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Collaborating to Close

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IS CERTAINLY A WORTHY, BUT DAUNTING, GOAL. COLLABORATING CAN MAKE THE SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE MUCH MORE ACHIEVABLE. ...

Does the digital divide still exist? The answer is a resounding "yes," and it is having a particularly devastating impact during the COVID-19 crisis. Library professionals see this on a daily basis. The needs of those living without digital access vary—including adults without the tools to complete a job application, seniors unable to take advantage of telehealth alternatives, and students who can't participate in online instruction or prepare homework assignments. More than ever, those without digital access are being denied access to opportunity.

How Bad Is It?

In 2019, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reported that more than 20 million Americans lacked internet access. That is the equivalent of the entire population of the state of New York.

The digital divide has been on full display during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider these statistics from Pew Research Center regarding the scope of America's digital divide:

- Three in 10 adults do not have access to smartphones.

- Four in 10 adults do not have access to broadband in their homes.

- Approximately half of lower-income households don't have access to a traditional computer.

- About six in 10 parents with lower incomes face barriers in providing digital access for their children's virtual education.

- More than two in 10 children have to use some form of public Wi-Fi in order to finish their schoolwork.

- Nearly two in 10 children don't have access to a computer at home.

These issues are very real for libraries. For a lot of people who visit libraries for computer-related help, their only other digital access outside our institutions may be a smartphone, if they have one.
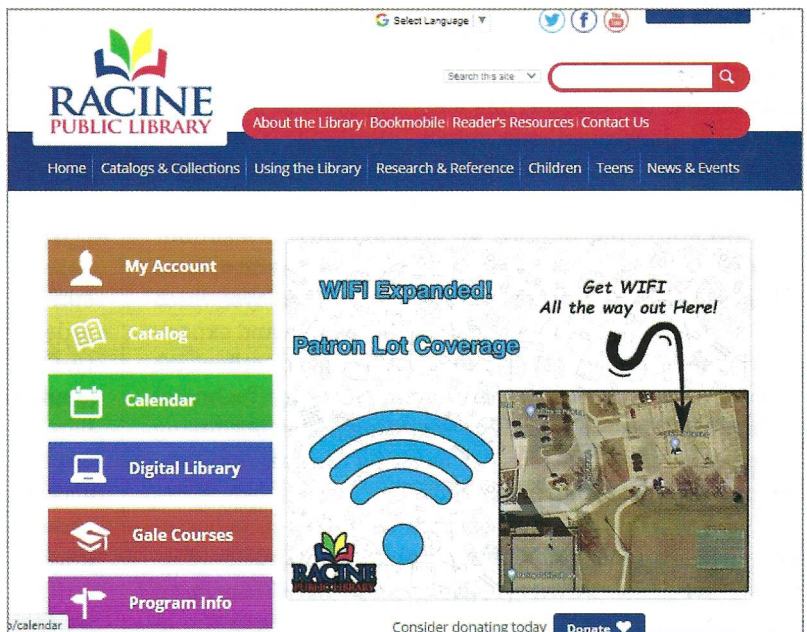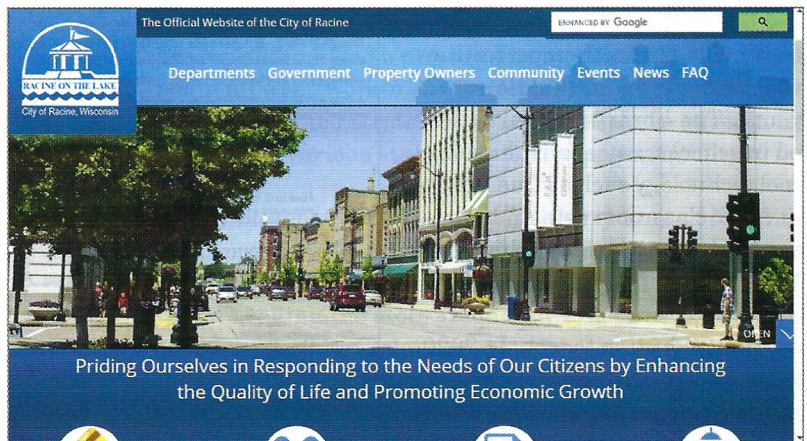
According to other research, there is a definite difference in the depth of the digital divide among races. In a 2017 report, the U.S. Census Bureau indicates that about 36% of African Americans and about 30% of Hispanics do not have access to broadband or a computer at home compared to about 21% of their white counterparts.

