

by Bruce Brown - August 3, 2016

## A house digitally divided: are smartphones enough to replace home internet?

All internet connections are not equal. A new Field Poll shows 9 percent more Californians have broadband internet access at [home](#) than in 2014, with the total now up to 84 percent. Sounds good, right? Well, not so fast, because that increase is largely due to smartphones, which doesn't bridge the digital divide, [according to The Mercury News](#).

The term for people who only have smartphone internet access is "underconnected." Sure, you can send text messages, take pictures, post on [social media](#), and look up small bits of information on smartphones. There may seemingly be apps for almost anything, but they're not appropriate for all tasks. Significantly, homework, extensive research, writing anything more than short notes, working with spreadsheets, most creative applications, filling out forms, taking online classes — these meaningful activities are best done, if not exclusively done, with a desktop or laptop computer.

The Field Poll found that 43 percent of Californians who earn less than \$22,000 use a computer or laptop for internet access at home, compared to 94 percent of people with incomes of \$100,000 or more. In California, people without high school degrees, and Spanish-speaking Latinos, have both had big jumps in internet connectivity since 2014 — 63 percent and 69 percent, respectively — but all or most of the gains have come from smartphones. Seniors 65 and older are even less connected overall, at 56 percent, a 9 percent gain since 2014, with 5 percent from smartphones. Seniors didn't pick up smartphones as much as the other groups.

The most pressing concern is for education. "We need to invest more funds in getting low-income people, particularly school children, devices that work at home that are not smartphones," said Tamara Straus, a spokesperson for the California Emerging Technology Fund. "It's really important for education and digital literacy. That's really the divide."

Lower-cost internet access programs to lower income households, which internet providers are beginning to offer, will only make a difference if the people in the home are using computers. Smartphones just won't bridge the divide and help people catch up.