Digital Equity:
A Key to Children's Health & Racial Justice

A Call to Action & Policy Agenda
2023-2024

The Children's Partnership

Part 3 of the Racism and Child Health Series

Digital Equity: A Key to Children's Health & Racial Justice
A Call to Action & Policy Agenda for 2023-2024

Digital equity is a core social driver of health.

Digital equity refers to the 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 health, civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning and access to essential services.[1]

The systems crucial to the well-being of our families are increasingly dependent upon digital infrastructure: schools and learning, doctor visits and health care services, skills training, housing and job applications, workforce development resources and more.[2,3,4]

As a result of persistent structural racism, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Pacific Islander, Asian American, and mixed-race (BIPOC) communities have been disproportionately impacted by digital inequities,[5,6,7] contributing to worse health outcomes compared to their white peers. Children from BIPOC communities disproportionately experience barriers to digital equity including poverty and lack of translation/interpretation. In California, children from Native American, Black, Pacific Islander, and Latinx communities experience poverty at above the state average and over double the rate of white children,[8] and more than 94% of California children with limited English proficiency are BIPOC.[9]

Three Core Pillars of Digital Equity

Reliable, Affordable Broadband
82% of CA children — or more than 1.3 million kids — who lack high-speed internet at home are BIPOC.[10]

Adequate Devices
8% of Latinx residents do not have computers or tablets but rely solely on phones to connect to the internet, compared to just 4% of white residents.[11]

Digital Literacy Skills & Supports
Nearly 50% of Spanish-speaking families with children stated in a survey that they did not know how to receive medical services online or by phone.[12]

When families have equitable access to the pillars of digital equity, opportunities and services that support good health are unlocked for all Californians.

But when families lack the essentials for digital equity, they face barriers — some insurmountable — to accessing these essential opportunities.

Digital Inequities Create Barriers to the Opportunities Needed for Children's Health Equity

Health Care Services
In Medi-Cal, Black and American Indian/Alaska Native kids had the lowest rate of accessing health services using telehealth in 2020.[13]

Education
The connectivity gap between Latinx and white students at the same income level in Los Angeles is as high as 20 percentage points.[14]

Economic Security
For individuals with low incomes, the introduction of home internet service increased their likelihood of employment by 14%.[15]

Stable Housing & Public Benefits
Families of color face the highest rates of housing insecurity,[16,17] yet 92% of workers assisting people to apply for housing assistance said applicants faced technological barriers to securing relief.[18]

Call to Action: 2023-2024 Policy Priorities

Concerted policy action at all levels of government — together with action from schools, social service agencies, business and other entities — will be needed to close the digital divide. We have an unprecedented opportunity to make progress toward this goal in the next several years.

The US Congress should:

Renew funding for the Affordable Connectivity Program, which provides $30/month to low-income families. Additional funding should be paired with measures to ensure the program's implementation equitably prioritizes high-speed, home internet service in the communities that need it most and ensures equitable pricing and service are provided to low-income families.

The US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should:

Establish clear definitions and rules on digital discrimination that hold internet service providers and others accountable for the impact on communities of color, low-income communities and others impacted by digital redlining.

The California Legislature should:

Pass legislation that would create greater accountability for cable broadband providers who perpetuate digital redlining and improve affordability and service for customers through enhanced public oversight and stronger anti-discrimination and equal-access standards. *(TCP had supported [AB 41](#) as a vehicle for this policy. Unfortunately, amendments made to [AB 41](#) in July 2023 by the Senate Utilities Committee struck all anti-discrimination benchmarks and equal access provisions, making California policy worse for communities of color and harder for the state to address the digital divide. As a result, TCP and our allies regretfully [oppose the current version](#) of the bill.)*

Pass [AB 286, Broadband Infrastructure Mapping (Wood)](#), to require more granular reporting of broadband mapping at the address level to understand the nuances of broadband adoption and ensure that investments can be targeted to address digital inequities most effectively.

Pass [AB 1588, the Affordable Internet and Net Equality Act (Wilson)](#), to require internet service providers that contract with state agencies to provide consumer internet services to recipients of public benefits at affordable prices and guaranteed speeds.

Pass [AB 1714, Broadband as a Public Utility (Wood)](#), to allow the state to regulate internet service similarly to other essential public goods — like electricity, water and sewer — providing the oversight needed to ensure the greatest possible access at reasonable prices and with clear standards for quality service, such as speed and reliability. (AB 1714 has been made a 2-year bill by the author and no action will be taken before January 2024.)

The CA Department of Technology (CDT) should:

Fully consider the needs of children and youth of color as part of the California State Digital Equity Planning (SDEP) process and final recommendations by prioritizing the inclusion of youth and youth-serving organizations and including a youth impact assessment or similar analysis in its final report.

The CA Department of Education (CDE) should:

Finalize and release guidelines required under AB 2315 (Quirk-Silva) for the use of telehealth technology in public schools to provide mental health services.

The California Health and Human Services Agency (CalHHS) should:

Leverage technology through program data sharing and systems interfacing to streamline access to services so that when families enroll in one program, like Medi-Cal, they are automatically enrolled in other programs they qualify for, like WIC and Cal-Fresh.

The CA Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) should:

Clarify that community health worker/promotora services that support members in effectively using telehealth to access health care are considered preventive services and covered by Medi-Cal.

Clarify that telehealth appointments that include an interpreter should by default be scheduled for longer than if the same appointment were being scheduled without a translator.

Clarify that Medi-Cal managed care plans (MCPs) have the responsibility to provide all telehealth-related documentation in threshold languages.