The city partnered with the library to expand internet access before and during the pandemic.

What Has Racine Public Library Done to Help Bridge the Divide?

Racine Public Library began offering a number of programs and services to address the digital divide long before COVID-19 and has expanded our initiatives to meet the even greater challenges posed by the pandemic.

During "normal" times, our patrons could spend up to 3 hours per day using our computers on-site. Similar to so many patrons at your libraries, our patrons have used the computers to apply for jobs, communicate with family, write books, and access the many resources the internet has to offer. With the help of the Racine Public Library Foundation, patrons are able to check out a laptop or Chromebook to use within the library setting or at home. They also may check out hotspots.

Library staffers spend a large amount of time helping people navigate computers, especially in applying for jobs.

We often hear, "I've never had to use a computer before today, but I need to find work. I don't even know how to use the mouse or navigate a website." We have added staff to our adult services department to help patrons with their computer questions. Even during this extraordinary period, we have found innovative approaches to continue assisting with these same issues. We also offer Connectivity Clinics to help residents access low-cost internet options. We have promoted this extensively during the pandemic through the library's social media accounts and website.

Libraries are learning places, and technology is simply another educational tool. Racine Public Library has provided computer classes for about 20 years. Topics have included Using Windows, Internet Safety, Cutting the Cord, and Digital Device Buying. During regular hours, the library provides one-on-one time to help our patrons with various issues, such as reading ebooks and using smartphones.

We have also expanded classes and access to technology for youth. In early 2017, the library partnered with

the Racine Unified School District to provide outreach opportunities to elementary and middle school youth. The library has participated in school science fairs, bringing cool technology such as Cue Robots and VR classroom sets and allowing students to try everything out. We also host Teen Tech Week in area middle schools, which offers a short introduction to tech. In 2020, we reached more than 600 students in that 1 week alone.

Additionally, the library has partnered with Girls Who Code. This partnership, in conjunction with the school district's student clubs across the system, has substantially increased our reach. Even with the school closures in our region due to COVID, we are continuing to provide Scratch classes and Girls Who Code events online.

Drop-in lab opportunities are also available and open to all ages. The library hosts monthly Maker Mondays, which give the community the opportunity to come in and experience some technology they might not be able to otherwise access. We also have partnered with Gateway Technical College's Fab Lab to provide 3D-printing programs during the pandemic, and patrons are learning the basic skills in computer-aided design as a result.
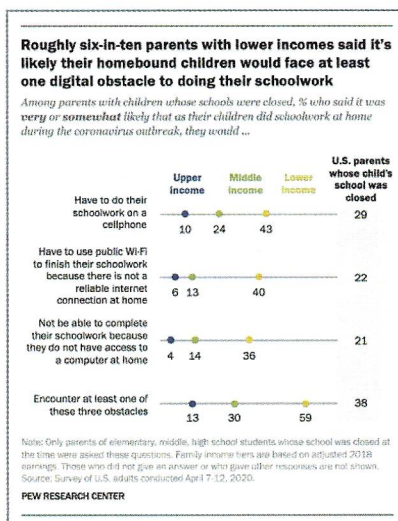
The Lab, our program designed as a drop-in opportunity specifically for middle and high school students during scheduled school breaks, lets them use the 3D printer, create new worlds in Minecraft, or try out some of the library's other tech. We recently expanded this initiative for kids in kindergarten through fifth grade with a grant from the Racine Public Library Foundation.

