



The low-income families digital divide

# Western Sydney Community



Australian Government  
Australian Research Council



## Research Team

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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 Western Sydney 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](http://qut.to/bctvy). For more information on the research project contact the DMRC via the details above.

# Community: Western Sydney

The Western Sydney region is known for its cultural diversity. During the last 20 years, approximately 80% of humanitarian entrants arriving in NSW settled in Western Sydney. We spoke to families living within one suburb that broadly reflects the demographics and socioeconomic experiences of the region.

The suburb is well serviced by public transport, including a train station (with connections into neighbouring suburbs and the central metropolitan area of Sydney) and several bus routes. The suburb has a number of essential services, including a central shopping centre and a small hospital.

Approximately 80% of the population have both parents born overseas. A similar proportion of the population use a language other than English at home (such as Mandarin, Korean, Arabic, and Nepali), and roughly one quarter of the population follow the religion of Islam. Couples with children make up the majority of families but about 14% of families are single parent households, and these are mostly headed by women (83%).

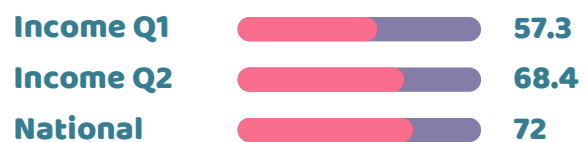
Although more than half of the population are in the labour force, in roughly one third of families both parents were not working. The median weekly family income is approximately \$1,700, which is more than \$400 less than the median family income for the state.

Almost half of the population are renting, with close to 40% making rental payments that are greater than 30% of their household income.

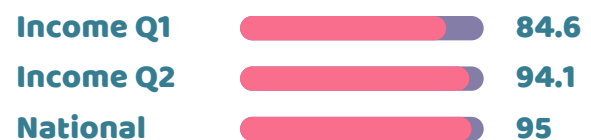


## Australian Digital Inclusion Index Scores for Low-Income Australians (/100)

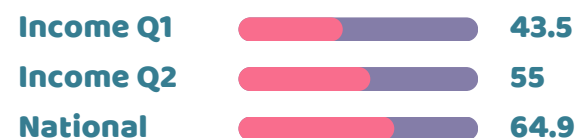
### Access



### 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

A higher proportion of the Western Sydney community have completed Year 12 when compared with the national average. Similarly, a higher proportion have completed an undergraduate degree. However, more than half of the student population in the community are in the bottom socioeconomic quartile.

The technology provision provided by schools during COVID varied massively, even among state schools in the same area. Decisions about which children would be provided with a laptop appeared to be based on what the school could access and their method for identifying and/or prioritising certain students. Many students missed out and were forced to share with siblings or work from mobile phones during this period.

Many of the primary and secondary schools within the community are religious affiliated, with fewer government funded schools, particularly for high school. For several schools, more than 95% of the student population have a language background other than English.

## Community Resources

The local library is a major support service for the community with awareness about social services seemingly low. A community board in the library advertises social services available to the community. Some people in the community go to the library to access free Wi-Fi, to use the computer lab, or to attend a digital literacy class, which are offered in several languages (the most popular being Chinese and Vietnamese) and for different age groups (although mainly seniors). However, COVID disrupted these services which were already constrained by funding and limited resources.

Some staff at the local council believe that digital inclusion needs to be made a priority because it is too costly offering services both online and in person/by phone. Given the diversity of the community's backgrounds, council needs to work hard to build trust as a first step towards getting people to access support services.

### Finished school at Year 10



### Finished Bachelor's degree



### Bottom socioeconomic quartile



# Local Families

The parents from the five families we spent time with in Western Sydney had migrated to Australia between 5 to 20 years ago, with four parents arriving as refugees, three of them with children. Four families were single parent households. The number of children per family ranged from two to seven, and the ages of children living at home ranged from 1 to 24. The children went to different primary and secondary schools within the suburb, with several of the older adult children attending university. A parent in three of the households was employed. Two single mothers who had more recently arrived as refugees were focused on learning to speak English before looking for full time or long-term work.