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FOREWORD:
About the Racism and Child Health Series

Structural racism is the root cause of persistent racial health inequities, and these inequities have a profound impact on the health and well-being of children, youth, families and communities.[19]

As illuminated by Dr. Camara Jones, pediatrician, public health scholar and anti-racist activist, racism is "the system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks (what we call 'race'), that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities, unfairly advantages other individuals and communities, and saps the strength of the whole society through the waste of human resources."[20]

A racist institution or system is made up of policies, rules, procedures, practices, processes, regulations or guidelines that produce, sustain and normalize inequities between racial groups and operate behind the illusion of colorblindness and neutrality.[21]

The key indicators of racism within a system or institution are racially disparate outcomes, whether intentional or not.

This is the third in a series of briefs that explore how children continue to be harmed by racism that is embedded in and perpetuated by institutions, systems and policies that impact the well-being of children. The first brief in this series focused on police violence and its impacts on BIPOC children and the opportunity to shift funding to community-based mental health and well-being supports. The second explored how systemic racism exists within health care delivery systems that serve BIPOC children and the promise of a community health workforce as an anti-racist, community-centered strategy to advance child health equity.

Through these briefs, we consider opportunities to disrupt oppressive systems, defer to community leadership, and demand bold changes that put the well-being of our children first.

To learn more about the Child Health and Racism series, visit: https://www.childrenspartnership.org/what-we-do/health/racism-and-child-health/

Introduction

Access to technology and the internet is the start of true connectivity to education, jobs, health care, social services, economy and much of the social fabric of today. The lack of access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet, adequate devices and training to harness the power of the digital world is the digital divide; and it has been largely Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Pacific Islander, Asian American, and mixed-race (BIPOC) communities and low-income children that have been disproportionately impacted and disadvantaged by this lack of connection.

The importance of broadband connectivity, devices and digital literacy in a child's education and health soared during the pandemic. After California initiated a shelter-in-place order in March 2020, K-12 instruction and health care rapidly shifted online. However, not all families had the devices, high-speed internet or digital skills to adapt fully to this new world. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and exacerbated the digital divide that has continued to limit opportunity and hinder well-being for California's BIPOC children.

This brief aims to serve as a resource for advocacy to advance digital equity in order to address the disparate impact of the digital divide on BIPOC children.

It explains the pillars of digital equity, gives examples of the opportunities that are enabled by digital equity, and describes the current policy landscape. Through a child health lens, the brief lays out an actionable policy agenda that we have the power to move in the next two years.

Please join us!

Visit us online and follow us on social media to stay up to date on policy developments and action opportunities to advance digital equity for all California's children!

www.childrenspartnership.org | **Twitter:** @kidspartnership
Facebook: /kidspartnership | **Instagram:** @kidspartnership

SECTION 1:
Digital Equity is a Core Part of Whole Child Equity

Social drivers of health (SDOH) are the social, economic, environmental and other conditions that shape health and well-being.[22] SDOH are structural factors in the places where children and families live, work, play and go to school — such as whether a family has access to healthy foods, livable wages, quality education, neighborhoods free from violence where it is safe to walk and play, affordable housing, clear air and reliable transportation, to name just a few.

Evidence shows that approximately 80% of our health outcomes are driven by these social conditions.[23] Medical care, on the other hand, accounts for only about 20% of our health outcomes.[24] Recognizing the ways in which these systems impact the health of our communities is essential to a "whole child" equity approach that recognizes and addresses the various social conditions that shape child health and well-being.

Increasingly, digital equity is being recognized as a social driver of health because the systems crucial to our well-being are increasingly dependent upon digital infrastructure: schools and learning, doctor visits and health care services, skills training, housing and job applications, workforce development resources and more.[25,26,27,28]

Digital equity

refers to the 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 health, civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning and access to essential services.

Digital equity is particularly important for health and well-being because it has a compounding effect that starts in childhood. Digital equity has been called a "social determinants echo chamber" and a "super social determinant of health" because digital inequity compounds inequities in other systems, from impeding education to interrupting health care, all the while limiting access to resources that could address adverse social conditions, such as applications for housing and income assistance programs.[29,30] These social drivers affect an individual at all stages of life, but the effects are particularly significant to the health and ongoing development of children.[31]

As a result of persistent structural racism, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Pacific Islander, Asian American, and mixed-race (BIPOC) communities have been disproportionately impacted by digital inequities,[32,33,34] contributing to worse health outcomes compared to their white peers. Children from BIPOC communities disproportionately experience barriers to digital equity including poverty and lack of translation/interpretation. In California, 27%, 22%, 21%, and 18% of Black, Native American, Latinx and Pacific Islander children,[35] respectively, experience poverty compared to just 8% of white children and 15% of all children. Furthermore, more than 94% of California children with limited English proficiency are from BIPOC communities.[36]

