

# An overview of the digital divide



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This essay defines and addresses the significance of the digital divide providing evidence to support its existence in the United States. It analyzes findings from various research reports and case studies identifying factors that cause the divide. The digital divide is a technology gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” As a result of these gaps, 21st century learners will fall further behind and will not be able to reap the full benefits of our fast-growing technology driven society.

The digital divide is the technology gap between people with access to digital and information technology and those with limited or no access (NTIS, 1998). The digital divide is often referred to as the technology gap between the haves and the have-nots. There are many factors that inhibit student access to computers and the internet. There is a digital divide among computer and internet access by race, income, education and location, as well as physical disabilities (Fourie & Bothma, 2006).

Research shows that Caucasian Americans access to digital and information technology at 46. 1% nearly doubles that of African Americans at 23. 5% and Hispanic Americans at 23. 6%. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders exceed all racial/ethnic groups at 56. 8% (Athena Alliance, 2001). Minority groups are at a disadvantage when it comes to having access to computers and the internet but it is not because they are minorities. Their limited access is because they are at a socio-economic disadvantage due to lower education levels and poorer incomes (Solomon, 2002). The technology gap by race seems to be closing significantly. This is due to the availability of computers and internet access at schools, libraries and community centers. Yet, there is still a technology gap in low-income and rural communities.

Socio-economic factors play a major role in the technology gap between students. Poverty remains a major factor that limits students' access to technology. Only 35% of households in lower socio-economic groups have internet access while 59% of middle income groups, 73% of upper middle income groups, and 83% of those in top income groups have access to the internet (Gartner Group, 2000). Now more than ever, unequal adoption of technology excludes many from reaping the fruits of the economy. Sectors of the population are excluded from the power and the economical benefits offered (Fourie & Bothma, 2006).

Divisions among the population are not just due to income but also location. There is a digital divide by geographical location. For students in high-poverty and rural areas, libraries can be the only way to get online (Barack, 2005). A digital divide separates rural America from the rest of the nation when it comes to broadband internet use and access. Only 24% of adults in rural America have high-speed internet access, compared to 38% of urban Americans and 40% of suburban Americans who have access (Perkins, 2006). Efforts are being made by the government and the private sector to increase connectivity in rural America.

People with disabilities face a significant digital divide as well. Despite regular increases, both metro and non-metro people with disabilities have lower rates of internet use than their geographic counterparts with no disability (Dobrinsky, 2006). Surveys consistently report that people with disabilities have only half the rate of internet access of people without a disability (RTC, 2006). Obstacles that Americans with disabilities face include how costly adapted hardware and software can be, limited locations for

internet access, workplace internet access maybe unavailable because of unemployment, and internet content may be frustrating because sites are not accessible to people using assistive technology (NTIS, 2000).

Educators at all levels must keep up with the digital world inhabited by a new type of learner whose worldview is often developed through surfing the web, instant-messaging, and online activities like video games or social networking sites like Facebook and Myspace (Menard, 2008). To level the playing field for these “ 21st century learners” or “ digital natives,” we must bridge the technology gap that exists among these students by racial/ethnic, socio-economic, educational and geographical factors, as well as limited accessibility due to physical disabilities. According to Menard (2008), today’s young people were born into the Internet era and face a life saturated by digital media. Their interaction with technology will deeply affect the way these learners interact with their environment. To be successful in today’s technology driven society, students must have equal access to computers and information technology.

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