

# The Digital Divide Hits U.S. Immigrant Households Disproportionately during the COVID-19 Pandemic

**SEPTEMBER 3, 2020** FEATURE | By Alexis Cherewka

The internet is a critical component of modern life, and never has that been clearer than during the COVID-19 pandemic, where online connectivity has proven an essential lifeline to telework, distance learning, telemedicine, and relationships with relatives and friends. In the United States, 87 percent of adults said they considered the web to be important or essential for them during the outbreak. Yet neither access to the internet nor vulnerability to the coronavirus are spread equally. Immigrants are over-represented in frontline pandemic-response occupations such as doctors, home health aides, and grocery store workers, leaving them more exposed to the disease. Meanwhile, the foreign born also make up a disproportionately large share of groups with lower levels of digital skills. As such, questions surrounding digital inclusion and a push for digital equity have come to the fore, especially for populations that have been disproportionately hit during this public-health crisis.

In the United States, 36 percent of native-born, native-language adults were at higher levels of proficiency solving problems in digital environments or using digital tools as of 2015, compared to just 12 percent of U.S. residents who are foreign born and speak a language other than English, according to the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) study run by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The proportion of U.S. adults with no computer experience is also much higher for immigrants who speak a language other than English in the home, PIAAC found, at almost 21 percent compared to approximately 5 percent for English speakers. The situation in the United States is part of a global trend and is similar to that of other countries with similar proportions of immigrants, such as Germany and Canada. Across OECD countries, which are high-income economies, native-born adults who speak the native language have higher levels of proficiency with digital problem-solving than do immigrants.

This article outlines available data on immigrants' digital access and digital literacy skills in the

United States and examines the essential nature of these digital tools and experience with them during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Immigrants and Digital Access**

Digital access is defined as an individual's ability to obtain tools such as computers and smartphones, as well as consistent connection to the internet. As such, access can be varied and does not have a one-time cost, but requires multiple recurring expenses over time. For example, an individual may have inconsistent access due to the constant need to add prepaid mobile airtime or replace and repair technologies. Families might also share a single device between multiple individuals, which limits each person's access. Digital skills, meanwhile, refer to an individual's "ability to manage information and solve problems using digital devices, applications, and networks," per the OECD's definition. These skills include tasks such as using a mouse and completing a multistep online form by navigating across applications.

The ability to access and use digital services is especially relevant for finding and keeping a job, attaining education and other credentials, addressing the homework gap, and receiving health-care services. However, data on immigrants' digital access and skills are inconsistent. At the classroom level, some numbers focus not on immigrants as a group but on the population of English Learners (ELs), who are comprised of immigrant students as well as the U.S.-born children of immigrants in K-12. Other data on the digital divide evaluate disparities in race or ethnicity, including categories such as Hispanic, but without delineating between the foreign and native born.

What is clear is that the gap in access to communications technology is often larger for people of color, those with lower incomes, and those with lesser levels of education. Immigrants who fall into these subpopulations appear to be especially vulnerable to digital inequities.

### *A Longstanding Divide*

The digital divide has long been an issue of concern for advocates, economists, and others.

In all, 18 million of the estimated 129 million U.S. households are without internet access, including many immigrant households. One-tenth of families headed by Hispanic immigrants had no access to the internet in 2016, which was greater than the 7 percent of U.S.-born Latinos without access and twice the rate of non-Hispanic White residents, according to a study published by the Sesame Workshop's Joan Ganz Cooney Center. According to researchers at the Pew Research Center, although Hispanic immigrants comprise about half of all Hispanic internet users, in the 16 percent of U.S. Hispanics that did not access the internet in 2016, 77 percent were immigrants. However, the situation is not the same across immigrant backgrounds. Black immigrant households, for example, access digital technology at rates similar to the general U.S. population—a reality perhaps consistent with the fact that they are among the most highly educated immigrant groups.