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
Black	27%
American Indian & Alaska Native	22%
Hispanic	21%
Pacific Islander	18%
All Children	16%
Multi-Race	14%
Asian	10%
White	8%
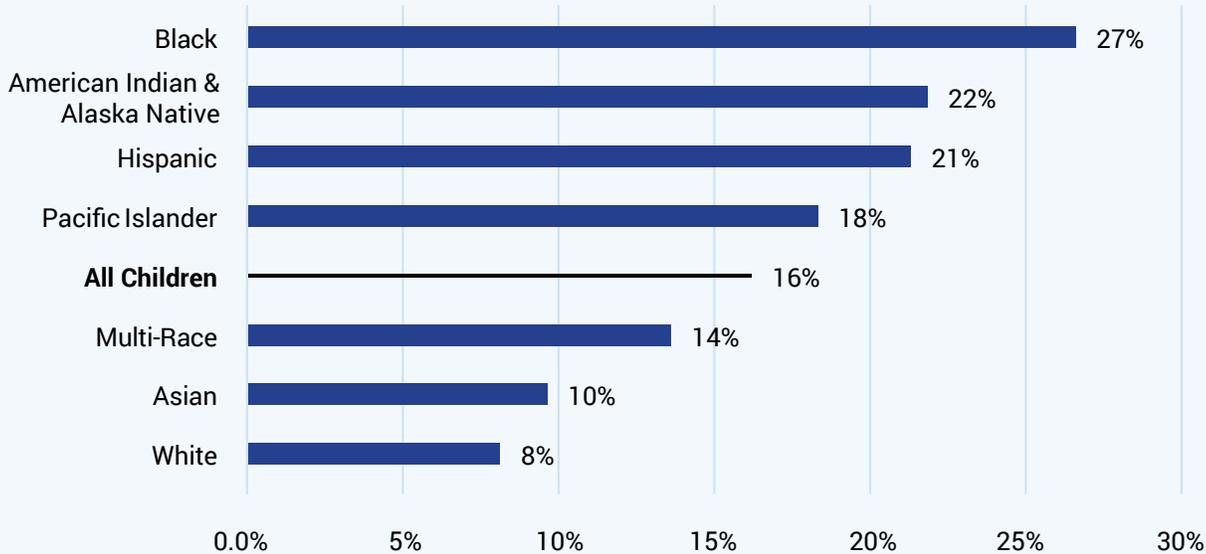
Note: Black, Latinx, Native American, Asian American and Pacific Islander communities are diverse populations in themselves with a vast array of subgroup identities. Because data is not available for subgroups within any of these racial categories, it is likely that many inequities that exist for subgroups within these populations are masked in the available data as presented here.

Systemic racism shapes the social drivers of health and how they are experienced by BIPOC communities, ultimately creating and perpetuating health inequities — unjust and avoidable negative health outcomes that disproportionately impact BIPOC communities.[38] Access to affordable and reliable broadband services is less common for Black, Latinx, Native American and Spanish-speaking households in California. These communities of color experience digital redlining — discrimination within broadband practices that mirrors historic racist housing policies that similarly have put critically important resources out of reach for BIPOC communities.[39,40,41,42,43]

Persistent inequities in access to high-speed internet, adequate devices, and digital education and training have detrimental and lasting effects on our children's abilities to grow up healthy, to learn and to develop into thriving adults. The deliberate enactment of policies and processes to advance digital equity for BIPOC communities must be prioritized to protect the health and well-being of children.

Scaling Solutions for Digital Equity:
The Origins of The Children's Partnership

In the early 1990s when the Internet was still an "information superhighway," it was becoming clear that new digital technologies would transform learning and living for kids. The Children's Partnership (TCP) called out computers, fast internet and the skills needed to use them as the next equity challenge. When TCP wrote "America's Children & the Information Superhighway" in 1994, we laid out goals and an action plan for spreading these new technologies equitably, guided by what is in children's best interests. In 2005 we developed the Digital Opportunity Measuring Stick, to measure progress toward these goals.

Working with partners, TCP also tested out ways to equip underserved communities to fully participate in the digital society. With the California Emerging Technology Fund, and some enterprising middle schools, TCP designed and put in place a School2Home pilot to close the technology gap by providing students with digital devices and broadband access, along with training for parents to be more involved in their children's learning. Additionally, with university and community partners, we promoted Virtual Dental Homes that use telehealth to provide a safe, effective way to deliver preventive dental care to children who do not have direct access to a dentist in their schools and early learning centers — reducing school absenteeism and lessening the need for parents to leave work.

For this brief, we focus on three major pillars of digital equity: affordable broadband, adequate devices, and digital literacy skills and supports. Each of these three pillars is necessary to achieve digital equity. If one or more pillars is missing or insufficient, digital equity will be impeded and with it, access to the services and opportunities that support health.

For instance, a young person having a fast internet connection at home is not sufficient if they do not have a laptop or other device that is compatible with the platform required to complete their homework. A parent having fast internet and a device is insufficient if they are not equipped with the digital skills necessary to navigate a telehealth appointment for their child.

Three Core Pillars of Digital Equity

Reliable, Affordable Broadband
82% of CA children — or more than 1.3 million kids — who lack high-speed internet at home are BIPOC.[10]

Adequate Devices
8% of Latinx residents do not have computers or tablets but rely solely on phones to connect to the internet, compared to just 4% of white residents.[11]

Digital Literacy Skills & Supports
Nearly 50% of Spanish-speaking families with children stated in a survey that they did not know how to receive medical services online or by phone.[12]

These pillars exist within a broader environment of digital and technological equity challenges and needs. This includes the need for equitable and accessible online content, including for those with limited English proficiency; improving online safety, especially for children and youth; accessible tech support for youth, families, and students; rooting out bias in the algorithms and predictive analytics increasingly used within health care, education and tenant screening technology; and the privacy of consumer data in the ever-expanding universe of health care and behavioral health online applications, among others.

Pillar 1: Reliable, Affordable Broadband

Digital redlining perpetuates systemic racism, disproportionately leaving behind BIPOC Californians.

The term broadband refers to high-speed internet service, which may be delivered through several kinds of transmission technologies, including cable, fiber, wireless and satellite, among others. Access to affordable broadband infrastructure — just like electricity, water, sewer and other services we consider basic public utilities — depends on infrastructure investment at the community level.

