



State of the Digital Divide in the Hispanic Community

Since the COVID-19 pandemic spread across cities, towns and villages it has highlighted many disparities. In particular it has shown the extent of the digital divide in the Hispanic community.

In 2021 the National League of Cities (NLC) constituency group Hispanic Elected Local Officials (HELO) wanted to explore the challenges of the digital divide and propose digital equity solutions for municipal leaders.

Every year, the National League of Cities (NLC) asks the leadership of its constituency groups, like Hispanic Elected Local Officials (HELO), leadership what policies and areas of interest our community would like focus on throughout the year. In an overwhelming majority HELO wanted to spend 2021 exploring the digital divide and its effects on the Hispanic population.

Our community has always been aware that broadband access was an area where we had less access, with only 65% of Hispanics having a broadband connection compared to our White (80%) and Black (71%) counterparts.¹

However, in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout the country impacting the Black and Hispanic communities the hardest, the digital divide – the gap between individuals who have access to computers, high-speed internet and the skills to use them, and those who do not – not only became obvious but also dangerous to millions of Hispanic residents throughout the country.²

During a year where many people worked from home to lessen the risk of infection from the virus, the Hispanic community was overrepresented in essential work and remained on the front lines as healthcare workers, truck drivers, store cashiers, food processors, agricultural workers, janitors and maintenance workers.

This not only increased our chances of being infected but also increased the impact of the digital divide on our community. With schools suddenly digital, our children were left to educate themselves, sometimes without access to broadband. Households with one computer and several students had to make tough decisions about who got access and when.

We continued to see the impact of the digital divide this year, as vaccines were more readily available to those with a computer and broadband that could access a website to learn about vaccine distribution in their community and schedule a shot. Again, millions of Americans, including those on the frontlines allowed to receive vaccinations first, were disadvantaged by their lack of access to the internet in getting a lifesaving dose of the vaccine.

There is so much to discuss on the topic of the digital divide and how we in the Hispanic community found ourselves drastically impacted. In this brief, our goal is to unpack for you not just how we got to this point but also focus in on solutions: We will look at the impact on Hispanic residents, actions local leaders can take, currently available broadband funding and how to kickstart digital equity efforts that combat the digital divide.

At the end we will provide input from our peers and thought leaders who are working within their cities, towns and villages to address the digital divide. My hope is that you take away from this policy brief actionable steps to move forward in closing the gap to help our residents achieve an equal footing in an increasingly digital society.

DAVID LUNA, Ed.D, COUNCILMEMBER, CITY OF MESA, AZ
PRESIDENT, HISPANIC ELECTED LOCAL OFFICIALS (HELO)

How Digitally Disconnected is the Hispanic Community?

The digital divide is the gap between individuals who have access to computers, high-speed internet and the skills to use them, and those who do not. This gap shows up in a variety of ways in our communities: economic, educational, health and social outcomes can be traced to access to broadband. Although the digital divide is a problem for many Americans, it is particularly extreme for the Hispanic community.

“What we discovered during the pandemic is that many of our communities of color did not have internet access. This was particularly apparent in our school districts as well as our Latino-owned businesses. For example, students in Mesa Public Schools were not able to complete their education because there was no internet connectivity available to them. This included both hardware and broadband access. Many of our small businesses did not have connectivity to engage in any type of business transaction. Because of the digital divide, our communities of color suffered immensely.”

COUNCILMEMBER DAVID LUNA, Ed.D, CITY OF MESA, AZ

There are three main aspects of the digital divide:

- ◆ **Affordability:** Cost of devices and broadband service is not within reach for users.
- ◆ **Accessibility or Availability:** Broadband at speeds and quality to accomplish common tasks is not accessible or available to users because the service does not exist, the speeds or quality are inadequate, or devices to use the internet are not available.
- ◆ **Skills:** Users do not have the capacity to use technology (internet, devices, etc.) or the skills necessary to navigate successfully.

