



The low-income families digital divide

Outer Brisbane Community



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Digital inclusion and the digital divide

Our research approaches digital inclusion as a complex issue with intersecting factors that affect a family's levels of inclusion. The term "divide" can position people as either "haves" or "have nots" on either side of this divide. The term divide acknowledges that while gains have been made, especially in relation to access and affordability, there is a deepening gap between those who are digitally included and those who are at risk of being left behind by the digital economy.

Our research focuses particularly on income as a determinant of digital inclusion recognising that low-income status affects several areas of a

person's life. We have gained many insights into families' lived experiences of digital exclusion and note that family members' ability to be resilient and respond to their exclusion is highly dependent on their personal circumstances. A major challenge for low-income families as they aim to participate in the digital society is the precarious position they are often in with regard to housing, employment, and access to health services and other social infrastructure. The digital divide, then, is not just a technological divide, but is made complex by social and economic disadvantage.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which our research has taken place. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, and to Elders past and present.

The research team warmly acknowledges the staff in our partner organisations who have made this research project possible. We thank them for their expertise, time, support and commitment to the research and improving digital inclusion for low-income families. We also thank the families in the Outer Brisbane Community who generously gave us their time and welcomed us into their homes. Similarly, we also thank the community-based organisations in the area that shared their experiences of supporting the digital inclusion of low-income families.

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This document is intended to be read in conjunction with the key findings reported in 'Digital Inclusion is Everybody's Business' and other community reports from **The low-income families digital divide series** that can be found at qut.to/bctvy. For more information on the research project contact the DMRC via the details above.

Community: Outer Brisbane

The Outer Brisbane community is located within a quiet bay side area roughly 45 minutes' drive from Brisbane with a population of around 20,000 people. It is a long-term, low socioeconomic area with almost three quarters of residents born in Australia, including about 7% identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. A central train line operates regular services between Brisbane and the local area, but a bus, car, or bike is needed to commute to and from the train stations. There are few, infrequent bus services, leaving many residents dependent on taxis and rideshares. As there are several cycleways in the area, recreational cycling is often popular with weekend tourists riding out from the city.

The community has one major shopping centre in which several government, medical, and commercial services are located. However, other community organisations, such as the public library and schools, are disparate and not easily accessible to families without their own vehicle.

A significant proportion of people in the area are employed as community and personal service workers (16%), working in industries such as aged care (5%) and in hospitals (4.5%). The median weekly income is \$612, almost \$200 less than the national median (\$805). Although English is the most spoken language at home, a small portion of the population also speak languages such as Samoan, Tagalog, and te reo Māori which give rise to cultural and arts events. Local Traditional Owners also play an active role in the community.

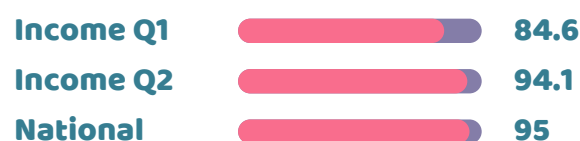


Australian Digital Inclusion Index Scores for Low-Income Australians (/100)

Access



Affordability



Digital Ability



Individuals within the lowest income quartiles (Q1 <\$33,800; Q2 \$33,800 - \$51,999) experience higher levels of digital exclusion than many other Australians. These figures from the ADII highlight these inclusion gaps at the national level.

Education in the Community

There are five public primary and secondary schools within 5kms of the Outer Brisbane suburb, as well as two private schools.

There are also several flexible learning or alternative educational centres that support young people who need additional support or who are at risk of disengaging from education.

Many students at the learning centres and at other primary and secondary schools in the suburb are Indigenous (about 26% of the student populations) and fall into the lowest socioeconomic quartile (about 65%).

Community Resources

Not-for-profit organisations and community services in the suburb are investing in digital inclusion and digital ability work. However, because the organisations rely on government grants to support their training programs, and these grants do not prioritise digital inclusion, organisations reported having to offer digital ability training under the guise of work-ready skills training.