But communities of color have been historically and systemically left out of broadband investment, with California's Latinx children representing the largest group who does not have access to high-speed home internet: more than 25% of Latinx households with children do not have home high-speed internet access, translating to 1.1 million Latinx children who do not have high-speed internet access at home.

82% of CA children — or more than 1.3 million kids — who lack high-speed internet at home are BIPOC.[45]

25% of households where Spanish is the primary language have no internet connection at all.[46]

Throughout our nation's and our state's history, BIPOC communities have been systematically and intentionally excluded from owning homes, accessing economic and educational opportunities, and benefiting from other resources essential for attaining equitable economic power. Our digital infrastructure is rooted in this history.[47]

Digital redlining — discrimination within broadband policies and practices that marginalize communities of color from being able to access affordable internet — mirrors historic, race-based exclusionary housing tactics committed against Black, Native American, Latinx and Asian American communities in California.

Digital redlining occurs, for example, when major network providers systematically exclude low-income neighborhoods of color from broadband service — deploying only substandard, low-speed home internet, making high-speed access either completely unavailable or unaffordable.[48] The California Task Force to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans notes that digital inequity is one of the many enduring legacies of slavery, legal segregation and government policies in the environment and infrastructure affecting African Americans to this day.[49]

A 2022 study by Digital Equity LA and the California Community Foundation Digital Equity Initiative found that internet service is slower and more expensive in communities of color and high-poverty neighborhoods in LA County. For example, the report found that Charter Spectrum advertised their "Internet Ultra" 500 Mpbs service tier for $70 per month, at less favorable terms, in the historically Black communities of Baldwin Hills, Crenshaw and West Adams, while advertising the same service for $30 per month in the whiter, wealthier neighborhoods in Mar Vista just a few miles away. Similarly, analysis by the Greenlining Institute found that the map of neighborhoods in and around Oakland that lack high-speed internet access closely resembles redlining maps from the 1930s used to drive racial discrimination in housing.

Digital inequities affect both rural and urban communities in California, and racial inequities are even more stark in rural California:

19% **of Los Angeles County and 20% of Central Valley** households have no high-speed internet connection or rely on smartphones.

NEARLY **40%** **of rural Black households lack high-speed internet access,** compared to 23% of Black households statewide.[53]

FULLY **46%** **of rural American Indian/ Alaska Native (AI/AN) families do not have high-speed internet,** compared to 24% of AI/AN households statewide.[54]

Pillar 2: Adequate Devices

Low-income BIPOC families are more likely to lack adequate devices and rely solely on smartphones, which are insufficient for many functions.

Access to laptops, desktops or tablets is essential for distance learning, health care services, remote work and other functions. However, as a result of digital redlining, too many low-income communities of color have been forced to rely on smartphones or forgo connection entirely. While 98% of households with children nationwide have access to smartphones, smartphones are often incompatible with educational platforms, and their speed, capacity and size make them inadequate for many digital needs.[55,56]

A 2021 survey[57] found that:
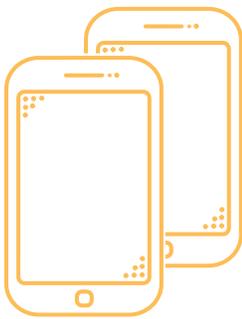
10% of low-income families rely on smartphones to connect to the internet, compared to just 2% of other families.

8% of Latinx Californians rely on smartphones to connect to the internet — double that of any other ethnic group.

10% of Latinx Californians for whom Spanish is their primary language rely on smartphones to connect to the internet.

A survey of households conducted by the Census Bureau in September 2020 found that among households in California with children, 78% of those who rarely or sometimes had a computer available for educational purposes were BIPOC.[58]

In a 2020 survey of parents of K-12 students by the Education Trust-West:[59]

Among parents who expressed a lack of confidence that their child would be able to participate in remote learning, **41% said having a suitable device or enough devices was the top barrier,** higher than any other barrier cited.

64% said that having their child's school provide devices would be very helpful to their families, and this number rises to 69% for low-income families and 71% for African American families.

📖 Pillar 3: Digital Literacy Skills and Supports

BIPOC families are disproportionately affected by digital literacy gaps compared to their white peers.

Families need broad-based, digital problem-solving skills and sufficient training and support to use digital platforms effectively, as well as to protect their families' safety and privacy online and thrive in the workforce.

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance defines digital literacy as possessing "the variety of skills — technical and cognitive — required to find, understand, evaluate, create, and communicate digital information in a wide variety of formats."[60]

BIPOC communities are particularly vulnerable to lacking the digital skills and support they need to navigate health, education and employment.

For instance, the 2020 survey of parents of K-12 students by the Education Trust-West found that many families lacked the digital literacy needed to support their children with distance learning during the pandemic:[61]

23% of parents statewide said they did not know how to use the remote/distance learning software that was provided to their children.

Just 65% of parents give themselves a letter grade of an A or B in terms of tech savviness.

A 2020 community needs assessment of Spanish-speaking families with children conducted by Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE), The Children's Partnership and partners found:[62]

Nearly 50% of families stated that they do not know how to receive medical services online or by phone.

1 in 5 families surveyed do not have an email address; in Central California, nearly 30% do not.

A National Skills Coalition analysis concludes that "workers of color are disproportionately affected by digital skill gaps compared to their white peers, in large part due to structural factors that are the product of longstanding inequities in American society, such as income and wealth gaps and uneven access to high-quality K-12 education."

The data show clear racial inequities in workers who have no digital skills or limited digital skills:

	Latinx workers	Black workers	Asian American/Pacific Islander workers	White workers
Limited or no digital skills	57%	50%	36%	23%

Customized support for parents and young people from trusted community centers, schools or other institutions can provide opportunities for families on the other side of the digital divide to get the training and support that may not be available to them though their jobs or through paid tech support services.