Affordability

Households earning \$50,000 or less a year are the least likely to have broadband at home.³ According to the latest five-year American Community Survey, the median income for Hispanic households was \$51,811.⁴ Even within the Hispanic community, there is vast difference in median income across different Hispanic origins.⁵ Cost of broadband connection is of concern, but so is the cost of internet-ready devices. Eighty percent of White adults reported owning a desktop or laptop computer, compared to just 67 percent of Hispanic adults.⁶

COVID-19 exacerbated these affordability concerns. Sixty-one percent of Hispanic Americans have reported a job or wage loss due to COVID-19, compared to just 38 percent of White Americans.⁷ This impact has been felt even more acutely by Hispanic immigrants without citizenship or permanent residency – 58 percent of Hispanic immigrants say they or someone in their household has lost a job or wages since February 2020, compared to just 45 percent of naturalized U.S. citizens.⁸

Accessibility or Availability

Beyond affordability of broadband access, not all households live in an area where there is infrastructure to support connection. According to data from the League of United Latin American Citizens, 31 percent of Hispanic households do not have access to broadband.⁹ Most of these households are clustered in rural communities, where high-speed broadband internet is the hardest to find. With nearly 1,000 rural Hispanic communities spread across the country, the rural-broadband concern is of specific concern for Hispanic households.¹⁰

Skills

Effective use of internet is an acquired skill, a significant barrier to adopting effective use of internet is the digital skills and experience to know what to do online from banking, virtual learning to telehealth services.¹¹ This is a particular issue among immigrants and those with limited English proficiency. According to the Migrant Policy Institute, although immigrants and those with limited English proficiency make up one-sixth of American workers, they make up one-third of the workforce without digital skills and nearly one-fourth of the workforce with limited digital skills.¹² Lack of access to affordable at home broadband, health care, ineligibility for most government relief programs and job instability have left undocumented immigrant families especially vulnerable amid the pandemic.¹³

What Makes the Digital Divide Tougher to Bridge in the Hispanic Community?

There are a few key factors that make it harder to bridge the digital divide in the Hispanic community.

Fear of deportation

As of 2020, there are 44.8 million immigrants living in the U.S., making up 13.7 percent of the population. About 10.5 million (23 percent) of those immigrants are undocumented.¹⁴ Because of their legal status and a fear of deportation, this segment of the Hispanic community has a strong desire for privacy. This can make it difficult for city leaders and other government officials to reach Hispanic residents and connect them with services that could help bridge the digital divide. Many programs ask for personal information that members of this community may not be comfortable sharing.

Fear of authority

A lack of trust in government officials is pervasive in the Hispanic community. In a 2019 survey, 38 percent of Hispanics said they had experienced discrimination or unfair treatment due to their background.¹⁵ The regular discrimination that Hispanics experience in the U.S. exacerbates and reinforces their fear of interacting with government leaders, even in instances like digital equity programs that would benefit them. In FY 2020, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement completed 185,844 removals, or deportations, a 30 percent decrease from FY 2019.¹⁶ Most of these deportations were for people of Hispanic origin.

Top Five Countries for ICE Removals¹⁷

County of Citizenship	FY 2020 Removals	% of Total Removals
Total	185,884	100%
Mexico	100,388	54%
Guatemala	29,790	16%
Honduras	21,139	11.4%
El Salvador	12,590	6.8%
Ecuador	2,951	1.6%

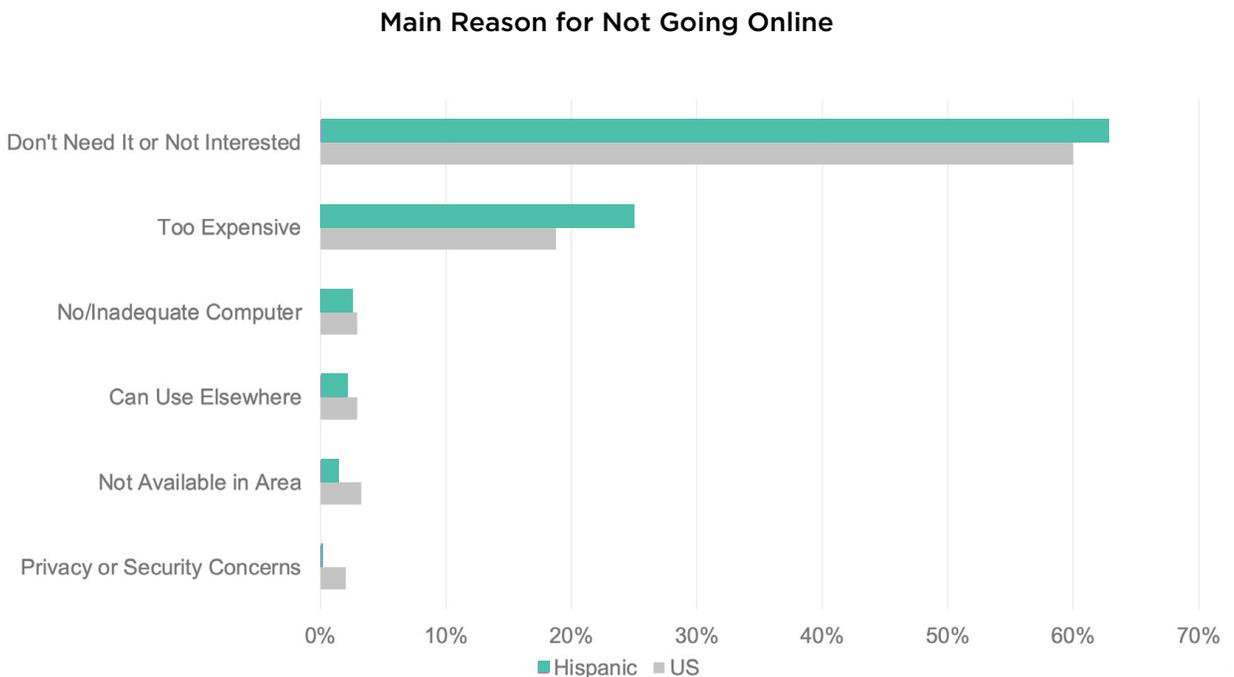
These immigrants are forced to live “underground” and outside established support systems because of their immigration status.