These organisations are also trying to reach and support specific vulnerable groups, such as women fleeing domestic violence, which is challenging as these women are often not online for safety reasons. One organisation had shifted to doing physical outreach in shopping centres to be able to connect with women safely.

The local library typically provides targeted support to individuals, helping them to complete personal digital tasks such as applying for jobs and managing social services. Due to space restrictions, the library was unable to provide any digital literacy training for the local community, however, a library in a nearby suburb had space for a training room and was able to offer some.

Finished school at Year 10



Finished Bachelor's degree



Bottom socioeconomic quartile



Local Families

Five families from Outer Brisbane were involved. Four were single parent families headed by mothers. During the study, one of the single parent families moved from social housing into rental housing with a de facto partner. Another was in a multi-generational setting, with the single mother, her mother, and her daughter living together in a rental property. One single mother lived with her high school-aged children in a rental property whilst the final single mother and her young daughter lived in a caravan park which had been converted into social housing. The fifth family were a married couple with two children and were the only family to have purchased a house. All the families were from English-speaking backgrounds and didn't report being engaged with any multicultural associations.

Technology in the Home

Most families had access to digital devices, including mobile phones and laptops, though cost and maintenance was a major factor, particularly for children's devices which often broke and needed to be replaced (with some children being on their second or third replacement device). Most of the children's devices were provided by parents or grandparents. In one family, two of the children had each received an iPad through the NDIS for telehealth appointments, although they also used the devices for other purposes. Without the NDIS, the children would be unlikely to have a device, as there were three school aged children in the household.

Connectivity in the Home

Access to data, Wi-Fi, and broadband was a significant issue for most families. At the beginning of the project, two families lived in the converted caravan park in demountable cabins that could not be connected to the NBN and had no site-based Wi-Fi. These families had to be mobile-only and primarily relied on hot spotting from their mobile phones to get online; one of the mothers was studying full-time and needed to hot spot her laptop from her mobile phone to be able to do her online classes (during COVID). In other instances, these families would use the free Wi-Fi at a local laundromat.

Online Safety

One single mother was very hesitant to her allow daughter, who was in her early years of primary school, to use any digital media, citing safety concerns and her desire for her daughter to do non-screen-based activities. Aside from this, all the young people who participated in the study had "digital lives." All were born into the digital world, and no children told stories of poor experiences online, such as experiencing cyberbullying. However, one single mother shared that she had once smashed her teenage daughter's phone on purpose because of the negative impact it was having on her mental health due to online interactions with other teenage girls.

Attitudes to Technology

Four of the families expressed long-term positive orientations to technology, including the parent's own memories of getting their first phones, computers, or video game consoles. These same four families considered access to technology and the internet to be critical to learning for their children. One single mother talked about having to cut her budget to be able to afford stable broadband to support her children's learning.

Key Findings

The findings below highlight some of the insights that emerged from our conversations with families and community organisations in the Outer Brisbane Community. These findings should be read alongside the broader project findings outlined in the 'Digital Inclusion is Everybody's Business' report, which can be accessed at qut.to/bctvy.



The cost of reliable access to home-based internet is out of reach for many families and either requires them to make substantial sacrifices to afford it or limits them to purchasing expensive mobile-data only that must be shared across several devices.

Issues of housing are compounding and exacerbating digital inclusion, with families' living situations (such as location, housing type, and level of precarity) directly impacting the types of connections and devices they access or seek out.

School-based digital resourcing significantly affects families' choice of schools, with issues of digital ability amongst students and caregivers, the provisions of resources to families, and concerns of costs to families brought to the forefront during and following COVID-19.

Gaps in Digital Inclusion in Outer Brisbane

X **Internet connections and data are unaffordable and often inaccessible or unreliable.** Families struggle to access and pay for fixed line internet in their homes, with some social housing tenants unable to access NBN services from their premises. In some households, several family members rely on a single mobile phone and data, which are susceptible to connectivity dropouts, for all online activities including schooling. The cost of digital devices, for example for Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) programs at schools, is prohibitive.