Digital literacy training can vary greatly depending on needs, from basics like the components of a computer and creating an email account to more specialized support for specific applications (such as spreadsheets) or career-specific skills or certifications. Digital literacy also includes support to build skills evaluating sources of information and maintaining safety online. Across the board, youth and caregivers need access to training and support on the setup and use of online platforms essential for health, education and accessing social services.

SECTION 3: Digital Inequities Create Barriers to the Opportunities Needed For Child Health

> **When children and families have equitable access to affordable broadband, adequate devices and digital literacy supports (the pillars of digital equity), opportunities and services that support good health for kids are unlocked.**

But when families lack the essentials for digital inclusion, they face barriers — some insurmountable — to accessing these same opportunities. This section explores a few opportunities that are enabled by digital inclusion — or stymied by digital exclusion. These four opportunities are not exhaustive, but they are ones particularly important for children's health and well-being.

Opportunities Enabled by Digital Equity

Health Care Services
Telehealth services, virtual check-ins

Education
Distance learning, online educational platforms

Economic Security
Earnings, job search tools, jobs requiring digital skills

Stable Housing and Public Benefits
Housing search, public benefits applications

1. Health Care Services

> **Telehealth has improved access to care, but BIPOC and Spanish-speaking Californians experience technological, language and other barriers.**

Telehealth can reduce transportation and work barriers, enabling children and their families to connect with their health and mental health care providers at home or in school and receive services like well-child visits, developmental screenings and more.[66,67,68,69,70,71]

But prior to the pandemic, policies of the state and federal government, together with policies of health insurers — including Medi-Cal — severely limited access to telehealth services, despite the promise of telehealth reducing access to care barriers in California.[72]

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, health care has increasingly moved online through telehealth. When the pandemic began, policymakers rushed to remove barriers to telehealth, recognizing telehealth as an effective means of delivering care in a time of crisis.[73] Many states, including California, temporarily simplified and expanded their policies about what kinds of services can be provided using telehealth, where telehealth can be provided and in what settings, and how payment works.[74] The California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) implemented broad policy flexibilities to meet the health care needs of Medi-Cal's 12 million beneficiaries, over 5 million of whom are children and youth.

Of consumers surveyed by the California Health Care Foundation who used telehealth services between March 2019 and August 2020, satisfaction was very high. And notably, 64% of low-income patients expressed that it was easier to keep their telehealth appointment than it had been to keep in-person appointments in the past.[75]

Despite these important policy changes, many communities — especially BIPIOC families and families with limited English proficiency — were not prepared for this sudden shift, and inequities in access to quality telehealth services persisted:

Among youth 0-17 in 2020, **Black/African American and American Indian/Alaska Native Californians had the lowest rates of telehealth usage in Medi-Cal,** with white children and youth having the highest rates.[76]

56% of Latinx households reported no use of telehealth compared to 38% of white households.[77]
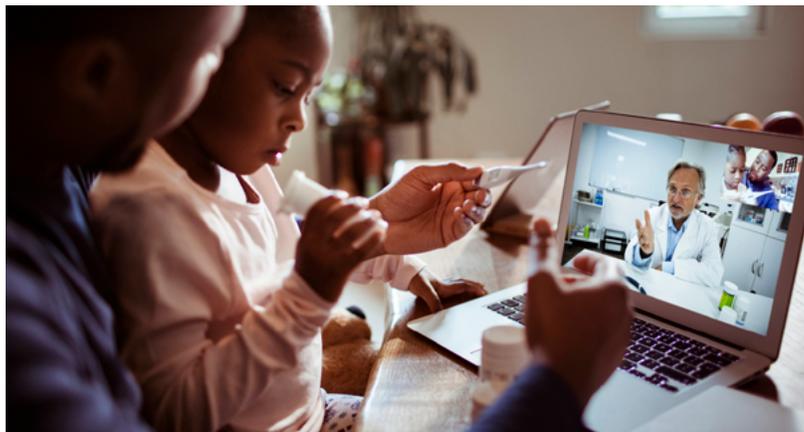
In a 2020 survey, the vast majority of parents (94%) said that accessing their child's doctor via telehealth could help them, **but only 48% said they currently used telehealth.**[78]

In a 2020 survey, 60% of limited English proficient individuals reported that the telehealth services they received were not in their preferred language.[79]

In a 2020 survey, **62% of Latinx respondents said that they did not have a strong enough internet connection or bandwidth,** and 57% stated that they did not have enough cell phone minutes to effectively utilize telehealth.[80]

40% of consumers reported that they did not receive any instruction from their provider on how to prepare for or access their telehealth appointment.

In 2022, The Children's Partnership engaged 85 families who identified as Latinx, Black, Native American or Asian American and who have children with special health care needs to better understand their experiences with telehealth during the pandemic. Participants shared their experiences:

Many parents lacked the technology and digital infrastructure that telehealth requires, including access to reliable broadband, Wi-Fi or devices.

A number of parents **received no explanation or instruction on the structure and logistics of a telehealth visit.** They did not know what to expect before, during or after a telehealth visit.

More than half of families reported experiencing language barriers in their telehealth visits, and over 1 in 3 families sometimes or never were provided an interpreter for a telehealth appointment when they needed one.

🎓 2. Education

BIPOC students are more likely to face barriers to accessing the technology that continues to be needed for effective learning and accessing educational resources.