## Technology in the Home

All five parents had a smartphone as did every child in each household over the age of 13. Each family also had at least one laptop that had been provided to them by The Smith Family (who were the only not-for-profit organisation the families received any direct and ongoing support from). While some households also had access to devices like a desktop computer and a Smart TV, another household was 'device poor', as they only had access to one laptop and one mobile phone for the whole family and were without internet access. All households struggled with maintaining devices. Several homes were unable to connect their laptops to Wi-Fi, whilst one family had difficulty updating essential software which meant their laptop could not be used.

## Connectivity in the Home

Many parents saved up to ensure their children had technology. Three families had shopped around and were on the cheapest broadband package. Other families benefited from having devices gifted or handed down from extended family members. All families had been impacted by unexpected bills or had been charged for plans beyond their means or in ways they had not expected. As an example, one single mother had entered into an unaffordable three year contract with a major telco that was costing her one third of the weekly income she had left after paying rent. She regretted this decision, which was made out of desperation, but felt she had no option but to see out the plan.

## Online Safety

All families experienced regular mobile spam messages and calls, which would often claim to be from government departments. As a result, most families had stopped answering calls from numbers they did not recognise. All parents worried about their children's safety online and wanted to learn more about how they could manage risks. At times, anxieties about safety led parents to restrict technology use in the home.

## Attitudes to Technology

All parents generally felt positive about the role technology played in their children's lives and in society more broadly, but they also felt left behind and fearful of technology or were concerned about financial hardship and security issues associated with technology access. However, all parents were determined their children would not feel left behind in the same way they do. This led parents to make sacrifices, often beyond their means, to secure technology for the home. For four families, the parent's desire to connect with their country of origin, religion, culture, or first language was a strong motivator for and clear benefit to using technology.

# Key Findings

The findings below highlight some of the insights that emerged from our conversations with families and community organisations in the Western Sydney 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](http://qut.to/bctvy).



**Families have increasing anxiety and concerns due to experiencing scams and receiving spam and phishing calls, texts and emails. These security and privacy concerns add extra pressure and stress to parents who are making financial sacrifices to ensure their children are digitally included.**

**The social and digital exclusion families experience is heightened by a lack of language and literacy support, with too little support and consideration given to engage speakers from language backgrounds other than English in digital and social inclusion programs.**

**The Smart TV plays a crucial role in negotiating cultural identity and belonging, allowing families to share cultural entertainment, gain digital media skills and engage in learning together.**

# Gaps in Digital Inclusion in Western Sydney

**X** **There is a lack of targeted digital literacy programs.** Although there is the Tech Savvy program offered regularly for seniors there is no equivalent for parents. Essential community services, such as the library, are often not responding to the current digital media practices/habits of households to shape their digital programs. For instance, the library, schools, local government and NGOs could engage with YouTube as a popular potential channel to broadcast or communicate what social, educational and digital services are available to families in the area.

**X** **Navigating the language challenges in the design and delivery of digital inclusion programs and resources comes at a high price.** Councils, libraries, and NGOs bear the cost of translation. These extra costs are rarely provided by funders/governments. Translation is expensive and/or labour-intensive (e.g., when performed by library or NGO staff who might not have language translation responsibilities as part of their job description).

**X** **There is a lack of awareness about available digital infrastructure and resources.** While students were using library computers and/or printing, they did not seem to be aware of the additional support services, such as homework support and tutoring services, that are also available for free or at low cost within the community. Similarly, no parents were using the library computers and there is not enough being done to connect parents to digital literacy training and support.

**X** **There are too many barriers that prevent low-income families from accessing social services.** Women who wanted to provide social support to their community have been told they need to pay exorbitant and unaffordable fees to use local community spaces. Refugee families are missing out on essential health services because of their visa status. Some state government services, such as the Active Kids vouchers, are insufficient to cover costs and are therefore not being used.



# Solutions for Advancing Digital Inclusion in Western Sydney



**Subsidise home access and ensure every high school student has a laptop and home broadband.** Access to digital devices, particularly home broadband internet, should be provided for free or subsidised to the lowest SEA households.