X **There is a lack of funding for digital inclusion services.** Community service organisations struggle to access funding that is targeted to digital inclusion. Some organisations appropriate funding targeted at other areas, such as employment pathways, to provide basic digital skills training and support that helps people function in everyday life, and thus prepare them to be work ready.

X **Digital mentoring is under-resourced in community organisations.** Assisting clients with digital access and using digital technologies is a daily activity for community service workers. However, these digital mentoring activities are not formally recognised as part of people's jobs and therefore are not adequately resourced. This deepens community organisations' capacity to connect with the digitally disconnected and to further identify them and engage them in digital learning programs and skills training.



Solutions for Advancing Digital Inclusion in Outer Brisbane



Greater accountability for telecommunications providers.

Telecommunications providers should support their low-income customers by providing more low-cost products and providing more specialised support for vulnerable groups. Providers could partner with communities so provide place-based services and products that meet people's needs and budgets.



More, directed funding for digital inclusion work in communities.

Local, state, and federal governments should prioritise and fund digital inclusion programs targeted to low-income families, including young people, school leavers, and parents returning to work. This is essential given the 'digital-by-default' approach to the provision of social services and the increasing digitisation of everyday tasks such as banking and shopping.



Better recognition of "digital labour" involved in doing digital inclusion work.

Community service organisations and their funders need to recognise and appropriately resource the essential digital mentoring that community support workers are doing on the frontline in service of low-income families, above and beyond their primary role (e.g., domestic violence support, healthcare, and cultural engagement). This should include professional development in digital capability within the organisation.



Digital Inclusion in the Outer Brisbane Community: Rebecca's Story

"You always need to have Wi-Fi."

Rebecca is a single mother in a de facto relationship with three children, two of whom have specials and are registered with the NDIS. When we met Rebecca, she was living in cabin-style, demountable social housing with limited living and play space for her children. On these social housing premises, NBN fixed line broadband did not extend to individual dwellings and was only available in the manager's office.

"One of the things that I have a challenge with in here [social housing] is that we don't have a landline. So ultimately, like if you have a Smart TV or you have a PS5, whatever you call those things, you know, you always need to have Wi-Fi."

As a result, Rebecca was solely reliant upon her mobile phone and prepaid data to do all her essential digital tasks, including applying for jobs, managing social services and NDIS, and her children's education across three separate schools (one primary, one secondary, and one special school). Rebecca's children had NDIS-provided tablets for telehealth, and gaming consoles to stream content, which had to be hot-spotted from Rebecca's mobile device and data, requiring constant monitoring of data usage.

Over the course of our engagement with Rebecca and her family, Rebecca's de facto partner, Chris, became employed. This enabled Rebecca and her children to move in with Chris into a four-bedroom rental property in a nearby suburban estate and access to more resources as a household. Critically for Rebecca, this meant access to unlimited, fixed-line internet with Wi-Fi, enabling more devices to be connected to the internet

simultaneously and less reliance on shared mobile data. Accordingly, all family members could independently use their devices without the risk of expending data and incurring additional costs each month.

With their newfound unlimited access to NBN Wi-Fi, Rebecca's children were able to extend the use of their tablets beyond telehealth to more recreational gaming, such as Roblox and Minecraft, which promoted learning and relationships between the siblings and with their friends. The oldest child also acquired a laptop for schoolwork, which could be connected simultaneously with others' devices to the internet. For Rebecca, the Wi-Fi didn't change her choice of device—her preference to complete essential digital tasks was still via her mobile phone, which she was highly proficient with—however, she expressed that the NBN Wi-Fi completely took the pressure off her needing to monitor data use and her children's competing needs for it.

Rebecca's story highlights the important relationship between housing and digital inclusion across the three dimensions. Moving homes enabled access to reliable broadband and sufficient data (which Rebecca had previously gone without). Regarding affordability, although fixed-line internet is an additional cost to her mobile service, the overall costs per month were not significantly more expensive, as the household's bundled plan cost was fixed (therefore, predictable), and offered better value for money. Regarding digital ability, while the fixed line NBN didn't change her own device use, it did open more possibilities for her children to acquire more diverse digital skills across different devices and life domains—something that Rebecca wanted for her children.



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