

A joint product of the Disparities Policy Project and Public Opinion and Survey Research

### THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND ACCESS TO HEALTH INFORMATION ONLINE

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) calls for a number of web-based initiatives, including development of the website [healthcare.gov](http://healthcare.gov) which provides a variety of health information and helps individuals find coverage options. This web-based information will be particularly important when the major provisions of the law, including the health insurance exchanges, are implemented in 2014. As a result, understanding the level and quality of Internet access among those groups most likely to benefit from reform, such as the uninsured, those with lower incomes, and members of racial and ethnic minority groups, is an important consideration as health reform is implemented. The following Data Note, using data from The Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University *Race and Recession Survey*, conducted January 27-February 9, 2011, examines racial and ethnic disparities in the shares who report seeking out health information online, and explores the broader question of how disparities in Internet access might impact the abilities of different groups to access health care information available on the web as part of the ACA.

Racial and ethnic differences in computer use and Internet access have long existed, and while progress has been made, over the past decade in narrowing these gaps, disparities still exist.<sup>1</sup> The current survey found small but substantial differences in terms of who uses the Internet, how they access it, and whether people are already obtaining health information online. Hispanics are least likely to report being online – 72 percent say they use the Internet or email at least occasionally, compared to 80 percent of blacks and 87 percent of whites. In other words, 13 percent of whites, 20 percent of blacks and 28 percent of Hispanics report that they are not online. This difference appears to be driven at least in part by racial and ethnic disparities in income. While nearly all higher-income whites, blacks and Hispanics report using the internet (95, 94, and 93 percent, respectively), among those earning less than \$40,000 per year, 24 percent of whites, 31 percent of blacks and 36 percent of Hispanics say they are offline. Blacks and Hispanics are also less likely than whites to report having a computer at home. Nearly nine in ten whites (89 percent) say they have a desktop or laptop computer at home, compared to roughly 8 in 10 blacks (78 percent) and Hispanics (81 percent). Among those with lower incomes (less than \$40,000 per year), blacks are least likely to report having a computer at home (63 percent, compared with 75 percent of whites and 73 percent of Hispanics with lower incomes).

Racial and ethnic disparities also exist when it comes to the speed at which people access the Internet. While majorities across racial and ethnic groups report having a high-speed connection at home, the share of Hispanics (56 percent) and blacks (63 percent) who report connecting at high speeds is lower than that of whites (77 percent). Among those with lower incomes (less than \$40,000 per year), about six in ten whites (61 percent) report connecting at high speeds, compared with closer to four in ten blacks (45 percent) and Hispanics (42 percent).

Evidence of a Digital Divide				
Percent who say they...	All	White	African American	Hispanic
<b>Use the Internet or email at least occasionally</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>87%<sup>b,h</sup></b>	<b>80%<sup>h</sup></b>	<b>72%</b>
Earn less than \$40,000 annually	72	76 <sup>h</sup>	69	64
Earn \$40,000 or more annually	95	95	94	93
<b>Have a computer at home</b>	<b>86%</b>	<b>89%<sup>b,h</sup></b>	<b>78%</b>	<b>81%</b>
Earn less than \$40,000 annually	74	75 <sup>b</sup>	63	73
Earn \$40,000 or more annually	97	96	95	98
<b>Have a high speed internet connection</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>77%<sup>b,h</sup></b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>56%</b>
Earn less than \$40,000 annually	56	61 <sup>b,h</sup>	45	42
Earn \$40,000 or more annually	86	86	83	88

<sup>b</sup> Percentage is statistically different from the percentage for blacks within the same row.  
<sup>h</sup> Percentage is statistically different from the percentage for Hispanics within the same row.

<sup>1</sup> Aaron Smith, "Technology Trends Among People of Color," Pew Internet and American Life Project at the Pew Research Center, available at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Commentary/2010/September/Technology-Trends-Among-People-of-Color.aspx>.

## ACCESSING HEALTH INFORMATION ONLINE

Six in 10 adults overall say they have ever used the Internet to access health information, and again there are discrepancies by race. Forty-three percent of Hispanics report having ever used the Internet to access health information, while 56 percent of blacks and 65 percent of whites report doing so. The differences are even more striking among those with lower incomes. Just three in ten Hispanics with incomes under \$40,000 say they have ever used the Internet to access health information, compared with 44 percent of blacks and half of whites with similar incomes.

Percent saying they have ever used the Internet to access health information				
	All	White	African American	Hispanic
<b>All</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>65%<sup>b,h</sup></b>	<b>56%<sup>h</sup></b>	<b>43%</b>
<b>Annual Household Income</b>				
Earn less than \$40,000 annually	45	50 <sup>h</sup>	44 <sup>h</sup>	30
Earn \$40,000 or more annually	73	74	73	71
<b>Health Insurance Status (Less than 65 years old)</b>				
Insured	69	72 <sup>h</sup>	67	57
Uninsured	51	^	46	36

<sup>b</sup> Percentage is statistically different from the percentage for blacks within the same row.  
<sup>h</sup> Percentage is statistically different from the percentage for Hispanics within the same row.  
<sup>^</sup> There is insufficient data to show percentage for uninsured Whites.

Finally, as noted above, the ACA uses the Internet as the primary means of communication to help individuals learn about coverage options, and once the exchanges are in place in 2014, to enroll in health plans and renew policies. Those who are currently without health insurance<sup>2</sup> are among the groups most likely to need access to this new information, but currently, just half of the uninsured (51 percent) report having used the Internet to access health information. This percentage drops to 36 percent among uninsured Hispanics. This finding has significant implications as implementation continues and more coverage options become available for the uninsured.

## METHODOLOGY

The Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University Survey Project is a three-way partnership and an experiment in combining survey research and reporting to better inform the public. The *Race and Recession Survey*, the 21st in this partnership series, was conducted by telephone from January 27 – February 9, 2011 among a nationally representative random sample of 1,959 adults ages 18 and older. The full sample includes additional interviews with randomly selected African Americans and Hispanic Americans, for a total of 501 black and 501 Hispanic respondents. The added interviews (commonly referred to as an “oversample”) were completed to ensure there were enough respondents for separate analysis. Results for all groups have been weighted to reflect their actual distribution in the nation. Telephone interviews conducted by landline and cell phone were carried out in English and Spanish by Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS).

The margin of sampling error for results based on the total sample is plus or minus 3 percentage points; for results based on African Americans and Hispanics it is plus or minus 6 percentage points; for whites it is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Representatives of The Washington Post, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University worked together to develop the survey questionnaire and analyze the results. Each organization bears the sole responsibility for the work that appears under its name. The project team from The Washington Post included Jon Cohen, director of polling and Peyton Craighill, polling manager; from the Kaiser Family Foundation: Mollyann Brodie, senior vice president for executive operations and director of public opinion and survey research, Elizabeth Hamel, associate director of public opinion and survey research, Bianca DiJulio, senior survey analyst, and Cara James, director of the Disparities Policy Project; from Harvard: Robert J. Blendon, professor of health policy and political analysis at the Harvard School of Public Health and the John F. Kennedy School of Government, and John M. Benson, managing director of the Harvard Opinion Research Program in the Harvard School of Public Health.

Due to rounding, percentages may not add to 100.

<sup>2</sup> In this data note, the uninsured refer to those under age 65 without health insurance. Those ages 65 or over are excluded because they have access to Medicare.

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