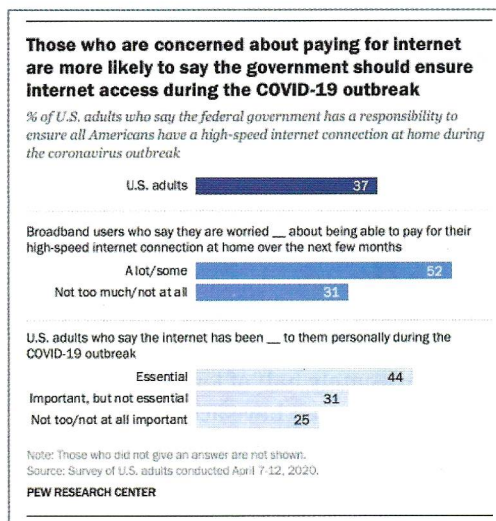## What Is the City of Racine Doing to Bridge the Divide?

In January 2019, the city of Racine competed with more than 130 cities across Canada, the U.S., and Mexico for designation as a North American Smart City. Racine became the first Wisconsin municipality to be awarded this designation, and it is the smallest city to earn this honor as of this writing.

For Racine, communitywide connectivity has been its top Smart City priority. The city concluded that digital infrastructure is as important to its ability to compete in the future as roads, rails, and ports were 100 years ago.

As a community with fewer than 100,000 residents, we realized that local government alone would not have the resources to make our post-industrial community and its residents more competitive. Doing so would require strong public-private partnerships. Among the first such partnerships Racine established was with a major telecommunications company, resulting in the launch of Wisconsin's first 5G network, prior to the pandemic.

Instead of relying solely on privately held high-speed networks, the city also leveraged its own municipal fiber optic network, which consists of more than 3,000 strand miles crisscrossing a significant portion of the community. Originally installed to improve public safety and emergency responses, the city was able to leverage its dark fiber—segregated fiber not being used for law enforcement or other emergency service purposes—to create multiple access points for free, publicly available, high-speed internet access, including access points in the community's lowest-income neighborhoods.

The city of Racine and Racine Public Library recognized that the public sector never has all of the answers. The best solutions often come by combining the ideas from a diverse array of residents and representatives of businesses, nonprofits, and academic institutions. In order to build an inclusive Smart City strategy that embraces all of its people and advances communitywide connectivity, Racine hosted Smart Cities September—a month of events in 2019 designed to engage individuals and institutions alike. With the enthusiastic support of Racine Public Library, the city brought together more than 500 national, state, and local leaders and residents to discuss how we can use technology to improve the community's quality of life, economic competitiveness, sustainability, and social equity.

How Can Your Library and Community Collaborate to Close the Divide?

We recommend a five-step process for collaborating to close the digital divide in your community.

1. Start With Demographics

Whether you are considering your library patrons or the community as a whole, initiatives to close the divide start with understanding your demographics. Who among your

Roughly six-in-ten parents with lower incomes said it's likely their homebound children would face at least one digital obstacle to doing their schoolwork

Among parents with children whose schools were closed, % who said it was very or somewhat likely that as their children did schoolwork at home during the coronavirus outbreak, they would ...

	Upper income	Middle income	Lower income	U.S. parents whose child's school was closed
Have to do their schoolwork on a cellphone	10	24	43	29
Have to use public Wi-Fi to finish their schoolwork because there is not a reliable internet connection at home	6	13	40	22
Not be able to complete their schoolwork because they do not have access to a computer at home	4	14	36	21
Encounter at least one of these three obstacles	13	30	59	38

Note: Only parents of elementary, middle, high school students whose school was closed at the time were asked these questions. Family income tiers are based on adjusted 2018 earnings. Those who did not give an answer or who gave other responses are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 7-12, 2020.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Those who are concerned about paying for internet are more likely to say the government should ensure internet access during the COVID-19 outbreak

% of U.S. adults who say the federal government has a responsibility to ensure all Americans have a high-speed internet connection at home during the coronavirus outbreak

U.S. adults	37

Broadband users who say they are worried __ about being able to pay for their high-speed internet connection at home over the next few months

A lot/some	52
Not too much/not at all	31

U.S. adults who say the internet has been __ to them personally during the COVID-19 outbreak

Essential	44
Important, but not essential	31
Not too/not at all important	25

Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 7-12, 2020.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Pew Research Center data illustrates the situation.

local population is impacted by the digital divide? How are they impacted? In addition to holding focus groups or surveying library system users, you can review the U.S. Census Bureau's QuickFacts for your community. QuickFacts includes statistics about the percentage of residents who do not have a computer and/or an internet subscription.