**Strengthen the provision of tailored digital programs and resources, particularly in diverse languages and targeted toward families.** Translation is costly, time-consuming and needs to be appropriately funded, but there are opportunities to recognise and support people in the community who are able to provide informal translation during small digital inclusion workshops. State schools could be used to deliver targeted family-focused digital inclusion training with informal translation made available through the school community.



**Create greater awareness of available community resources by using communication channels that build on families' existing digital habits.** Council, NGOs, and libraries could consider using platforms such as YouTube to reach people in their homes, in their language (enabling AI translation where no human translation can be provided). Promoting available resources more widely will ensure that community members know about services that already exist. School newsletters may also provide a way to reach parents with information about social services.



**Provide support to people who want to provide community social/digital inclusion opportunities in different languages.** Easy access to financial support and fee waivers for the use of meeting spaces in libraries and council buildings would allow communities to take direct action. Perhaps pair a council support person to provide mentorship in community leadership to community members looking to provide others with support.



**Align digital inclusion support with health support, especially in response to learning difficulties, medical diagnoses, and mental health.** Advocate for all children to be able to access full support to address learning difficulties, with recognition of the various restrictions relating to visa status and prohibitive financial costs. Until there is legislation change connect people with pro bono support.

# Digital Inclusion in the Western Sydney Community: Krishna's Story

**“There are no other options...I have to take two more jobs so that I can pay the bills.”**

Krishna (60) has been a single father to two daughters and one son for more than 10 years. He migrated to Western Sydney more than 30 years ago with his parents and siblings from Fiji. He worked for a cabinet-making company for 17 years which allowed him to purchase a home, however, after the store closed and he was made redundant, he struggled to keep jobs as employers were not willing to be flexible around school and childcare hours. He received unemployment benefits for a year and during this time was supported to do a 6-month part-time TAFE business course; the first time he ever used a computer. This course was transformative and supported him to set up and run his own handyman business and he says these basic skills meant he could engage with his children's education and technology needs.

Krishna's family have a computer in the home that he purchased at the start of COVID to address anticipated school needs (it was highly discounted as it had been a display computer). The children have several laptops on loan from the school or provided by a charity and each member of the home has a smart phone. The family also have unlimited broadband access. Krishna's children are confident and capable with their use of technology, by he repeatedly stressed that the cost of technology was a major hindrance in his life.

**“In this modern life, they [pointing to his children] all have to have their individual mobile phones. Otherwise, you miss out on contact with each other. And you have to have the internet...So, four of us, and three of**

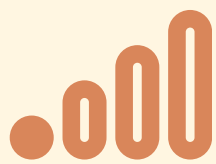
**them in school, you can't have like 100MB or whatever they call it. You have to have a full internet, otherwise you will always cross the limit [data plan]...And then everyone must have their own laptops or their own computers...I cannot go to one [child] and say, 'stop now, she [another child] has to do it [work on a computer] now'.”**

Two of Krishna's teenage children had learnt to troubleshoot and repair technology in the home, but recently his son's Android phone had stopped functioning properly and Krishna was required to find \$400 to purchase a new one. This was essential because his son needed to get the train to school alone, and he felt it was vital his children were able to contact him for safety reasons. Krishna explained:

**“There are no other options for me. Then I have to think, “yeah, I have to take two more jobs so that I can pay the bills'.”**

Krishna did not feel at his stage in life that he would want to attend more computer classes, and would rather stay on top of technology security developments via news stories and from his children. However, he is deeply frustrated by digital scams and would like to learn more about how to stop these intrusions.

**“It just keeps coming. You know you haven't ordered anything, and you should not click on it. And if they call, I just block the number. But they keep coming up with different numbers and all this. I always just see [looking at pretend phone in hand] and 'no, that's not in my contacts. Off you go'.”**



## **The low-income families digital divide**

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publications in the series visit  
[qut.to/bctvy](https://qut.to/bctvy)**

