

Kids with access to a home computer are more likely to graduate, digital divide study finds

Access to a home computer increases the likelihood that children will graduate from high school, but blacks and Latinos are much less likely to have a computer at home than are whites, according to a new study by a researcher at the University of California, Santa Cruz, that also found the digital divide is even more pronounced among children than adults.

The findings document the persistence of the digital divide and the impact on educational outcomes, even when factors like income and parental education are taken into consideration, said Robert Fairlie, associate professor of economics at UCSC. His findings appear in the October issue of the *Economics of Education Review*.

"The digital divide is large and persistent, and black and Latino children are particularly hard-hit," said Fairlie. "The digital divide has important implications for educational and economic inequality in the United States. These findings should be a wake-up call for policy makers."

Although many studies have explored the impact of computers in schools, and the federal government has made computer access in schools a priority, very few studies have assessed the impact on youth of having a computer in the home. Among the key findings of Fairlie's research:

- Teenagers who have access to home computers are 6 to 8 percentage points more likely to graduate from high school than teens who lack access to a home computer, after controlling for individual, parental, and family characteristics.
- Only 50.6 percent of blacks and 48.7 percent of Latinos have access to home computers, compared to 74.6 percent of whites.
- Only 40.5 percent of blacks and 38.1 percent of Latinos have Internet access at home, compared to 67.3 percent of whites.
- Among children, slightly more than half of all black and Latino children have access to a home computer, and about 40 percent have Internet access at home. By comparison, 85.5 percent of white children have home computer access, and 77.4 percent can use the Internet at home.
- Asians have home computer and Internet access rates that are slightly higher than white rates (77.7 and 70.3 percent, compared to 74.6 and 67.3 percent).
- Among Latinos, Mexicans have the lowest home computer and Internet access rates, followed by Central and South Americans.

Racial disparities in access to computer technology--the so-called digital divide--are ignored in the latest Department of Commerce reports, entitled *A Nation Online*.

"We are clearly not all a 'nation online'," said Fairlie. "Twenty million children in the United States, or 26 percent of children, have no computer access at home, and race is a key part of who's online and who isn't."

In previous work, Fairlie has found that racial disparities in access to computers at home are highest among the age group 8-25. "These patterns are particularly troubling in light of the presumption that information

technology is a new prerequisite for success in the labor market," said Fairlie, a labor economist who specializes in minority entrepreneurship. His research is funded by the W. T. Grant Foundation and the Community Technology Foundation of California.

During a recent trip to Washington, D.C., Fairlie presented his report, "Are We Really a Nation Online? Ethnic and Racial Disparities in Access to Technology and Their Consequences," to the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and participated in a Congressional briefing on the digital divide.

Source: UC Santa Cruz

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