Language access

As of 2015, a growing number of Hispanic residents (68 percent) reported speaking English proficiently.¹⁸ However, there are still a significant number of Hispanics in the U.S. who do not use English to navigate their daily lives. This group of non-English speakers tend to be age 65 and older, identify as female, have less than a high school education and are foreign-born.¹⁹ Many governmental programs operate only in English. Language access, including in public information campaigns, advertisements and program enrollment processes, is a driving force in keeping Hispanic residents from getting digitally connected.

Affordability

Accessing the internet can be expensive and beyond reach for many. According to the American Community Survey, affordability is one of the main reasons respondents give for not going online. Twenty-five percent of Hispanics cite this as a reason compared to 19 percent of the entire U.S. population. A 2019 survey found that the typical White family has eight times the wealth of the typical Black family and five times the wealth of the typical Hispanic family.²⁰ A lack of generational wealth and access to capital makes it harder for Hispanics to afford costly monthly internet subscriptions and pricey devices necessary to access the internet.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2017 & 2019

Take Action to Bridge the Digital Divide in Your Hispanic Community

As a local leader, you have the potential to make a difference and bridge the digital divide in your community.

UNDERSTAND YOUR COMMUNITY'S SPECIFIC CAUSES OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The first step in addressing the digital divide is understanding what is causing it. A broadband needs assessment enables city leaders to explore the extent of the digital divide, who is being excluded, what broadband service is currently available and what solutions cities could bring to the table.

“Digital literacy has been an ongoing issue for many of our communities and even more so now through COVID-19 where technology innovation has changed the way services are provided and how resources are accessed. Due to this, I believe municipalities should offer digital literacy education programs or partner with non-profits through grant funding, public private partnerships and the like; especially as more cities themselves try and leverage technology through social media, mobile apps and more. Self-sufficiency is becoming more and more dependent on digital literacy and we as municipal leaders need to ensure our constituents know how to access all information and services regardless of the method to which they are shared.”

MAYOR PRO TEM CRISTAL RETANA, FARMERS BRANCH, TX

ENGAGE TRUSTED COMMUNITY LEADERS TO SHARE INFORMATION

Many residents are likely to be suspicious of a “free internet” advertisement, or an offer that seems too good to be true for subsidized internet programs or low- or no-cost computers. Other residents may be concerned about privacy issues. Engage trusted community leaders in answering questions and allaying fears to get residents in need online. Hispanic local elected officials with strong relationships in their neighborhoods are ideally positioned to lead this work. Schools and religious communities can be great partners in getting the word out and answer questions if you help enlist them as allies. In other communities, these key partners may be recreational or youth sports leagues and facilities, community librarians, or senior groups. Be expansive in your plan for engaging trusted partners to share information with the Hispanic community about how to get connected.

MEET YOUR RESIDENTS WHERE THEY ALREADY ARE

For Hispanic residents without existing home broadband access and a computer, it can be difficult to get connected to programs to bridge the digital divide. It is important to think more expansively about outreach. This may mean prioritizing traditional television and radio broadcasts as well as sharing information in-person. You may be able to distribute flyers at local markets and events, through utility bills and other mailings, at libraries and community centers, or through clinics, grocery or school meal distribution, and other activities that draw a wide cross-section of your community.