The pandemic shed light on how digital equity is essential to achieving educational equity. When K-12 instruction rapidly shifted online in March 2020, thousands of children lost access to education. For example, in the first few weeks after schools shut down in spring 2020, about 15,000 Los Angeles high school students were absent, and more than 40,000 were not in daily contact with their teachers. Not all students had access to the broadband, devices and digital literacy needed to join their classmates in their online schoolroom. Some children without digital access were forced to search out Wi-Fi hotspots on school busses or in fast food restaurants, while others simply went without:

17% **of Spanish-speaking low-income Californians did not have adequate broadband at home for their children to participate in distance learning.**[84]

20%[85] The connectivity gap between Latinx and white students at the same income level in Los Angeles is as high as

1 in 5 unconnected or under-connected students received a significant **reduction in teaching-activity hours** compared to before the pandemic.[86]

As a result of these and other inequities, the pandemic widened disparities in achievement between low-poverty and high-poverty schools in California (which are disproportionately home to BIPOC students).

Moreover, the impact was not only felt in K-12 schools, but it was also felt in early learning spaces. Prior to the pandemic, the debate around "screen time" captured the public discourse on early childhood learning and digital media. However, during these last few years, as technology offered a pathway to learning during the pandemic, the debate shifted and gave room to remote learning, including for young children. As evident in K-12 schools, families with digital access are able to support the advancement of their young child's learning, while young children in families without digital access may be left behind.

Beyond the pandemic, digital equity, including access to high-speed broadband and devices, remains essential to achieving educational equity for children of color. Families must use the internet for accessing critical student information, resources and other supports for students. Having internet access at home is like having access to textbooks at home: Students are unable to do their coursework without reliable, high-speed broadband internet or devices. In many schools, digital tools adopted during distance learning — such as Google Classroom — were maintained after students returned to schools. And in many cases, homework and textbooks are available online exclusively or require online research, making reliable internet and devices indispensable for education. In addition, students use the internet to access important resources like tutoring and other out-of-school learning activities, as well as applying to college.[88]

Substantial investment in addressing digital inequities during 2020 helped significantly to close gaps in device access and made modest improvements in broadband access.[89] But progress stalled in spring 2021, and as most students headed back to full-time, in-person education, significant gaps remained,[90] disproportionately limiting digital access for BIPOC students. The pandemic has brought to light an indisputable fact that will far outlive the experience of COVID-era distance learning: There is a glaring digital divide that continues disproportionately to impede the ability of millions of BIPOC students from succeeding in their education.

🐷 3. Economic Security

The lost educational time disproportionately experienced by BIPOC students can lead to lifetime loss of earnings; greater digital skills enable employment and higher wages.

Learning loss due to digital barriers can lead to loss of wages across one's life. Students with a persistent lack of access face significant workforce barriers:

A drop in GPA of just 0.4 points is projected to lead to a $1,400-$2,000 annual wage loss and an estimated $22 billion in GDP loss.[91]

After the '20-'21 academic year, challenges with distance learning are estimated to lead to an **annual earnings deficit of $110 billion for disconnected students** nationally.[92]

Digital inclusion impacts parents and guardians' ability to search for jobs and submit applications, build a professional network, and develop skills and gather information on trades and professions. In a 2022 analysis, Common Sense Media found that:[93]

Among low-income individuals, the introduction of home internet service **increased their likelihood of employment by 14%.**

Among these households, **62% cited the internet as having helped them or a family member find employment.**

Furthermore, people with digital skills can earn significantly more money to support their families: Those who qualify for jobs that require even one digital skill can earn an average of 23% more than in a job requiring no digital skills.[94]

4. Stable Housing and Public Benefits

Digital barriers prevent families from finding affordable housing and accessing public benefits.

As with so many goods and services, the internet is central to accessing housing and housing benefits — whether searching for an apartment rental or applying for public benefits. But families most at risk for housing insecurity — disproportionately low-income BIPOC households — are the families with the least access to digital tools. Lacking digital tools means the families who most need the ability to search for affordable housing opportunities and apply for housing benefits are impeded from accessing these very resources.
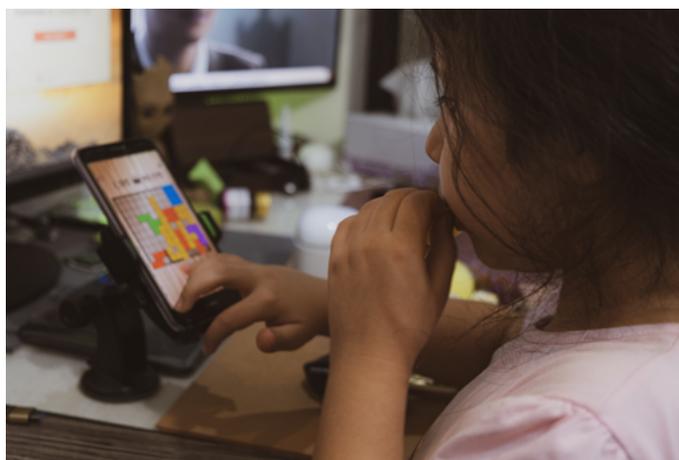
Across the U.S., families of color face the highest rates of housing insecurity, with housing hardship having an acute impact on Black renters living with children: 29%, or 1.7 million renters, reported at the end of 2021 that their household was not caught up on rent.[95] **According to workers that help applicants fill out requests for rent relief through the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) in California, a staggering 92% said applicants faced "technological" barriers to securing such relief,** making it the most commonly cited barrier to the program.[96]

In addition to housing support, other state and federal benefit applications that support health and well-being can be more easily accessed online, such as CalFresh, CalWORKS and WIC. Digital barriers limit the ability of families to access these and other critical supports for which they are eligible.

