Broadband Internet Access, Education & Child Health: From Differences to Disparities, Part 1

Health Equity

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The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply exacerbated inequalities across the county. Access to high-quality education, health care, and stable employment are prominent examples of areas for which socioeconomic and racial/ethnic disparities have worsened. A common and critical driver of disparities in these areas is the ability to access functional internet. Although the digital divide in the United States has been acknowledged for decades, the pandemic and the start of a new school year that will likely include some degree of virtual education for all students brings a new sense of urgency for addressing this issue.

In this two-part post, we'll talk about some of the features of unequal access to broadband internet—covering first the impact on childhood education and then on health care—and highlight potential solutions.

A Growing Digital Divide

Access to broadband is often framed as a rural/urban issue; however, data shows the number of houses without broadband in metropolitan areas is more than three times that of rural areas—13.9 million versus 4.5 million. Socioeconomics appear to be a more central driver of differential access. As of 2019, 27% of adults in the U.S. were not home broadband users—and if we break that down further, 44% of households with incomes under $35,000 lacked broadband compared to only 13% of those with incomes of $50,000 or above. For those with less than a high school education, only 46% of households had home broadband compared to 93% of households inhabited by a college graduate.

There is also evidence of differential access by race and ethnicity. Only 66% of Black households and 61% of Hispanic households had home broadband compared to 79% of White households.

As internet becomes a fundamental need for accessing education, among other critical services, those who cannot afford functional internet are further deprived of resources and opportunity, amplifying the consequences of these differences and their unfairness, and thus solidifying them as disparities.

A Disparity Amplified: Internet Access Amid COVID-19

As many activities were pushed online due to the pandemic, the digital divide sparked a heated debate around the opening of public schools in our home city of Philadelphia. Here, the school district temporarily suspended all classes when COVID-19 closed schools because not all students had access to computers and the internet. The district ultimately distributed laptops to all students, but internet access proved to be more challenging. Families were provided with a list of low-cost internet options and links to maps of Philadelphia hot spots where they could utilize free Wi-Fi.

As caregivers weighed the pros and cons of multiple options, including attending virtual school lessons from parking lots and other public locations, many families were left in the proverbial dark. The most vulnerable families had additional barriers to surmount, such as the need for a permanent address to apply for services, or the ability to navigate English-language applications. For those with multiple children engaged in virtual learning, families struggled with poor internet speed available through hot spot areas and free and low-cost plans, limiting their ability to access synchronous learning sessions or download educational materials.

For the nearly 200,000 students attending Philadelphia district and charter schools, these disparities affect more than their education. For many students, particularly in low-income communities, school provides a critical safety net with respect to nutrition, mental health support and social services. Losing the connection to these essential services threatens not only their learning, but their overall health.

In PolicyLab's school reopening guidance, the authors note that school instruction will likely move between virtual and in-person learning throughout the year. During periods of virtual learning, reliable internet access will be important so children can stay safe at home if possible, avoiding COVID-19 exposure when trying to complete school work outside of the home. We will delve deeper into broadband's connection to health care in part two of this post.

Innovative Solutions to Close the Gap

Facing a school year that will begin virtually, Philadelphia recently announced the PHLConnectED program. The program will provide free, high-speed internet access to more than 35,000 families through partnerships with Comcast and T-Mobile. Importantly, the program will also give families access to digital navigators and digital skills training to begin the process of closing the digital equity gap.

Several case studies from other cities show how local governments are seeking to address broadband access in ways that are appropriate, impactful and equitable:

- The San Jose Digital Inclusion Fund distributes money to the public library and school systems for lending out internet hot spot devices, implementing a digital literacy workshop and giving out $200 stipends to buy internet service.
- Baltimore's "youth fund" was utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic to buy food, laptops and internet for children.
- San Antonio's COVID relief package allotted $27 million dollars toward expanding municipal broadband structure to give residents internet access after a study found that 40% of households did not have home internet.

These programs are an important first step in determining the best ways to provide high-quality internet access for everyone. But questions remain: How can cities create sustainable funding models to provide internet for families through public and privately funded programs? Furthermore, how can research emphasize the impact that access to the internet has on other aspects of family health and well-being?

The internet is an essential service that has increasingly become critical for childhood education—something we know is tied so closely to future health outcomes. There is a renewed sense of urgency to address the issue of broadband access as the COVID-19 pandemic continues and as school districts across the country begin a new school year. The internet will only become more important over time and steps must be taken to ensure all families and their children are able to readily access this essential resource.

Carina Flaherty is a former clinical research assistant at PolicyLab.

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Sarah Wood
Sarah Wood
MD, MSHP
Faculty Scholar
Chén Kenyon
Chén Kenyon
MD, MSHP
Faculty Member