How City Leaders Can Bridge the Digital Divide

Broadband internet has evolved from being a cutting-edge luxury to an essential utility for participation in daily life. Unfortunately, not everyone benefits from this vital tool. Because of barriers in affordability, accessibility or availability, and skills, an estimated 42 million residents in the United States do not have broadband at all, and 157.3 million live with slow or unreliable internet service.[1] This must change. Cities can be proactive to bridge the digital divide. The Digital Equity Playbook helps city leaders determine causes of the digital divide in their communities, provides recommendations to address it, shares stories from local governments and suggests additional resources.

Broadband is high-speed, reliable internet access, measured in download and upload speeds.

What are the digital divide and digital equity?

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. Digital equity means the digital divide no longer holds people back. According to the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), digital equity is a "condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy and economy. Digital equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning and access to essential services."[2]

Whom does the digital divide affect?

Access to the internet, connected devices and digital literacy remains unequal in the U.S. Estimates vary between 14.5 million and 42 million residents living in areas without broadband internet of at least 25 megabits per second (Mbps) download speed and 3 Mbps upload speed.[3] Even when internet access is available, it is not always high quality. A Microsoft analysis from November 2019 found that 157.3 million Americans are suffering from slow and unreliable internet connections with speeds below the FCC guidelines.[4]

Some people are more likely to be digitally disconnected than others:

◆ Because more people live in urban than rural areas, most digitally disconnected households are in urban areas. However, rural areas lag urban areas regarding broadband adoption (81 percent compared to 86 percent, respectively).[5]

◆ Low-income residents are less likely to have reliable access to high-quality, in-home connections and enabling technology. Households earning less than $20,000 per year have a broadband adoption rate of 62 percent, compared to households earning more than $75,000, which have an adoption rate of 81.8 percent.[6]

◆ Nearly half of the people who are digitally disconnected are Black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC). Compared to 90 percent of White households and 86 percent of Latinx households, only 82 percent of Black households have internet at home.[7]

◆ Older residents are more likely to be digitally excluded, as 42 percent of American seniors, or 22 million, lack broadband at home.

Mbps, or megabits per second, is the measure of internet bandwidth. The greater the bandwidth, the faster a user can download data from or upload data to the internet.

What is causing the digital divide?

Three main causes of the digital divide exist:

Affordability
Cost of devices and broadband service is not within reach for some users.

Accessibility or Availability
Broadband at speeds and quality needed 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 skills necessary to use technology (internet, devices, etc.) or to navigate successfully.

Endnotes

[1] Busby, J. & Tanberk, J. (2021, April 30). *FCC reports broadband unavailable to 21.3 million Americans, BroadbandNow study indicates 42 million do not have access.* BroadbandNow Research. broadbandnow.com/research/fcc-underestimates-unserved-by-50-percent McKinley, S. (2020, March 5). Microsoft Airband: An annual update on connecting rural America. Microsoft. blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2020/03/05/update-connecting-rural-america

[2] National Digital Inclusion Alliance. *Definitions.* www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions

[3] U.S. Federal Communications Commission. (2019, May 29). *2019 Broadband Deployment Report.* docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-19-44A1.pdf Busby, J. & Tanberk, J. (2021, April 30). *FCC reports broadband unavailable to 21.3 million Americans, BroadbandNow study indicates 42 million do not have access.* BroadbandNow Research.

[4] McKinley, S. (2020, March 5). *Microsoft Airband: An annual update on connecting rural America.* Microsoft. blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2020/03/05/update-connecting-rural-america

[5] Tomer, A., Fishbane, L., Siefer, A., & Callahan, B. (2020, February 27). *Digital prosperity: How broadband can deliver health and equity to all communities.* The Brookings Institution. www.brookings.edu/research/digital-prosperity-how-broadband-can-deliver-health-and-equity-to-all-communities

[6] Tomer, A., Fishbane, L., Siefer, A., & Callahan, B. (2020, February 27). *Digital prosperity: How broadband can deliver health and equity to all communities.* The Brookings Institution. www.brookings.edu/research/digital-prosperity-how-broadband-can-deliver-health-and-equity-to-all-communities

[7] Tomer, A., Fishbane, L., Siefer, A., & Callahan, B. (2020, February 27). *Digital prosperity: How broadband can deliver health and equity to all communities.* The Brookings Institution. www.brookings.edu/research/digital-prosperity-how-broadband-can-deliver-health-and-equity-to-all-communities

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