Imprecise data aside, scholars suggest the digital divide appears to be narrowing. For example,

Latino immigrants' use of the internet was 16 percent lower than White individuals in 2009, but in 2015 Hispanic immigrants narrowed the gap substantially, coming in at only 5 percent lower use than White residents. Still, while the pool of digital have-nots may be declining, the gap continues to be felt by some immigrants and marginalized groups.

It is not clear precisely how many immigrants use mobile phones as their sole or primary means of accessing the internet. Individuals with lower incomes represent a higher portion of this smartphone-dependent population, as do people of color and those with lower levels of education. Among people with incomes under the national median, 41 percent of foreign-born Hispanics with children said in 2016 that they only ever accessed the internet via mobile device, compared to 17 percent of U.S.-born Latinos in the same income group. Similarly, 44 percent of immigrants who are Hispanic did not use a computer at all—although they may use a mobile device—compared to 19 percent of U.S.-born Hispanics, a rate similar to other ethnic groups.

## **Immigrants and Digital Skills**

Effective use of the internet for work, school, handling of finances, and for other tasks requires not only access but also the digital skills and experience to know what to do online. Immigrants and Limited English Proficient (LEP) workers were over-represented in populations with limited or no digital skills identified by OCED's PIAAC study and shared in a 2020 report by the National Skills Coalition. Although they account for about one-sixth of U.S. workers, immigrants make up more than one-third of the workforce without digital skills. They also account for nearly one-quarter of workers with limited digital skills, in other words those who are able to complete basic computer tasks but would have difficulty sorting emails. Among Hispanic immigrants with children, 20 percent said in 2016 they do not use the internet at all.

Yet the situation is complicated, and there is not a clear understanding of the overall types of digital skills that immigrants possess. When it comes to mobile phones, immigrants with cell phones or smartphones used more features at greater numbers than the total U.S. population of smartphone users, according to a 2012 survey of Philadelphia residents. Cellphone-using immigrants were three times as likely to use video-calling services, twice as likely to post on social media, and nearly twice as likely to send emails using their phones compared to the overall cell phone-using public. This may be unsurprising, given immigrants' desires to maintain connections with communities in their countries of origin.

However, people who are smartphone-dependent are also likely to have what is considered fragmented knowledge. They may be able to pay bills through a mobile app, but may not have experience filling out a job application on a desktop computer. This fragmented knowledge may allow people to perform some digital tasks that are necessary for their everyday lives, but could restrict them from developing deeper digital problem-solving skills required for a wider range of functions, and which will be increasingly important as more tasks move into the digital realm.

## **Digital Access and Skills during COVID-19**

The public-health crisis has highlighted the importance of digital access and skills for four essential outcomes: employment, adult education, children’s education, and access to health services.

### *Employment*

The impact of stay-at-home orders and social distancing caused economic activity across the United States to come to a near-halt beginning in late March 2020, resulting in spiking unemployment rates that reached a record 14.7 percent in April for the overall workforce, and significantly higher for some immigrant groups. During the pandemic, as many as 70 percent of employees have worked remotely at least sometimes. As a result, the internet has been an invaluable resource for finding and keeping employment during the pandemic.

The shift to remote work has forced many to quickly adapt to new technological situations, obtain digital access, and improve digital skills, which can be difficult for immigrants and others with a weak foundation of online experience. In this way, the pandemic aggravated a trend that had been growing before COVID-19. Increasingly, even entry-level positions now require some type of digital skill, and four out of five middle-skilled jobs—which typically require less than a bachelor’s degree but pay a living wage, and which account for nearly half of the overall labor demand—now require higher digital skills. As such, immigrants who have been working remotely or searching for employment may find themselves without the necessary digital access or experience to advance or maintain their careers.

### *Adult Education and English Literacy Instruction*

Nearly one in every ten workers is LEP, and these individuals—the large majority of whom are immigrants—also earn 25 percent to 40 percent less than the English-proficient population. English language proficiency has been associated with an average earnings increase of 10 percent to 20 percent for adult male immigrants, so access to adult English literacy instruction can be an important factor for improving employment-related outcomes. However, immigrants and LEP individuals enroll in adult education, including English literacy programs, for a variety of often overlapping purposes, including to attain high school equivalency, prepare for postsecondary education, obtain a better job through the pursuit of additional credentials and other occupational training, support their children’s education, and obtain citizenship.