Many Hispanic households rely heavily on smartphones to get online and often are active on social media networks such as Facebook or WhatsApp. Make sure that any information you provide digitally is mobile-friendly and targeted to these mobile-only residents' internet habits.

PROVIDE LANGUAGE TRANSLATION AS A STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE

Spanish is the most common non-English language spoken at home in the U.S.²¹ To properly support and serve residents, cities should provide materials and information in languages beyond English. There are existing materials for some established digital equity programs that are already translated into Spanish. EBB Para Mi is a national public awareness campaign by HTTP: Hispanic Technology & Telecommunications Partnership to encourage Hispanic families to take part in the Emergency Broadband Benefit. The EBB Para Mi website includes information and promotional materials.²² The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has developed an outreach toolkit for local governments, schools, community organizations and others to use to share information about Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB).²³ This toolkit includes graphics, customizable flyers and slides, video and audio in a variety of languages. These materials can be used as-is or personalized for your community's official city communications channels, including traditional and social media. Although these materials are focused on EBB, they may be helpful for other digital equity efforts in your community.

MAKE USE OF AVAILABLE FEDERAL BROADBAND FUNDING

There are several federal funding sources to bridge the digital divide in your community. These opportunities are time-limited so act quickly to ensure your city benefits from them.

“I would like to see universal broadband throughout the U.S. and its territories. Everyone needs reliable access to the internet. Especially, our students, seniors, and our economically disadvantaged. I would like to see organization between the federal and state governments in rolling out broadband to everyone. To build a strong America we need everyone at the table and that begins with broadband. Let’s build broadband as our new ‘road’ to recovery and make a better future for all.”

COUNCILMEMBER JENNIFER TORRES-O’CALLAGHAN, LATHROP, CA

Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB): The Emergency Broadband Benefit is a new, first of its kind program with the goal of expanding digital opportunity to every household by connecting families to the transformative power of the internet. EBB is a temporary COVID-19 relief program authorized by Congress and administered through the Federal Communications Commission that provides families experiencing an economic hardship up to \$50 a month, or up to up to \$75 a month if the household is on Tribal lands, to subscribe to broadband. It also provides up to \$100 towards the purchase of a qualifying computer or connected device through participating internet service providers.²⁴ EBB funding is available to all Hispanic families nationwide — even to mixed status families, as long as at least one member of the household has an ITIN number or has a student who qualifies for free or reduced school lunch.²⁵

Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF): The American Rescue Plan Act, establishes a \$7.1 billion Emergency Connectivity Fund to help schools and libraries support remote learning. The ECF will enable eligible schools and libraries to purchase Wi-Fi hotspots, modems, routers and connected devices. Schools and libraries can also reimburse households for internet service needed to participate in remote learning. The \$7.1 billion will be funneled through the FCC’s current E-rate program for schools and libraries. However, there are key differences between this new funding and previous E-rate funding. Traditionally, E-rate funds were limited to “on-campus” use. Now, schools and libraries can use E-rate funds to support student’s off-campus.

American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA): The ARPA provides direct support for local governments to make necessary investments in water, sewer or broadband infrastructure.²⁶ The ARPA State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund provides \$65.1 billion to local governments for a wide range of digital inclusion activities, including physical network build-out in unserved and underserved areas, device and connectivity subscription support and digital literacy training.

ADVOCATE FOR YOUR COMMUNITY'S DIGITAL EQUITY NEEDS

Although these federal tools are a great step toward closing the digital divide in America, more is needed to ensure that all residents, regardless of race or income, can participate in our digital economy. City officials should call on their Members of Congress to pass legislation that addresses the barriers residents face in getting online, including legislation that:

- ◆ Adequately funds new or upgraded future-proof broadband infrastructure in rural areas and communities that have been digitally redlined by existing internet service providers;
- ◆ Supports permanent new funding for schools, libraries and low-income households to access subsidized broadband subscriptions and connected devices;
- ◆ Eliminates state legal barriers to municipal broadband, which provides a critical alternative to communities capable of building their own broadband infrastructure;
- ◆ Provides local, state and federal officials with accurate information about where broadband infrastructure currently exists, and the prices and speeds for broadband service to businesses and homes; and
- ◆ Establishes regulatory oversight that promotes competition, affordability and network neutrality by internet service providers.

The digital divide cannot be solved by any one unit of government alone – local, state and federal leaders will need to partner in the coming years to close the gaps and ensure a more equitable broadband future for all.

Endnotes

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