Broadband Is a Vital "Green Strategy" for California

Telecommuting, telehealth trends show long-term potential for fewer vehicle trips; home broadband is essential for economy, environment and equity

Media Contacts:
CETF: Nadine Hugg, nadine.hugg@cetfund.org or (510) 697- 8276
USC: Ron Mackovich, ronald.mackovich@usc.edu or (213) 810-8583
Read full survey results

Los Angeles and Bay Area – April 19, 2021 – A new Statewide Survey released today by the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) and the University of Southern California (USC) found 55% of workers with access to broadband have been working fully or partly at home during the pandemic, and a large majority of those workers are planning to continue a similar pattern in the future.

The use of telehealth also has jumped, driven by lockdown requirements and enabled by temporary changes in cost reimbursement policies making remote consultations comparable to in-person visits. Just over half of respondents accessed health consultations by phone, smartphone or computer during the pandemic, and 70% of those expect to cut in-person healthcare-related trips going forward by at least half.

Still, the statewide survey of 1,650 residents finds that these evolving new lifestyle habits vary greatly by race/ethnicity, age and income—stark evidence of the continuing Digital Divide that leaves a significant number of Californians at a disadvantage because they are unable to access the Internet and other digital functionality needed for vital activities. The trends underscore why affordable home broadband access for all Californians is critical to reach ambitious carbon emission reduction goals and provide more equitable access options for all residents seeking healthcare, particularly during health crises.

"Broadband is a vital 'green strategy'," said Sunne Wright McPeak, CETF President and CEO. "These findings call out the need for strategic broadband investments by government leaders, transportation planners, and health systems to help close the Digital Divide, returning triple bottom-line dividends for the economy, environment and equity."

Expectations for Reduced Commute Trips

Most employed respondents who have been working at least part time at home on broadband, expect far fewer vehicle trips, with 31% expecting to only work from home. Over half expect to cut vehicle trips at least once a week. Assuming a five day per week commute pattern, the findings suggest telecommuting could reduce 55% of these trips relative to pre-pandemic levels.

In addition to telecommuting and telehealth, distance learning among adults for online classes and training also jumped. A third of Californians, age 18 or older and including college students, said they've taken an online class or training during the pandemic. Two-thirds of those say they'll continue distance learning if they have the opportunity, though the likelihood increases with age. Overall, 95% of the respondents expect that distance learning and telehealth combined would replace at least some vehicle trips for traditional in-person courses and medical visits.

"The hesitancy towards remote work, learning and telehealth was swept away by necessity during the pandemic," said Hernán Galperin, the study's lead researcher and an associate professor at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. "Now we're seeing a seismic shift in the way people want to work, learn and manage health visits among those who have broadband access. Those changes give us a real opportunity to cut congestion and carbon emissions."

Disparities in Telehealth

Telehealth eliminates vehicle trips, waiting rooms and reduces the time needed away from work and family for health and prescription consultations. Those benefits, though, are not shared equally. Latino, Asian and Black respondents did not take advantage of telehealth nearly as often as white and higher-income respondents. Disparities in income, education and access to any kind of healthcare are likely influencers.

Among Latinos, 56% report no use of telehealth compared to 44% of non-Latinos, likely reflecting both their lack of access to healthcare and home Internet. The first survey release in March reported that low-income households, and particularly low-income Spanish-speaking households, were more likely to have no or limited home Internet access. Disparities extend by age, with those 65 and over showing the greatest utilization of telehealth care despite that group's lower levels of connectivity. Most respondents who used telehealth services use phones or smartphones.

"Telehealth access is a critical component of broadband access and equity," said Dorian Traube, study contributor, associate professor at the USC Suzanne Dworak Peck School of Social Work and member of the CETF Board of Directors. "While the COVID-19 pandemic opened new access points for patients, disparities still exist in access related to essential social determinants of health including race and place of residence. Closing the Digital Divide holds promise for increasing health equity."

By region, the Bay Area shows the highest level of telehealth engagement at 58%, followed in descending order by the Inland Empire, Orange and San Diego counties and the Central Valley. Los Angeles County showed the lowest level of telehealth participation at 46%.

Telecommuting Preferences Among Demographic Lines

When asked how they would prefer to work, 31% of employed adults currently working from home using broadband replied they'd choose to telecommute every day. Just over half would split their time while 18% would choose a traditional in-person work environment.

Survey results show telecommuting becoming commonplace, with 38% working from home full time and 17% working part time. Among adults 65 and older who are employed, 63% were able to telecommute, a necessity for many during lockdown. The 35 to 44 age group reported the second highest level of telecommuting, while the youngest demographic, between 18 and 34, was least likely to telecommute.

Telecommuting rises with income. Only 32% in the lowest income group reported working from home. The percentage climbed steadily by income group, breaking the 60% mark for those earning $60,000 to $99,999. Of those in the top income bracket, 73% reported telecommuting full- or part-time. Those working from home are more likely to be college-educated women.

The survey results come at a pivotal time to help inform regional and state transportation planners as they work to integrate broadband infrastructure and transportation strategies.

"These 2021 Statewide Survey findings build momentum for the deployment of high-speed internet infrastructure so that we can not only offset vehicle trips, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and relieve traffic congestion, but ultimately provide all of our communities equitable access to healthcare and the education that the internet provides," said Kome Ajise, Executive Director, Southern California Association of Governments.

"As we work to bring a world-class transportation network to the San Diego region, we recognize that broadband is critical for improving mobility, transportation operations, and safety," said Hasan Ikhrata, Executive Director, San Diego Association of Governments. "SANDAG is committed to bridging the Digital Divide in the San Diego region, and the information from this survey will be tremendously helpful as we work with public and private sector partners toward this goal."

Read the first release of survey findings, which focuses on the characteristics of the Digital Divide in California. A recording of a news conference on the initial findings can be viewed here. The results focusing on K-12 education will be released by the end of April.

USC Research Panel

Researchers from across the University of Southern California will analyze and interpret results of the 2021 Statewide Survey, including: Stephen Aguilar of the USC Rossier School of Education; Francois Bar of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism; Donna Benton of the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology; Geoffrey Cowan of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and Center on Communication Leadership and Policy; Conyers Davis of the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy and Schwarzenegger Institute; Pedro Noguera, Dean of the USC Rossier School of Education; Manuel Pastor of the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, and Director of the Equity Research Institute; Adam Clayton Powell of the USC Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism; Dorian Traube of the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work; and Kathleen Wilber of the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology. Former State Treasurer and Controller John Chiang, Past Fellow at the USC Dornsife Center for the Political Future, also is a contributing researcher.

About the 2021 Statewide Survey on Broadband Adoption

The 2021 Statewide Survey of 1,650 California adults was conducted between February 10 and March 22, 2021 in English, Spanish, Mandarin and Vietnamese, to reflect population patterns. 94% of the interviews were completed by mobile phones and the remaining 6% by landline phones. The overall sample error is -/+ 2 percentage points with a 95% confidence level. The results are weighted for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education and region based on totals from the American Community Survey (ACS). Household connectivity results of more than 90% consist of the following findings: 84.8% connected; 5.6% underconnected (smartphone only); 9.6% unconnected.

About California Emerging Technology Fund

CETF is a statewide non-profit foundation with the mission to close the Digital Divide in California. CETF provides grants to non-profit community-based organizations (CBOs) to assist low-income households adopt broadband and become digitally proficient, leads and manages School2Home to successfully integrate technology into teaching and learning with deep parent engagement to close the Achievement Gap in middle schools in low-income neighborhoods, and promotes Digital Inclusion in public policy to achieve Digital Equity.

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