As California strives to improve access to these public benefits, there are also important opportunities to use technology to more seamlessly provide access to benefits, including improved horizontal integration that provides a single, common online application portal for state-administered public benefits, as well as Express Lane Eligibility for Medi-Cal, which uses eligibility for other public programs to expedite enrollment.

SECTION 4: Policy Landscape

There is much to celebrate in recent policy actions at the federal, state and local level, but implementation of policy and deployment of new resources are in the early stages.

It is essential that advocates, residents, committed policymakers and community leaders are actively engaged to ensure that BIPOC children and families have a voice and are centered in decision-making. In this section, we highlight five key themes in the current federal and state policy landscape:

1. When the pandemic hit, the federal government took quick action to provide short-term support.

► More than $900 million has been allocated to California schools and libraries under the federal Emergency Connectivity Fund to help students access devices and the internet.

► The federal Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) helps households pay for internet service and connected devices like a laptop or tablet, but the program does not have a permanent source of funding and is projected to run out of funds by spring 2024.

► The 2021 American Rescue Plan allocated more than $1.5 billion to the Office of Minority Broadband Initiatives, the Tribal Connectivity Program and other efforts to expand broadband to underserved communities.

2. Unprecedented state and federal funding has since been appropriated, but most of it has not yet been allocated to communities.

► The 2021 federal Infrastructure and Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) allocated $65 billion nationally to address the digital divide — including broadband infrastructure and initiatives like digital navigators and digital skills training.

► The 2021 California state budget allocated $6.5 billion to build out broadband infrastructure. The CA Department of Technology reports that most of the 10,000-mile middle mile network — the long-distance cables that connect communities to the internet backbone — is expected to be under contract by mid-2023.

► The CA legislature has passed numerous policy bills over the last two years to drive digital equity, including SB 4 (Gonzalez) and AB 14 (Aguiar-Curry), the Internet for All Act of 2021, which prioritizes the deployment of broadband infrastructure in California's most unserved communities.

3. Despite state policy changes having set the stage for greater digital equity, gaps remain, and, in some cases, implementation has been delayed.

► Most of the state's temporary telehealth policies have been made permanent, which will improve access to telehealth, including coverage for different telehealth modalities, payment parity, coverage for virtual communications and check-ins, and, in most cases, the ability of a provider to establish a new patient via telehealth. However, gaps in practice and ambiguities in policy remain, especially related to language access.

- In 2018, the California legislature passed AB 2315 (Quirk-Silva) to support the development of innovative, school-based telehealth models for the provision of mental health services. Implementation has been delayed, but the California Department of Education (CDE) is now working to develop the required guidelines for the use of telehealth technology in schools by the end of 2023.

- In 2022, the California legislature passed AB 2273 (Wicks) to establish the California Age-Appropriate Design Code. Under this law, companies will have to consider the privacy and protection of children in the design of any digital product or service that children in California are likely to access. Implementation of the law has not yet begun.

- In March 2023, as part of the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI), the California Department of Health Care Services launched the Behavioral Health Virtual Services Platform to provide a variety of resources and tools, including access to coaching and counseling supports.

4. Current planning efforts will determine the use of unprecedented federal funding, but they will only be successful if adequately informed by data and impacted residents.

- In January 2023, the state launched the Digital Equity Planning process, following new state and federal requirements to collect data, engage community residents, and articulate goals and strategies for digital equity. Federal law requires the plan to prioritize covered populations, including low-income residents, people of color, individuals with language barriers and individuals with disabilities. The plan must be submitted to the federal government in late 2023. Completion and approval of the plan will unlock billions of dollars of federal funding for implementation. Community leaders, residents and advocates have an important opportunity to shape the state's goals and strategies.

- A lack of publicly available and accurate data on broadband access has long plagued efforts to understand the digital divide at a granular, community level and to guide sound investment. Too often, policymakers are forced to rely on data reported by internet service providers, who have an incentive to overrepresent their service territory. For example, recent maps released by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) used industry-reported data, which excluded the majority of people in urban areas who are disconnected, including low-income communities of color. In response to push back from equity advocates, the CPUC agreed to discontinue use of these maps and release improved eligibility maps detailing underserved communities.[97] While this is a victory for equity, more work is needed to accurately map the details of the digital divide, including gathering community-based data from rigorous speed-testing and evaluating reliability and service quality.

5. The policy framework that regulates internet service providers is not sufficient to address digital redlining and needs to be strengthened.

- Internet service providers (ISPs) in California too often operate without significant market competition, limiting customer choice, affordability and service — and allowing digital redlining to go unchecked. A 17-year-old California law designed to increase competition among cable ISPs has not achieved its goals and is in need of reform, including stronger anti-discrimination provisions.

- In 2022, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced plans to address digital discrimination more aggressively, establishing a cross-agency task force and soliciting public comments on the appropriate legal standard for digital discrimination and policies for the federal, state and local governments to combat digital discrimination.

BEST PRACTICE HIGHLIGHT:
"A CIVIL RIGHT" — ALL FAMILIES CONNECTED PROGRAM

In May 2022, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) — the nation's second-largest school system — launched the All Families Connected Program, aimed at ensuring that every student has access to devices, internet connectivity and technical support at school and at home.

"Connectivity and universal ubiquitous access to digital content anytime anywhere, whether in school, in the community, in the park or the public library, is a civil right that must be delivered to our generation.[98] "

— LAUSD Superintendent Alberto Carvalho

At launch, LAUSD estimated that about 90,000 children in the district — or approximately 20% of students — lacked adequate broadband service to meet academic needs.

