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Latinos lagging far behind in Internet use, report says

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While most Californians use the Internet to shop, job hunt and get informed, one racial group is sorely lagging when it comes to the digital revolution, according to a report released Wednesday by the Public Policy Institute of California.

Only 48 percent of the state's Latinos use the Internet, while 40 percent have Internet connections at home. That compares with the 80 percent to 82 percent of blacks, whites and Asians who use the Web – and 70 percent to 77 percent who have access at their homes.

"Knowledge is power and particularly in the Information Age of a postindustrial society like we have today, those who have access to knowledge have a greater advantage," said the institute's president, Mark Baldassare.

Researchers interviewed more than 2,500 people in five languages and found that income is also a major factor in understanding Internet use. Those with incomes of less than \$40,000 a year had similarly poor usage rates as Latinos, according to the report.

That's not surprising when 37 percent of respondents cited the cost of a computer as the main reason they didn't have a computer at home.

"It's an affordability issue," said Lisa Navarrete, vice president of the National Council of La Raza.

Antonio Moreno, 24, lives with roommates in south Sacramento and is unemployed. To check e-mail or look for a job, Moreno must go to the homes of friends or relatives.

"I can't afford it right now – the computer or the charges," he said.

That's problematic, says Liz Guillen, director of legislative and community affairs for the nonprofit Public Advocates.

"Latinos and poor communities are already struggling to get access to the opportunities that will move them beyond poverty, that will lead to things like education and homeownership," Guillen said. "The lack of Internet access is really a lack of access to information, and information is what one needs to move forward in today's society."

The gap between the wired and unwired is growing, says the Public Policy Institute's Baldassare.

Rob Fairlie, an economics professor at UC Santa Cruz does research on the digital divide. He has also found that Latinos have low Internet usage rates and has tried to understand the causes.

"A quarter is due to lower educational levels, another quarter is due to lower income – so about 50 percent is because they are less educated than average and have a lower income," he said.

Fairlie said language barriers and jobs that don't require computer skills are other reasons.

At the Roberts Family Development Center in North Sacramento, a computer lab has more than 16 computers available to the public when children's programs aren't in session – an effort to combat the digital divide, said center co-founder Derrell Roberts.

"The airwaves bombard us with Web sites and e-mail addresses we should use, and the assumption is that the consumer has access to a computer," Roberts said. "And unfortunately, many of our families don't."

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