecting to broadband Internet at home solely through a smartphone. While that number is a relatively small 8 percent, it raises questions about how much and what kind of online information people are getting this way.

"Using a smartphone is a much different way of accessing the Internet than using a desktop or laptop," said Santa Clara University law professor Allen Hammond, who heads the Broadband Institute of California, an academic think tank. "While the smartphone has made information more accessible, the information comes more like a trickle than a stream."



Elias, 88, of San Ramon, uses the computer in the computer lab at San Ramon Senior Center in San Ramon, Calif. on Monday, July 7, 2014. (Jim Stevens/Bay Area News Group) (JIM STEVENS)

The survey seemed to support Hammond's view that smartphone users often go online for different chores than those who use desktops. It showed that larger percentages of Latinos, African-Americans, noncitizens and poor households reported using only the smartphone to go online from home. And these "smartphone-only users" were far less likely to go to community or government websites or to seek health and medical information or even to take online classes. For example, while 61 percent of home-computer users said they got medical information or communicated online with their doctors, only 41 percent of smartphone-only users did so.

In a statement, McPeak said that "while mobile phones are essential devices, they are not enough to help poor Californians access many of the services they need to break out of poverty or close

the education Achievement Gap." She said that despite having quick access to the Internet through their phones, students without a desktop, laptop or tablet at home are at a disadvantage when they must take assessment tests and do other school assignments using only a smartphone.

McPeak called on federal regulators to press Internet providers to offer affordable broadband service for low-income customers who qualify, and she asked the Federal Communications Commission to consider making online access easier for all Americans as large telecommunication companies continue to merge, as Comcast and Time Warner Cable are now trying to do.

"If the authorities do this right," said McPeak, "they can help close the digital divide and, in turn, close the achievement divide in schools as well."

The poll found that parents who have a broadband connection other than a smartphone at home were highly likely to go online at home to help their children learn (84 percent) and to obtain information about their children's homework and grades from the school website (75 percent).

"As technology is integrated in the classroom, poor students who only have smartphone access to the online world when they go home will fall farther behind and we all will be worse off for it," McPeak said. "This is a call to action for government, industry and philanthropic groups to work to finally close the Digital Divide in California."

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