



Broadband Service is a Racial Equity Priority

September 2020

Under normal circumstances broadband is the lifeline to economic opportunities, social engagement, and democratic participation in modern society. During the COVID-19 pandemic, broadband is essential to protect the health and well-being of members of a household and the public as well as key to a families' economic survival. Tragically, the racial disparities in broadband access have exacerbated the risk exposure of families of color during this historic public health crisis.

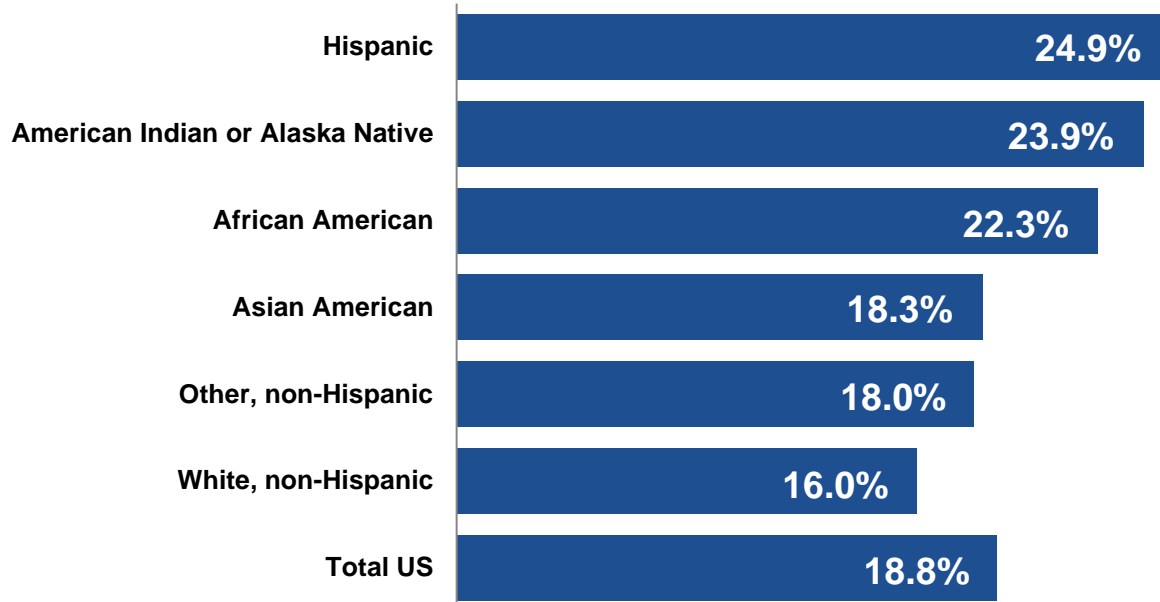
Racial disparities with broadband service and economic consequences

The United States has work to do when it comes to digital equity. There are persistent racial disparities with access to broadband service due to cost. Over the past decade, [US Census data](#) shows that a greater percentage of African American, Latinx, Asian American and American Indian or Alaska Native households have consistently reported not having internet service at home because it was too expensive.¹

- Around one in four Hispanic (24.9%) and American Indian or Alaska Native households (23.9%) and over one in five African American household (22.3%) cite affordability as a barrier. Also, more Asian American households (18.3%) than white, non-Hispanic (16.0) report affordability as a barrier to service. See the graph below showing how unaffordable broadband service is keeping families of color on the wrong side of the digital divide.
- Not all broadband access is equal: a disproportionate number of Black and Latinx households rely on a smartphone (small screen) for their broadband connectivity, with around one in four Black (23%) and Hispanic (25%) households [reporting they are smartphone only](#). Smartphone-only consumers tend to have lower incomes (26% have incomes less than \$30,000) and lower education levels (26% have attained a high school degree or less).
- Broadband access and digital skills are a prerequisite to jobs, from software developers and those in the professional scientific and technical services to automotive technicians and mechanics, those in nursing, tool and die makers, construction managers, and workers in the transportation and real estate industries. The integration of digital tools and enterprise management and collaboration platforms have transformed jobs and how we work. The [digitalization of work](#) increases both opportunities and inequality. Pre-COVID-19 pandemic, there were already [racial disparities in teleworking](#) with white workers (34%) and Asian Americans (38%) far more likely to telework than African American workers (26%) and Hispanic workers (22%). The ability to work from home limits the risk of COVID-19 exposure for workers, protecting the health of the workers and their families.

Main Reason for Not Using Internet at Home: Too Expensive Percent of Offline Households by Race or Ethnicity, 2019

(Source: U.S. Dept. of Commerce NTIA Digital Nation Data Explorer)



Broadband disparities exacerbate public health and education disparities for communities of color during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 virus is [highly transmissible](#) through airborne respiratory droplets produced from an infected person (e.g., through talking, coughing, singing, etc.). Staying home is one of the safest ways to avoid exposure and reduce the spread of this virus and broadband service facilitates the ability of a family to stay home. Broadband service reduces the need for physically visiting the doctor, going to class, purchasing groceries and food, handling financial transactions, or applying for assistance. For families with students, broadband has become the primary and fallback means for going to class and doing homework during this pandemic when schools and libraries are physically closed.

- COVID-19 has ravaged [communities of color](#). Older adults and those with underlying medical conditions are particularly [at risk from coronavirus](#). Households with broadband can turn to [telemedicine](#) to access healthcare services safely from their home, but it requires broadband service.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the bedroom or dining room table has become the classroom for students of all ages. A [recent study](#) found that school-age children in one out of three Black, Latino and American Indian or Alaska Native households did not have the broadband service necessary at home for remote learning. Every day of classroom instruction lost because of the lack of broadband creates an [achievement gap](#) and this is unacceptable.

Opportunity to make broadband a racial equity priority by bringing broadband to the home

The most economically distressed households must have access to affordable technology. Our health, our economy and our educational competitiveness will not fully recover in the United States without it. Fortunately, Senators Wyden and Blumenthal have introduced The Emergency Broadband Connections Act of 2020, the Senate counterpart to Representative Veasey’s bill (H.R. 6881) which passed the House as part of The [HEROES Act](#) (H.R. 6800). The Emergency Broadband Connections Act guarantees a \$50 emergency broadband benefit—\$75 in tribal areas—to every eligible low-income household in the country that makes a request to their Internet Service Provider (ISP) and provides a one-time discount for ISP-provided devices. The bill also expands the existing Federal Communications Commission low-income [Lifeline](#) program to offer unlimited voice minutes and texting. This is the U.S. Senate’s opportunity to address racial equity and, at the same time enable telemedicine, distance learning and online access to the workplace and marketplace from the home while also protecting public health.

For more information, contact National Consumer Law Center attorney Olivia Wein (owein@nclc.org).

¹ See the U.S. Department of Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration’s Digital Nation Data Explorer, data fields for “Main Reason Not Online at Home: Too Expensive”, broken out by “Race or Ethnicity” (covers US Census CPS data from 2010 – 2019), available at <https://www.ntia.gov/data>.