Additionally, digital skills are strongly correlated with general literacy and number-counting (numeracy) skills, and the OECD reported in 2013 that one-third of those with lower literacy and numeracy scores are immigrants. This connection has become more pronounced during the public-health crisis, with significant pockets of the education world moving to a distance format, making sufficient digital skills into a prerequisite for broader learning.

A July 2020 survey of adult education providers, including those who serve LEP and immigrant individuals, found that limited access to technology and limited digital literacy have been among their most pressing challenges in the rapid transition to remote learning during the shutdown.

Forthcoming research from the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy examines one immigrant-focused family literacy course that transitioned to remote instruction, in which several parents struggled to use a tablet or computer but were comfortable working on their smartphones, pointing to the pitfalls of fragmented digital knowledge.

### *Children's Education*

Nearly all K-12 schools moved to distance learning at some point during the pandemic, during which time there has been renewed interest in the so-called homework gap, or disparities in children's ability to use technology to complete homework assignments. Fifteen percent of U.S. households with school-age children do not have a high-speed internet connection at home, the Pew Research Center estimates. Although it is too soon for robust research evaluating the pandemic's effect on immigrant and second-generation students, teachers and families attest the homework gap has been especially pernicious for these students. In June, immigrant Latino families were more likely than native-born Latinos to report wanting one-on-one tutoring and increased time with teachers, suggesting their particular needs were not being met. However, the challenges are not unique among immigrants; among both foreign- and native-born Latino families with school-age children, 26 percent said they needed better access to the internet or technology, while 65 percent said they felt that learning was more difficult because of challenges communicating with teachers.

Even before the coronavirus outbreak, children of Hispanic immigrants were 18 percent less likely to have a computer in the home compared to children of native-born Hispanics. One in five immigrant Latino parents never used the internet at all according to a 2016 study, and 45 percent of those who did had done so for fewer than four years, suggesting many parents lack both the access and experience to help their children succeed with remote schoolwork. The problem is especially acute for ELs in small and rural school districts that employ few translators, and as a result the translation of documents such as lesson plans can take more than a week.

School districts have attempted to respond to the disparities. Many have provided children with laptops and other devices to access online materials or promised physical copies of lessons, but devices do not always work in every situation and printouts have not always been available. Instead, some children have reportedly borrowed cell phones and computers to form makeshift Wi-Fi hotspots to do schoolwork. Arlington County, Virginia, for example, was already providing iPads and MacBook Air laptops to students, and after the pandemic hit expanded its free Wi-Fi spots in places such as school parking lots. Yet across the United States, many students, including ELs, have simply not shown up for school online and have not been reached by their school district.

### *Access to Health-Care Services*

The use of telehealth services has increased dramatically during the pandemic, up to 44 percent of Medicare primary-care visits in April, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and is projected to reach 1 billion interactions by the end of the year. Telehealth services

have offered a low-risk way for patients to see medical professionals without exposing themselves to the coronavirus, and they can also save time and money compared to traveling to a medical facility. Some of the changes are likely to outlast COVID-19. During the outbreak, the federal government has temporarily expanded its coverage of telehealth services via Medicare, and the Trump administration has made moves to increase the services permanently.

Unsurprisingly, use of telehealth is linked to reliable internet access and the experience to utilize it. Yet despite the fact that many immigrants have increased exposure to COVID-19 due to their employment in pandemic-response occupations, their reduced connectivity and familiarity with digital tools may prevent them from using telehealth services. In addition to technological challenges, those who have limited English proficiency may have difficulty using telephone services without visual cues, or they may require translators, adding a layer of complexity.

Furthermore, immigrants of all types use fewer health-care expenditures than the native born. In other words, even before the pandemic immigrants were often less likely to receive health-care services than the native born, and to lack health coverage. By magnifying the effects of the digital divide, the surge of telehealth services will likely exacerbate this trend.

