

California's Digital Divide

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This fact sheet focuses on the latest available data, from 2019 and 2020.

FEBRUARY 2021

➤ **Broadband subscriptions were at all-time highs before the pandemic began.**

A record-high percentage of Californians (84%) had high-speed internet at home in 2019—up from 74% in 2017. Californians use the internet for a range of activities, including financial services (70%), telecommuting (39%), job searches (21%), and online classes or job training (21%). Telehealth has also been on the rise. In 2019, more than half of households researched health issues online; 42% accessed health or insurance records; and 39% communicated with doctors. As the pandemic shifted many activities online, usage almost certainly increased.

➤ **Significant gaps in broadband access persist.**

Though most demographic groups have seen significant increases in broadband subscriptions at home in recent years, racial/ethnic gaps persist. Seventy-nine percent of Latino households and 81% of African-American households had broadband subscriptions in 2019, compared to the statewide average of 84%. Broadband subscription rates are lower among adults 65 and older (82%), as well as among rural (73%), low-income (76%), and less-educated (80%) households.

➤ **Most households have multiple internet users—and greater bandwidth needs.**

Most Californians share broadband with others in their households: as of 2019, 76% of households had multiple users. The average-size household includes 2.7 people, while the average size of households with school-age children is 4. Households with multiple users require additional bandwidth for reliable access to online instruction and videoconferencing.

➤ **Household access to computing devices also varies across demographic groups.**

In 2019, more than one in ten Californians did not have a desktop, laptop, or other computing device at home. Access was especially limited among low-income (22%), rural (19%), less-educated (19%), African American (20%), and Latino (20%) households. Notably, nearly 200,000 households with school-age children (7%) did not have home access to a device.

➤ **More than one in four K–12 students lack reliable internet access at home.**

Nearly all schools and colleges switched to distance learning in spring 2020, creating unprecedented demand for internet at home, particularly in households with multiple users. Despite efforts to increase availability, 26% of K–12 students and nearly 40% of low-income students still did not have reliable internet access in fall 2020. According to the April 2020 [PPIC Statewide Survey](#), half of Californian parents were concerned about providing productive home learning environments.

➤ **Rural households face particular broadband challenges.**

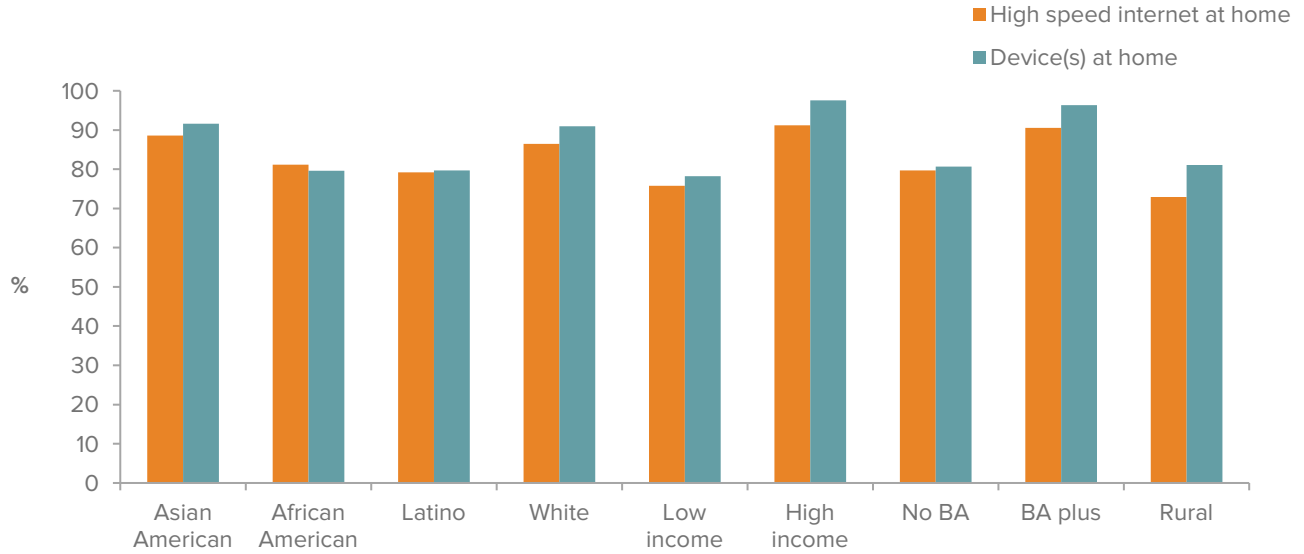
The 2019 American Community Survey showed rural areas had the lowest broadband subscription rates, with some exceptions: rates were high in some rural (and wealthy) parts of Sonoma and Marin Counties, while rates in several parts of central Los Angeles County—including Huntington Park, Watts, and Westmont—were among the lowest. Only 68% of adults 65 and older in rural counties had home broadband. Broadband in these areas is limited largely by financial, technological, and topological barriers. Limited connectivity may reduce access to telehealth, which is important because rural areas face shortages of physicians and mental health providers.

