



Nearly 91% of Californians Now Have Internet, But Low-Income Residents Still Struggle To Connect

Internet access in California has reached a new high with now nearly 91% of residents connected to the internet at home, according to a [study](#) released Tuesday by USC and the California Emerging Technologies Fund.

The latest estimate is up from 88% in 2019. And as connectivity overall has increased, the number of people connecting via a smartphone only has declined, meaning more people have the option to connect via computers.

“We depend on the internet for work, for learning, for access to government services, including access to vaccines,” said Hernan Galperin, principal researcher for the study. “The pandemic has really magnified this dependence to the point that we should increasingly talk about having internet at home the way we talk about having water or electricity. It is a basic utility of our time.”

While the results show more residents have devices in their hands, income remains one of the biggest barriers to internet connection across the state. According to the study, more than 1 in 4 low-income households are unconnected or under connected, in contrast to near-universal adoption among higher-income households.

The situation has gotten worse for some low-income households during the pandemic that may have already had internet but had to stop paying for their service in order to prioritize other basic needs.

“Those who were already low-income were falling off into deep poverty and greater isolation during the pandemic,” said Sunne Wright McPeak, president and CEO of the California Emerging Technologies Fund. “We find that the lowest-income households are the most fragile. They literally have a churn of up to 50% where the household is changing status of connectivity every year.”

The study found that school districts providing laptops and tablets for students played a significant role in improving computer access to families across the state. But authors of the study said there’s room for concern going forward around

whether districts will be able to continue to pay for hotspots and devices that got them through the pandemic.

To address ongoing infrastructure needs to help close the digital divide, a coalition of education groups on Tuesday wrote a [letter](#) urging Gov. Gavin Newsom to allocate a one-time \$8 billion investment in broadband and fiber connections across the state. The amount is based on results from a [recent report](#) commissioned by the California Public Utilities Commission that estimated the cost of building fiber connections to every unserved building and house in the state would be \$6.8 billion. The budget allocation proposal is asking for \$2.2 billion to construct a statewide open-access fiber network and \$4.6 billion to provide high-speed fiber optics to buildings and houses currently without it.

“The time is now to lay a foundation that removes the barriers that have systematically denied access to connectivity to our most vulnerable students and families,” said Tatia Davenport, CEO of the California Association of School Business Officials. “This request is our opportunity to implement a strategic vision that will have a significant, meaningful and long-lasting benefit to our 6.1 million students and California communities.”

—*Sydney Johnson*