2. Reach Out to Public-Sector and Private-Sector Partners

Reach out widely to partner institutions (e.g., school districts, technical colleges), faith-based organizations, and community-based organizations (e.g., United Way and other social services organizations), as well as area employers. Create a broad-based community conversation to refine the profile of those in need of greater digital access and clarify how closing the digital divide for them will pay dividends to both individuals and the community.

> EVEN THE BEST STRATEGY TO OVERCOME THE DIGITAL DIVIDE CANNOT BE SUSTAINED WITHOUT COMMUNITY UNDERSTANDING AND ENGAGEMENT.

3. Map Your Library and City Digital Assets

While your library and community may not have all of the pieces, chances are you have several that may not be coordinated currently toward a communitywide strategy. Take time to map your digital assets. Asset mapping is a strategic step to avoid duplication, increase optimization, understand gaps, and invite others to contribute toward a community solution. Locally, asset mapping has allowed Racine's elected and administrative officials to be more strategic about addressing the digital divide in lower-to-moderate-income neighborhoods.

4. Partner to Complement Library and City Digital Assets

In addition to the other benefits mentioned earlier, the asset map can be invaluable in identifying needed resources and partners who may be able to complement the digital assets of the library and city. Potential partners will not only appreciate that you have defined the problem, the target population you are trying to serve, and what you already have in place, but will also have some idea of how they can contribute to a community solution. Of course, as partners bring their resources and expertise to the table, your library and community have the opportunity to continue refining the community-need statement and implementation strategy.

One word of caution: Don't assume that an overall approach will work to address the needs of all of those with-

out digital access. Student needs and their solutions may be very different from those of senior citizens. One size does not fit all when working to overcome the digital divide. Creating segmented strategies is a more effective formula for addressing various stakeholders in your community.

5. Communicate Communitywide Every Step of the Way

If your library and community are focused on creating a communitywide solution to close the digital divide, it will require telling the story frequently and to as many audiences as possible, explaining why they should care and giving individuals and institutions both progress reports and ways to participate proactively. Even the best strategy to overcome the digital divide cannot be sustained without community understanding and engagement. Equally important, the perfect plan will be meaningless if those impacted by the digital divide do not know about the connectivity solutions being offered and how they can access them.

Closing the digital divide is certainly a worthy, but daunting, goal. Collaborating can make the seemingly impossible much more achievable, and the most effective communitywide collaboration for equitable digital access can begin with a simple conversation between your library and local government. ∎

Resources

Pew Research Center
pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/10/59-of-u-s-parents-with-lower-incomes-say-their-child-may-face-digital-obstacles-in-schoolwork

Federal Communications Commission: "Bridging the Divide for All Americans" fcc.gov/about-fcc/fcc-initiatives/bridging-digital-divide-all-americans

"What the Coronavirus Reveals About the Digital Divide Between Schools and Communities" brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2020/03/17/what-the-coronavirus-reveals-about-the-digital-divide-between-schools-and-communities

The Washington Post: "America's Digital Divide Is an Emergency" washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/23/americas-digital-divide-is-an-emergency

The Digital Divide: Percentage of Households by Broadband Internet Subscription, Computer Type, Race and Hispanic Origin census.gov/library/visualizations/2017/comm/internet.html

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William Martin

led the city of Racine's successful efforts in competing internationally with more than 130 cities in Canada, the U.S., and Mexico to earn its designation as a Smart City, the first in Wisconsin and the smallest in North America. Fascinated by history, culture, and language, Martin enjoys a range of books, including U.S. presidential biographies and children's books in Dutch, Spanish, and Hebrew.