

Poll: California's digital divide narrowing slightly

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The digital divide between broadband haves and have-nots has narrowed but still remains an electronic chasm, according to a report released Tuesday by the California Emerging Technology Fund and The Field Poll.

About 79 percent of households in California have broadband connections at home, while 21 percent do not have access, according to the latest Field Poll. The Field organization surveyed 1,664 California households to measure at-home penetration of broadband services, in a study undertaken for the nonprofit California Technology Fund.

"We clearly still have a digital divide," said Sunne McPeak, president and chief executive of the California Emerging Technology Fund.

Those with less education and low income levels or who have a disability or language barrier are most likely to be left behind.

"The big takeaway from this report is the many disparities that exist for broadband access," said Mark DiCamillo, director of The Field Poll.

Broadband access is reported, according to the survey, by 52 percent of adults who have not graduated from high school, 57 percent of seniors age 65 or older, 59 percent of adults who have a disability, 63 percent of Spanish-speaking Latinos have access, 65 percent of households with total annual income of \$20,000 or less, and 68 percent of noncitizens.

"The digital divide is being addressed," said Tim Bjarin, principal analyst with Campbell-based Creative Strategies, which tracks technology trends. "The federal government is actively looking at this. There is still a divide in that some people just can't afford broadband access."

Nevertheless, progress is being made, McPeak said.

"We are closing the digital divide through focus, discipline, accountability and investment of resources," McPeak said. "But it is still not completely closed."

On Thursday, the Federal Communications Commission is scheduled to vote

on a proposal to update lifeline rates for communications services -- much like low-cost lifeline services for conventional wired telephones -- to include broadband services.

A small increase in access to broadband services has occurred over the most recent 12 months, according to the survey.

One new wrinkle in the 2015 survey is that it is now measuring some elements of smartphone use in California.

About 8 percent of the respondents to The Field Poll survey said they have access to broadband services through a smartphone only.

Among the groups most likely to have broadband access solely through a smartphone: Spanish-speaking Latinos, unmarried parents of children under 18, adults who have not graduated from high school, those with household income under \$20,000, parents of children under 18, the survey found.

"The problem with access only through a smartphone is there are all sorts of things you can't do, including productivity tasks, or kids doing school work," Bjarin said.

The goal of the California Emerging Technology Fund is to achieve statewide 80 percent use of broadband services and to have no demographic group or region below 70 percent.

"The most encouraging part of the survey is to see the increase in broadband adoption in all of our targeted demographics and our targeted regions," McPeak said.

Those regions include the Los Angeles area, the Inland Empire and the Central Valley. The targeted demographics include low-income families making below \$20,000 a year.

"We still have a long way to go," McPeak said.

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