

# California's Digital Divide

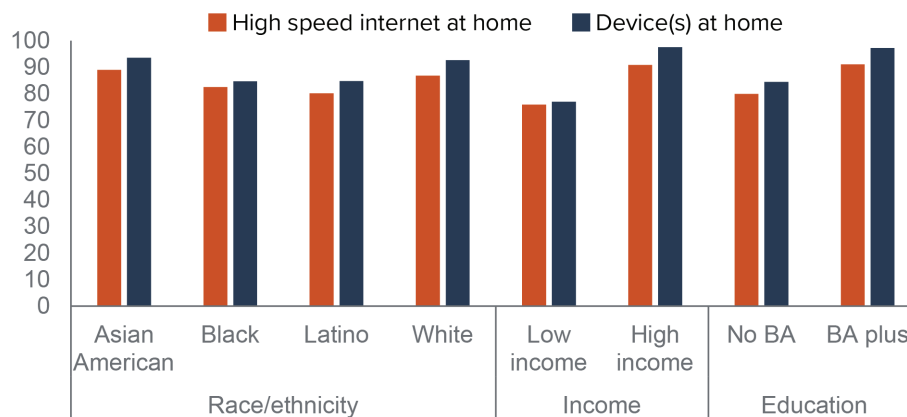
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*The 2020 American Community Survey (ACS) had to address substantial nonresponse bias due to the onset of the pandemic; as a result, the 2020 estimates differ from and are more limited than previous years'. We present these ACS findings cautiously, and we do not make direct comparisons with prior years.*

## Broadband access has been expanding steadily, but significant gaps persist.

- ▶ Broadband access has been growing steadily over the past several years. According to the ACS, 74% of California households had high-speed internet at home in 2017; the share increased to 84% in 2019.
- ▶ Experimental data from the 2020 ACS show that 85% had high-speed internet (or broadband) and 94% of Californian households had internet access—of any kind, including via cell phone.
- ▶ Home broadband access has been increasing across most demographic groups, but racial/ethnic gaps persist: 80% of Latino households and 83% of Black households reported having broadband in 2020, compared to 87% of white households.
- ▶ Households headed by adults 65 and older (83%), households with annual income below \$50,000 (76%), and households headed by non-college graduates (80%) were less likely to report broadband access in 2020.

## Low-income households were less likely to have access to broadband and devices in 2020



Source: American Community Survey, 2020.

Notes: The average household size is three. Low-income households are those with annual income below \$50,000; this is roughly 225% of the federal poverty line for a household with three persons (\$51, 818). High-income households have annual incomes above \$100,000. Education level and race/ethnicity are those of the household head. Within-category differences from the privileged group (white, high income, and BA plus) are significant at the 1% level.

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

- ▶ Most Californians share broadband with others in their households: as of 2020, 77% of households reported having multiple users.
- ▶ Households with multiple users require additional bandwidth for reliable access to online instruction and videoconferencing—which became a necessity for many during the pandemic. The average-size household in California includes 2.7 people; the average size of households with school-age children is 4.5.

## Household access to computing devices also varies across demographic groups.

- ▶ In 2020, 10% of Californians reported not having a desktop, laptop, or other computing device at home.
- ▶ Access was especially limited among low-income (23%), less-educated (16%), Black (15%), and Latino (15%) households.
- ▶ Notably, 5% of households with school-age children did not have home access to a device.