➤ **Federal and state governments are taking steps to bridge the digital divide.**

The most recent federal stimulus package set aside \$7 billion for broadband connectivity and infrastructure. The Federal Communications Commission recently awarded \$9.2 billion to internet service providers for the construction of rural broadband networks over the next 10 years; California received \$695 million. President Biden's recovery plan emphasizes universal broadband and infrastructure modernization. Governor Newsom issued an executive order in August 2020 that requires state agencies to work together to bridge the digital divide; this should enable the state to take full advantage of federal support.



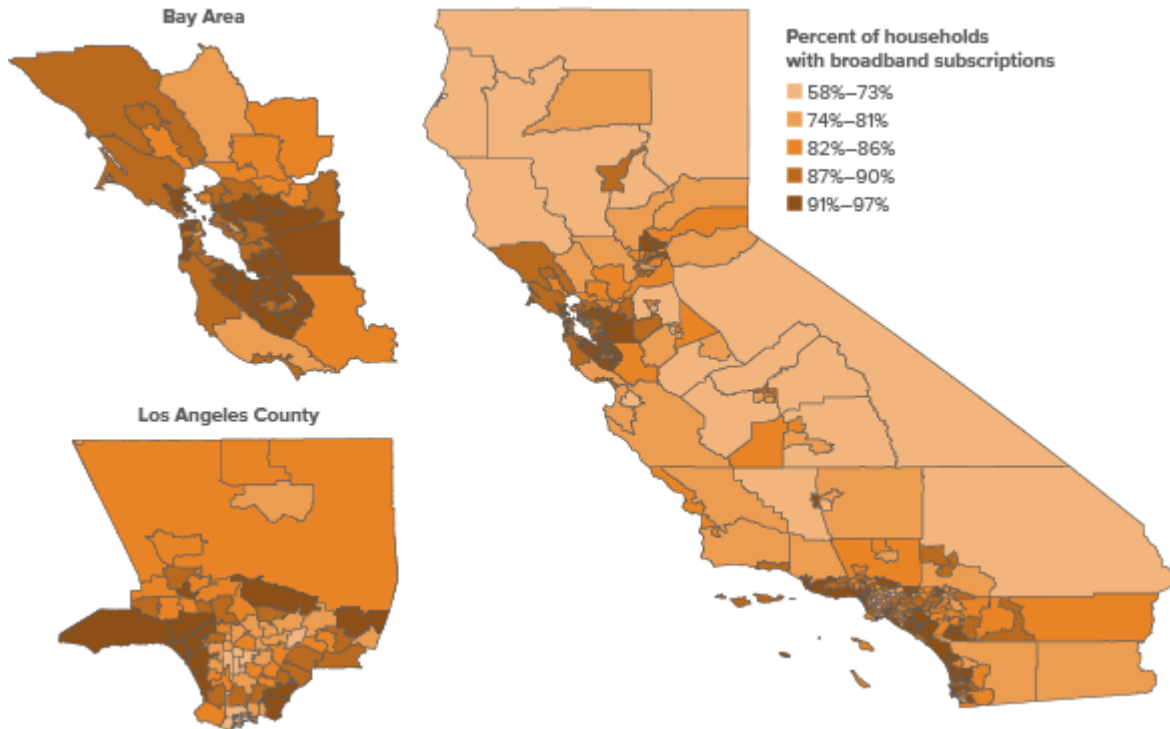
Gaps in access to broadband and devices persist



Source: American Community Survey, 2019.

Note: Low-income households earn less than \$50,000 annually; high-income households have incomes above \$100,000.

Rural areas tend to have the lowest broadband rates



Source: American Community Survey, 2019; PULSE Household Survey.

Notes: Areas shown are Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs), geographic regions that the US Census Bureau has defined for disseminating statistical information about the population. Each PUMA is built on its constituent census tracts and surrounding county or counties, and contains at least 100,000 people. Therefore, rural or lightly populated PUMAs have larger area, while urban, densely populated PUMAs are small.

Sources: American Community Survey, 2019; PPIC Statewide Survey, April 2020.

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