

Latinos fall behind growing digital divide

By Matt O'Brien
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More and more Californians are shopping, chatting, reading news and finding critical health, employment and government information online, but a report published today says Latinos and low-income residents are falling behind, widening the digital divide.

A telephone survey conducted this month by the nonprofit Public Policy Institute of California found that just four in 10 Latinos have Internet access at home, compared with 77 percent of Asian-Americans, 76 percent of whites and 70 percent of blacks.

And while the percentage of white and black residents who use computers and the Internet has grown since 2000, the rate of Internet usage among

Latinos has remained stagnant. The percentage of Latinos who use computers at home, school or work has declined to 58 percent from 64 percent.

"Those trends are going in a direction that's very troubling," said Mark Baldassare, president of the Public Policy Institute. "It reminds us that the Internet is an important resource for both public information and various types of commercial information, but it's not accessible to everyone."

Overall, 75 percent of Californians use a computer and 70 percent use the Internet, according to the researchers, who interviewed 2,503 adults in multiple languages earlier this month.

Bay Area residents are the most likely of all Californians to engage in online activity, with 81 percent using computers and 77 percent using the Internet.

Strong majorities of people across different ethnic and income groups said Internet access was important, yet there were significant disparities between those who used it. Those disparities have grown since the last time the state Public Policy Institute conducted such a survey in 2000.

Asian-Americans had higher averages than most groups in 2000, but their computer use has declined from 91 percent to 81 percent and Internet use has dropped from 84 percent to 80 percent, the report said.

The report does not guess at reasons for the growing differences between groups. The composition of the groups has changed since 2000 because of immigration and youths becoming adults, Baldassare said. He also said the economy may play a factor.

"Cost and expense is a major factor in why people

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are not computer and Internet users," Baldassare said. "If we think about the current economic climate compared to 2000, we have been in a more challenging climate."

Of those who lived in households with an annual income less than \$40,000, 49 percent used the Internet. In comparison, 83 percent of those with incomes between \$40,000 and \$79,000 used the Internet, and 92 percent of those with incomes more than \$80,000 were online.

Baldassare said the survey results represent public policy concerns, with Latino and low-income respondents less likely to use the Internet for information about health, schools and jobs.

The institute partnered in the study with the California Emerging Technology Fund, an organization funded by telecommunications companies and launched by the state to look into expanding broadband Internet access to Californians.

And while the report did not offer any policy suggestions, some are trying to close the gaps on their own.

At the Mi Oficina Computer Cafe in a predominantly Latino neighborhood along Monument Boulevard in Concord, recent immigrant Juan Flores, 23, had his laptop popped open Wednesday, with YouTube videos playing on one side of the screen and an instant messenger on the other. Flores said he uses the Internet after work to chat with family and friends in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Another cafe patron, Andres Dominguez, 24, was watching Japanese animation, but said that his primary use of the cafe's row of 12 flat-screen computers, which cost 9 cents a minute, was to communicate with family members in the Michoacan

state of Mexico.

Both said they would be far less likely to use the Internet if they didn't have the neighborhood cafe.

"We noticed the huge need in the community to have access to the technology," said Maribel Delgado, who opened the computer center with her brother last year, adding the coffee shop several months ago. "It started as a small idea and it just kind of took over us."

Delgado said she has taught many patrons who came in with little confidence about their technological abilities, and were sometimes afraid to ask for help.

"People are intimidated by computers because of their lack of knowledge," Delgado said. "That's one of the reasons we integrated the cafe. Once they come in for the coffee, then they start inquiring about computers."

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LIVE CHAT

Writer Matt O'Brien and guests from the Public Policy Institute of California and Mi Oficina Computer Cafe will answer your questions from 1 to 2 p.m. today at ContraCostaTimes.com.

Read the report
For the full report by the Public Policy Institute of California, visit the organization's Web site at www.ppic.org.

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