## **Conclusion**

National policies and initiatives have grown out of the renewed energy to address the digital divide, though there does not appear to be a specific focus on its disproportionate impacts on immigrants. Congressional Democrats have proposed major new investments in broadband internet infrastructure as well as subsidized internet access to families with low incomes or who have recently experienced unemployment. However, federal stimulus efforts have thus far mostly been silent on providing such assistance.

Meanwhile, private-sector and nonprofit efforts have continued or expanded, aiming to address the gap in a variety of ways. Launched in 2019, Digital US is a national coalition of service providers, policymakers, and other stakeholders aiming to address inequitable access to technology and opportunities to build digital skills. The Cristina Foundation, which has distributed refurbished computers to a range of recipients since 1984, in April teamed up with the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City and others to redouble its efforts. The National Skills Coalition has provided data and recommendations to policymakers. At the local level, multiple families and service providers have stepped up to support their community members in a variety of ways large and small.

The pandemic has illuminated the extent of the digital divide and its wide-ranging impacts, including on immigrant populations. Nevertheless, the scope of immigrants' digital access, digital literacy, and potential inequities remain somewhat unknown and require further research to better allocate resources to support populations in need. While some immigrants have higher levels of digital skills and similar digital access as other U.S. residents, others rely on smartphones and pay-as-you-go data plans, and have much less experience using digital tools. In context of longstanding structural inequities, the intersection of race, income, and education should be an important

consideration in this research as it impacts digital access and opportunities to build digital skills for immigrants.

To address this sweeping challenge, U.S. government policies and other large-scale efforts should define the digital divide as not only involving internet connectivity, but also a family's ability to maintain connectivity and access the most useful technology to utilize it, such as tablets and computers. Digital skills are a difficult to assess in full, with many individuals possessing fragmented digital knowledge. As the pandemic has illustrated, these skills have become requirements for employment, education, and, increasingly, health care, and so they should also become a leading priority for policymakers and advocates.

## **Sources**

Acevedo, Nicole. 2020. Latino Parents Face Back-to-School Uncertainty as COVID-19 Hits Their Families Hard. NBC News, August 3, 2020. **Available online.**

Aguilera, Elizabeth. 2020. For Some California Teens, School Closures Led to Work in the Fields. CalMatters, June 22, 2020. **Available online.**

American Hospital Association. 2020. Fact Sheet: Telehealth. Fact sheet, American Hospital Association, Washington, DC, February 2019. **Available online.**

Auxier, Brooke and Monica Anderson. 2020. As Schools Close Due to the Coronavirus, Some U.S. Students Face a Digital "Homework Gap." Pew Research Center, Fact Tank blog post, March 16, 2020. **Available online.**

Bartolone, Pauline. 2020. Hundreds of Sacramento Kids Stopped Schooling Due to COVID-19. CapRadio, June 2, 2020. **Available online.**

Batalova, Jeanne, Brittany Blizzard, and Jessica Bolter. 2020. Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States. *Migration Information Source*, February 14, 2020. **Available online.**

Belzer, Alisa, Tesa Leon, Margaret Patterson, Christy Rhodes, Federico Salas-Isnardi, et al. 2020. *COVID-19 Rapid Response Report from the Field*. Saint Paul, MN: Open Door Collective. **Available online.**

Bergson-Shilcock, Amanda. 2020. *The New Landscape of Digital Literacy: How Workers' Uneven Digital Skills Affect Economic Mobility and Business Competitiveness, and What Policymakers Can Do about It*. Washington, DC: National Skills Coalition. **Available online.**

Bosworth, Arielle, Joel Ruhter, Lok Wong Samson, Steven Sheingold, Caroline Taplin, et al. 2020. *Medicare Beneficiary Use of Telehealth Visits: Early Data from the Start of COVID-19 Pandemic*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Assistant Secretary for Planning

and Evaluation. **Available online.**

Brown, Anna, Gustavo López, and Mark Hugo Lopez. 2016. *Digital Divide Narrows for Latinos as More Spanish Speakers and Immigrants Go Online*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. **Available online.**

