California’s Digital Divide

Darriya Starr, Joseph Hayes, and Niu Gao

Broadband access has grown in recent years, but many still lack access.

- Access to fast and reliable home internet has continued to increase, but many still live without access. The American Community Survey (ACS) found that 85% of Californian households had high-speed internet at home in 2021—a slight improvement from 84% in 2019, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Since 2019, access to broadband at home has become more common for most demographic groups. But racial and ethnic gaps persist: 81% of Latino, 83% of Black, 87% of white, and 88% of Asian households report having broadband access at home in 2021.
- Households headed by adults 65 and older (83%), those with annual incomes below $50,000 (76%), and those headed by individuals without a college degree (80%) are less likely to have broadband access at home.
- In 2021, 95% of California households had any type of internet access, including from a cell phone—a slight increase from 93% in 2019.

Gaps in device access have narrowed slightly.

- In 2021, slightly fewer California households (10%) did not have access to a desktop, laptop, or other computing device at home than in 2019, when 11% lacked access.
- Lacking access to a device is more common if the head of household is low-income (22%) or does not have a college degree (15%).
- Furthermore, 15% of Black and 14% of Latino households do not have access to a device at home, while it’s less common for Asian and white households to lack access (7% in each case).

Not all California students can access the digital tools they need for school.

- Many students still struggle to access the internet for their homework, even when their district provides a device. For example, about 13,000 students of Fresno Unified School District’s 60,000 students remain unconnected to the internet outside of their school’s network in the greater Fresno area.
- Nearly 1 in 20 households (4%) with school-age children do not have access to a device at home.

Low-income households were less likely to have access to broadband and devices in 2021

Notes: Average California household size is three. Low-income households have an annual income below $50,000; or roughly 225% of the federal poverty line for a three-person household in 2022 ($51,818). High-income households have an annual income above $100,000. Education level and race/ethnicity are for household head.
Working Californians rely on digital access, and most want a digital work option.

- The current work situation for 35% of employed Californians involves at least some work from home or remote work as of November 2022, similar to the 37% who had this situation in 2021.
- Most employed Californians would prefer the option to work from home or remotely at least some of the time: 29% would “work from home or remotely full-time” and 32% would “mix some days working remotely, some days at the workplace” if they were given the choice, according to the November 2022 PPIC Statewide Survey.

Recent federal and state funding may help shrink the digital divide.

- California Senate Bill 156 (2021) provides over $6 billion to expand broadband infrastructure and enhance internet access in unserved and underserved communities. The federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (2021) provides at least $100 million to expand broadband infrastructure in California.
- Even with funding like SB 156 to defray the infrastructure costs of building out broadband, internet availability can differ greatly among neighbors due to individual financial constraints, a home's elevation, signal obstacles, accessibility for work trucks, and the accuracy of previous attempts to estimate an area's access.
- In May 2021, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) launched the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program, a temporary pandemic intervention that subsidized household internet bills up to $50 per month. At the end of 2021, the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) replaced EBB—offering long-term support for eligible households but at a reduced amount of $30 per month.
- Most eligible households still haven’t received the ACP internet subsidy: only 36% of over 5.8 million eligible households had enrolled by April 2023, according to the California Department of Technology.
- The share of households enrolled in the program slowed from 46% in late 2021 to less than 9% each quarter since mid-2022, but ACP still served more than one in seven households in the state (about 16% or 2,027,080 households) as of April 2023.

Only a third of eligible CA households receive federally subsidized internet