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## **Study Reveals Next Digital Divide Challenge: the “Under-Connected”**

### ***Discount Internet Programs Reach Few Low-Income Families; Many Limited to Mobile-Only or Slow, Unreliable Internet Access That Impedes Educational Opportunities***

WASHINGTON – A new national study of the digital challenges facing low- and moderate- income families shows that the vast majority are connected to the Internet (94%), but many rely on mobile-only access (23%) and more than half (52%) of those with home Internet access say it is too slow, a quarter (26%) say too many people share the same computer, and one fifth (20%) say their Internet was cut off in the last year due to lack of payment.

“It’s no longer a simple question of whether or not families are connected to the Internet,” said study co-author Vikki S. Katz, associate professor of communication at Rutgers University, “but rather *how* they are connected, and the implications of being under-connected for children’s access to educational opportunities and parents’ ability to apply for jobs or resources.”

The study, ***Opportunity for All? Technology and Learning in Low-Income Families*** from Rutgers and the Joan Ganz Cooney Center, is based on a nationally-representative telephone survey of nearly 1,200 parents of children ages 6 to 13 with household incomes below the national median. Findings will be discussed at a February 3 forum in Washington, DC featuring FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler.

The survey revealed substantial ethnic disparities, with Hispanic immigrant families being less connected than other families. One in five (20%) immigrant Hispanic parents do not go online at all, even occasionally, compared with 4% of Whites and U.S.-born Hispanics, and 2% of Blacks. Four in 10 (41%) Hispanic immigrant parents report mobile-only Internet access, compared with 25% of Blacks, 16% of Whites, and 17% of U.S.-born Hispanics below the median income.

The study also found that the lower the income, the more parents rely on their children to help with technology. For example, more than half (53%) of children from the lowest income group (less than \$25,000/year) “often” help each other learn about computers and technology compared to 33% of those in the higher-income group (\$45,000-65,000/year).

“Today, those most in need of educational opportunities are the least likely to have full access to the digital technologies that can help provide a level playing field,” said co-author Victoria Rideout, president of VJR Consulting. “The primary obstacle preventing greater equity and participation is financial, and the discounted options available aren’t reaching enough families.”

Key findings of the study include:

- Among lower-income families with mobile-only access, three in 10 (29%) say they have hit their data limits in the past year, one quarter (24%) say they had their phone service cut off in

the past year due to lack of payment, and one fifth (21%) say too many people share the same phone for them to get the time on it they need.

- The main reason some families do not have home computers or Internet access is because they cannot afford it, but discounted Internet programs are reaching very few. Only 6% of those with incomes below 185% of poverty (a common eligibility level for discounted service) say they have ever signed up for low-cost Internet access.
- Low- and moderate-income parents use the Internet for a broad range of purposes, but mobile-only families are less likely to shop online (36% vs 66% of those with home access), less likely to use online banking or bill-paying (49% vs 74%), and less likely to apply for jobs or services online (42% vs 56%) or follow local news online (70% vs 82%).
- Similar disparities exist for children's online activities with 35% of children with mobile-only access saying they often look up information online about things they are interested in compared with 52% of those with home Internet access; 31% of children with mobile-only access use the Internet daily, compared with 51% of those with home access.
- Family members are important resources for each other when it comes to learning about and through technology. Parents help kids use tech (77%), but kids help their parents too (53%), particularly if their parents have less education and/or lower incomes. One-third (32%) of parents in the lowest income group (<\$25,000) say their child "often" helps them with tech, vs. 15% of those in the highest income group (\$45-65,000).
- Children from low- and moderate-income families who have Internet access use it for educational purposes: among children ages 6 to 13, 81% play educational games and look up information they're interested in; among kids ages 10 to 13, 81% go online to do homework, 46% to collaborate with other students, and 40% to connect with teachers.

"To have a good shot at being college and career ready, every student needs to be online gaining digital literacy starting in the primary grades," said Dr. Michael H. Levine, executive director of the Joan Ganz Cooney Center, an independent digital research entity based at Sesame Workshop. "It is imperative that we make sure no child in America is under-connected."

Methodology: The survey was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and fielded by SSRS via landline and cell phone in English and Spanish. The complete study is available at <http://www.joanganzcooneycenter.org/publication/opportunity-for-all/>

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