Burning Glass Technologies. 2017. *The Digital Edge: Middle-Skill Workers and Careers*. Boston: Burning Glass Technologies. **Available online.**

Callahan, Angela. 2020. Educators Step In to Help Immigrant Students. News release, the American Federation of Teachers, April 20, 2020. **Available online.**

Callahan, Bill. 2020. Wyden Bill Provides Emergency Internet Assistance for Laid-off Workers, Low Income Households, Pell Students. National Digital Inclusion Alliance blog post, June 30, 2020. **Available online.**

Capps, Randy, Jeanne Batalova, and Julia Gelatt. 2020. *COVID-19 and Unemployment: Assessing the Early Fallout for Immigrants and Other U.S. Workers*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. **Available online.**

Capps, Randy and Julia Gelatt. 2020. *Barriers to COVID-19 Testing and Treatment: Immigrants without Health Insurance Coverage in the United States*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. **Available online.**

Chiswick, Barry R. and Paul W. Miller. 2015. International Migration and the Economics of Language. In *Handbook of the Economics of International Migration*, eds. Barry R. Chiswick and Paul W. Miller. Amsterdam: North Holland.

Coombs, Bertha. 2020. Telehealth Visits Are Booming as Doctors and Patients Embrace Distancing amid the Coronavirus Crisis. CNBC, April 4, 2020. **Available online.**

Digital US. 2020. *Building a Digitally Resilient Workforce: Creating On-Ramps to Opportunity*. N.p. **Available online.**

Flavin, Lila, Leah Zallman, Danny McCormick, and J. Wesley Boyd. 2018. Medical Expenditures on and by Immigrant Populations in the United States: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Health Services* 48 (4): 601-21. **Available online.**

Gelatt, Julia. 2020. *Immigrant Workers: Vital to the U.S. COVID-19 Response, Disproportionately Vulnerable*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. **Available online.**

Gonzales, Amy. 2016. The Contemporary U.S. Digital Divide: From Initial Access to Technology Maintenance. *Information, Communication & Society* 19 (2): 234-48.

Hickman, Adam and Lydia Saad. 2020. Reviewing Remote Work in the U.S. under COVID-19.



Gallup blog post, May 22, 2020. **Available online.**

Hugo Lopez, Mark, Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, and Eileen Patten. 2013. *Closing the Digital Divide: Latinos and Technology Adoption*. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center. **Available online.**

Jaworsky, Bernadette Nadya. 2015. Mobilising for Immigrant Rights Online: Performing “American” National Identity through Symbols of Civic-Economic Participation. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 36 (5): 579–99.

Johnson, Melissa, Molly Bashay, and Amanda Bergson-Shilcock. 2019. *The Roadmap for Racial Equity: An Imperative for Workforce Development Advocates*. Washington, DC: National Skills Coalition. **Available online.**

Kaiper-Marquez, A., E. Wolfe, C. Clymer, J. Lee, E. McLean, et al. Forthcoming. On the Fly: Adapting Quickly to Emergency Remote Instruction in a Family Literacy Program. *International Review of Education*.

Kaiser Family Foundation. 2020. Health Coverage of Immigrants. Fact sheet, Kaiser Family Foundation, San Francisco, March 2020. **Available online.**

Kelly, Makena. 2020. House Democrats Want \$5.5 Billion for Pandemic Broadband Funding. *The Verge*, May 12, 2020. **Available online.**

Latino Decisions. 2020. *The Impact of COVID-19 on Latino Families: Views About Returning to School in the Fall, Results From the 2020 National Latino Family Survey*. Seattle: Latino Decisions. **Available online.**

Lazarín, Melissa. 2020. COVID-19 Spotlights the Inequities Facing English Learner Students, as Nonprofit Organizations Seek to Mitigate Challenges. Migration Policy Institute commentary, June 2020. **Available online.**