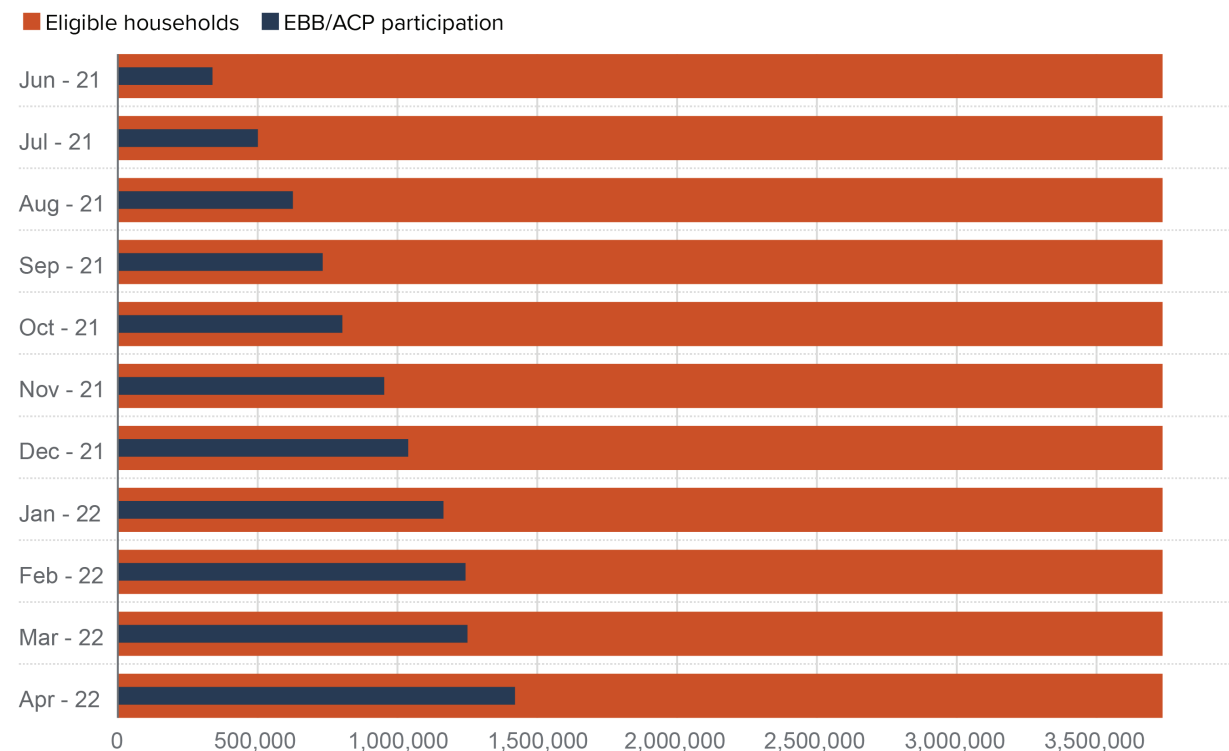
## The digital divide in K–12 education narrowed during the pandemic, but remote learning was challenging for many students.

- ▶ After most schools and colleges switched to distance learning in spring 2020, educators and policymakers [focused successfully on narrowing](#) the state’s longstanding digital divide. But digital [access is still considerably lower](#) among students in low-income, less-educated, and Black and Latino households.
- ▶ Most California students spent the entire 2020–21 school year online. According to the April 2022 [PPIC Statewide Survey](#), 44% of parents of school-age children—especially low-income parents (55%) and parents without college degrees (51%)—believe their child has fallen behind during the pandemic.

## Federal and state governments are taking steps to close the remaining digital divide.

- ▶ California Senate Bill 156 (2021) provides \$6 billion to expand broadband infrastructure and enhance internet access in unserved and underserved communities. The federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act provides at least \$100 million to expand broadband infrastructure in California.
- ▶ In May 2021, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) launched the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program, which offered a broadband discount of up to \$50 per month. The EBB expired at the end of 2021 and was replaced by the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which offers long-term support for eligible households—but at a reduced amount of \$30 per month.
- ▶ Most eligible households are not yet getting broadband subsidies: while the FCC estimates that at least [3.7 million California households are eligible](#), only 1.4 million had enrolled in the EBB or ACP as of April 2022. Nonetheless, these programs have helped increase digital access.

## Participation in major broadband subsidies has increased slowly but remains low



Sources: Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) / Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) Enrollments and Claims Tracker, FCC, 2021-2022.  
Notes: When the EBB ended in December 2021, EBB participants were automatically transferred to the ACP, which is expected to be a long-term, more permanent program.

Sources: American Community Survey, 2020; FCC EBB/ACP program Enrollment and Claims Trackers; Census Bureau Household PULSE Survey; PPIC Statewide Survey, April 2022. For more on the concerns surrounding 2020 ACS data and the measures taken to mitigate them, see [“2020 ACS 1-Year Experimental Data Release”](#) on the US Census Bureau website.