The program was launched using $50 million in short-term federal funding. It provides free devices, such as Chromebooks, to students who lack them. Through negotiated bulk discounts with internet service providers, the district also provides free home internet service to families who do not have a connection. 24-hour tech support is available, and the district has pledged to expand its digital citizenship curriculum.

Since the launch of the program, more than 128,000 students have been provided with LTE-enabled devices, hotspots, or fixed broadband connectivity to support learning.

According to a June 2022 district report, funding for most aspects of the program will expire at the end of 2023, with some components funded through September 2024. The district estimates that $104,600,000 annually will be needed to sustain the program, which could come from General Fund support, federal and state support, or voter-approved support through bonds.[99]

As a program that is critical to students' educational success, it is important that the All Families Connected program continues and that LAUSD works with its partners to identify the resources and funding needed to sustain this important lifeline for unconnected and under-connected students. Districts across California should follow suit and ensure all students have universal access to the digital tools needed for learning.

Concerted policy action at all levels of government — together with action from schools, social service agencies, business and other entities — will be needed to close the digital divide.

We have an unprecedented opportunity to make progress in the next several years.

The Children's Partnership urges our state and federal policymakers to prioritize these policy actions in 2023 to help address the challenges laid out in this brief and move California closer to digital equity for children and families:

The US Congress should:

Renew funding for the Affordable Connectivity Program, which provides $30/month to low-income families. Additional funding should be paired with measures to ensure the program's implementation equitably prioritizes high-speed, home internet service in the communities that need it most and ensures equitable pricing and service are provided to low-income families.

The US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) should:

Establish clear definitions and rules on digital discrimination that hold internet service providers and others accountable for the impact on communities of color, low-income communities and others impacted by digital redlining.

The California Legislature should:

Pass legislation that would create greater accountability for cable broadband providers who perpetuate digital redlining and improve affordability and service for customers through enhanced public oversight and stronger anti-discrimination and equal-access standards. *(TCP had supported* AB 41 *as a vehicle for this policy. Unfortunately, amendments made to* AB 41 *in July 2023 by the Senate Utilities Committee struck all anti-discrimination benchmarks and equal access provisions, making California policy worse for communities of color and harder for the state to address the digital divide. As a result, TCP and our allies regretfully* oppose the current version *of the bill.)*

Pass AB 286, Broadband Infrastructure Mapping (Wood), to require more granular reporting of broadband mapping at the address level to understand the nuances of broadband adoption and ensure that investments can be targeted to address digital inequities most effectively.

Pass AB 1588, the Affordable Internet and Net Equality Act (Wilson), to require internet service providers that contract with state agencies to provide consumer internet services to recipients of public benefits at affordable prices and guaranteed speeds.

Pass AB 1714, Broadband as a Public Utility (Wood), to allow the state to regulate internet service similarly to other essential public goods — like electricity, water and sewer — providing the oversight needed to ensure the greatest possible access at reasonable prices and with clear standards for quality service, such as speed and reliability. (AB 1714 has been made a 2-year bill by the author and no action will be taken before January 2024.)

The CA Department of Technology (CDT) should:

Fully consider the needs of children and youth of color as part of the California State Digital Equity Planning (SDEP) process and final recommendations by prioritizing the inclusion of youth and youth-serving organizations and including a youth impact assessment or similar analysis in its final report.

The CA Department of Education (CDE) should:

Finalize and release guidelines required under AB 2315 (Quirk-Silva) **for the use of telehealth technology in public schools** to provide mental health services.

The California Health and Human Services Agency (CalHHS) should:

Leverage technology through program data sharing and systems interfacing to streamline access to services so that when families enroll in one program, like Medi-Cal, they are automatically enrolled in other programs they qualify for, like WIC and Cal-Fresh.

The CA Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) should:

Clarify that community health worker/promotora services that support members in effectively using telehealth to access health care are considered preventive services and covered by Medi-Cal.

Clarify that telehealth appointments that include an interpreter should by default be scheduled for longer than if the same appointment were being scheduled without a translator.

Clarify that Medi-Cal managed care plans (MCPs) have the responsibility to provide all telehealth-related documentation in threshold languages.

In addition to these specific recommendations, following are examples of other areas needing attention from policymakers, nonprofits, schools, health care organizations and technology companies:

► Expansion of programs that provide free or low-cost devices and broadband subscriptions to families with low incomes.

► Increased funding for digital literacy training and support, including extensive public outreach campaigns among providers, support staff and communities, as well as customized support for parents and young people from trusted community centers, schools or other institutions that can provide opportunities for families on the other side of the digital divide to get the training and support that may not be available to them though their jobs or through paid tech support services.

► Expectations that devices, applications and platforms are equipped with language options and guidance on using the devices and platforms safely and securely, in multiple languages and at basic grade levels.

Conclusion

The digital divide is not new. It took a global pandemic to reveal what was undeniable: There is a glaring gap in access to the internet and digital technologies that keeps millions of families and children from being able to fully participate in our society and access opportunities needed for good health. Due to longstanding systemic barriers in American society, a lack of access to the pillars of digital equity — affordable broadband, adequate devices and digital literacy support — has disadvantaged Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Pacific Islander, Asian American and mixed-race communities, limiting their opportunities for health care, education, economic security, housing, public benefits and more.

We can and must change this — join us in this call to action today!

Today, our state and nation have an opportunity to reform existing policies and advance new policies that enable access to the pillars of digital equity and strengthen our collective commitment to advancing child health equity.

Visit us online and follow us on social media to stay up to date on policy developments and action opportunities to advance digital equity for all California's children and families.

www.childrenspartnership.org
Twitter: @kidspartnership | **Facebook:** /kidspartnership | **Instagram:** @kidspartnership

Acknowledgments

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