Lee, Nicol Turner. 2020. For Schools to Reopen, Congress Must Include Broadband Funding in the Stimulus Bill. Brookings Institution, TechTank blog post, July 28, 2020. **Available online.**

McHugh, Margie and Catrina Doxsee. 2018. *English Plus Integration: Shifting the Instructional Paradigm for Immigrant Adult Learners to Support Integration Success*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. **Available online.**

Mortrude, Judy. 2020. Is Your State Planning for an Equitable Digital Future? EdTech Center World Education blog post, February 13, 2020. **Available online.**

Natanson, Hannah. 2020. Schools Are Some Families’ Best Hope for Internet Access, but Virginia Laws Are Getting in the Way. *The Washington Post*, May 26, 2020. **Available online.**

Ndumu, Ana. 2020. Disrupting Digital Divide Narratives: Exploring the U.S. Black Diasporic

Immigrant Context. *Open Information Science* 4 (1): 75–84. **Available online.**

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). 2013. Time for the U.S. to Reskill? What the Survey of Adult Skills Says. Paris: OECD Publishing. **Available online.**

---. 2015. *Adults, Computers and Problem Solving: What's the Problem?* Paris: OECD Publishing. **Available online.**

Ortega, Alexander N., Ryan M. McKenna, Jessie Kemmick Pintor, Brent A. Langellier, Dylan H. Roby, et al. 2018. Health Care Access and Physical and Behavioral Health Among Undocumented Latinos in California. *Medical Care* 56 (11): 919–26. **Available online.**

Page, Kathleen R., Maya Venkataramani, Chris Beyrer, and Sarah Polk. 2020. Perspective: Undocumented U.S. Immigrants and COVID-19. *New England Journal of Medicine* 382 (21): e62. **Available online.**

Pew Research Center. 2017. A Third of Americans Live in a Household with Three or More Smartphones. Pew Research Center, Fact Tank blog post, May 25, 2017. **Available online.**

---. 2019. Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet. Fact sheet, Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, June 2019. **Available online.**

Rani, Rikha Sharma. 2020. Imagine Online School in a Language You Don't Understand. *New York Times*, April 22, 2020. **Available online.**

Rideout, Victoria and Vikki S. Katz. 2016. *Opportunity for All? Technology and Learning in Lower Income Families*. New York: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop. **Available online.**

U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). 2020. Trump Administration Proposes to Expand Telehealth Benefits Permanently for Medicare Beneficiaries Beyond the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency and Advances Access to Care in Rural Areas. Press release, CMS, August 3, 2020. **Available online.**

Velasquez, David and Ateev Mehrotra. 2020. Ensuring the Growth of Telehealth during COVID-19 Does Not Exacerbate Disparities in Care. *Health Affairs*, May 8, 2020. **Available online.**

Vogels, Emily A., Andrew Perrin, Lee Rainie, and Monica Anderson. 2020. *53% of Americans Say the Internet Has Been Essential During the COVID-19 Outbreak*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. **Available online.**

Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians. 2012. *Digital Diaspora: How Immigrants Are Capitalizing on Today's Technology*. Philadelphia: Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians. **Available online.**

Wilcock, Andrew D., Sherri Rose, Alisa B. Busch, Haiden A. Huskamp, Lori Uscher-Pines, et al. 2019. Association Between Broadband Internet Availability and Telemedicine Use. *JAMA Internal Medicine* 179 (11): 1580-82. **Available online.**

Wilson, Jill H. 2014. *Investing in English Skills: The Limited English Proficient Workforce in U.S. Metropolitan Areas*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. **Available online.**

Yang, Hannah. 2020. Immigrant Families Face Complex Challenges with Minnesota's Distance Learning. Minnesota Public Radio News, April 13, 2020. **Available online.**

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS ABOUT THIS ARTICLE, CONTACT US AT [Source@MigrationPolicy.org](mailto:Source@MigrationPolicy.org)

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/digital-divide-hits-us-immigrant-households-during-covid-19>