The low-income families digital divide

Regional Victoria 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

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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: Regional Victoria

The Regional Victoria case study site is a suburban community located within a coastal local government area known for its industrial exports.

The area is experiencing many socioeconomic challenges, including financial and food insecurity.

The region is serviced by bus routes and a central train line. However, the train station is approximately 40 minutes' walk from the commercial centre and no bus routes run solely across the suburb.

The community's only shopping centre serves as the central hub; several essential services, such as medical clinics, are located close to the centre. Other services, like fitness, leisure, religious, and youth organisations, are within walking distance.

The population is quite young (median age of 35). While more than a third (36%) of the families living in the area are couples with children, a large number (30%) are single parents, and these are mainly women (84.6%).

Almost half of the community are in the labour force (49%) working full time (49%) as labourers (21%). Yet, 25% of households have less than $650 total household weekly income.

Crucially, 14% of the community have a mental health condition, such as anxiety or depression.

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

Access

Income Q1	57.3
Income Q2	68.4
National	72

Affordability

Income Q1	84.6
Income Q2	94.1
National	95

Digital Ability

Income Q1	43.5
Income Q2	55
National	64.9

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

Although there are many schools and other education centres in the region (more than 150 kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools in the local government area), accessing support for digital learning is still a challenge.

Many students struggle with accessing appropriate digital supports, such as being able to access devices and affordable internet at home.

A large amount of the student population also identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, which reflects the wider number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander individuals within the community (2.5%).

Finished school at Year 10

Finished Bachelor's degree

Bottom socioeconomic quartile

Community Resources

People in the community have access to several social and community services. Many of these services offer programs which support digital inclusion, including free-to-access computers and digital skills programs at the local library, regional digital strategies and free Wi-Fi in public parks provided by the local council, one-on-one tech support at neighbourhood and community centres, and general learning programs from not-for-profit organisations.

Several people also receive support from a local Indigenous co-op, who help Indigenous community members in all aspects of their lives, including their digital needs. As an example, the co-op often buys or pays for clients' data or purchases devices for them. This sometimes creates challenges for staff at the co-op, as they have to be careful about knowing and sharing their client's personal data, such as passwords or bank details.

Local Families

Five families were involved in our project. Two were single mother families and one was a single father family. Two families were married couples with children, including one that had children and grandchildren living at home. Across the five families, children ranged in age from younger children (less than 6 months) to young adults living at home (25 years old). Most children were in primary school or their first year of high school. Four families had at least one family member who were Indigenous or First Nations. The parents in four families were working. One single parent was using a digital platform to sell artwork while looking for longer term work.

Technology in the Home

Each family had several mobile phones and laptops (often one per family member), as well as several Smart TVs, gaming consoles, and smartwatches. Some families also had digital security devices in response to their experiences of family and domestic violence. For all of the families, broken devices were common. Parents would often give their device to their children while saving up to buy a new device or to get the old device fixed. In one family, the two oldest daughters had learned how to use the accessibility settings on a device so that they could still access websites, listen to music, and play games on it despite it being broken.

Connectivity in the Home

Each family had different ways of making sure they could get access to the digital devices they needed at prices they could afford or that they were comfortable paying. Several families had learned how to shop around for good deals, like good data and device payment plans. Others had bought low-cost devices that could be easily fixed or replaced with cheap parts. Other families shared costs with friends and family members, or had support from community organisations who would give them data or help them buy devices, like if their children had disabilities or learning needs.

Online Safety

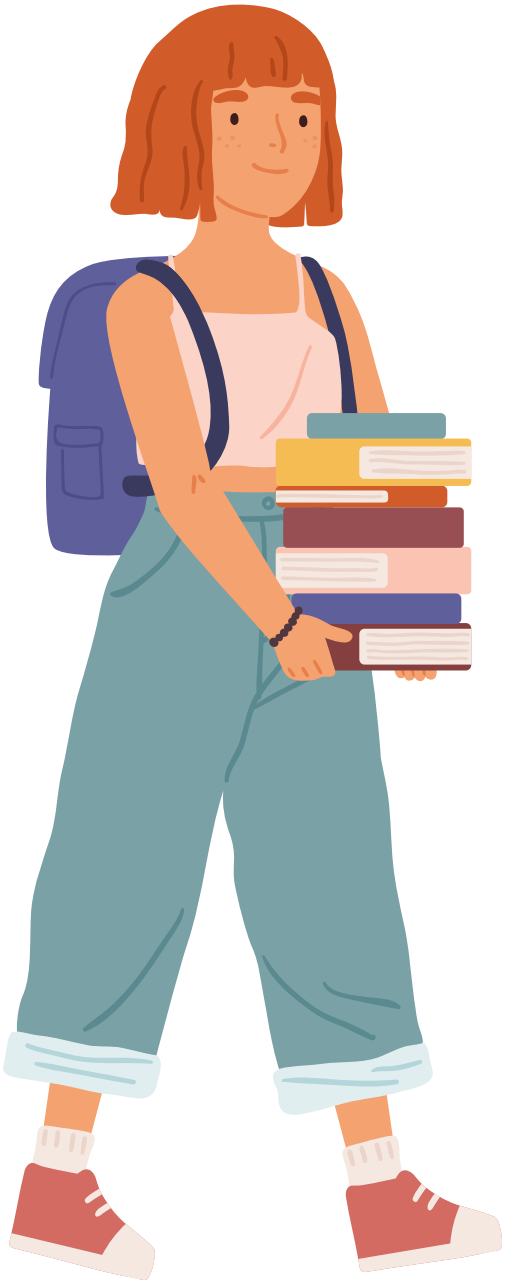
Three families had lost a lot of money through online scams. Several families had rules for their children, like no social media until a certain age or no in app game purchases, to try and stop them from being harmed online. Other families used screen time blocking apps. Many parents said they weren't sure what the 'right rules' were for their children.

Attitudes to Technology

Several parents didn't want to learn digital skills because they had negative experiences like being scammed or abused online. Other parents and university-aged children said that even though they were interested in technology, their work and study environments were not conducive to learning new skills. For instance, some parents spoke about how they weren't required to regularly use technology as part of their job. Similarly, several university-aged children shared how they often found that there was no quiet place for them to study or connect to good, strong internet while at home.

Key Findings

The findings below highlight some of the insights that emerged from our conversations with families and community organisations in the Regional Victoria 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.



Lived experience of financial loss through online scams means families need to be careful about online safety and take security precautions. However, parents' low digital literacies or lack of interest in digital technology limits their ability to know how to prevent future instances of online insecurity or harm.

Opportunities for education and learning for families, especially for older children, is limited by unreliable connectivity or lack of access, including affordability of devices and connections, and services or resources not being available or open.

Digital gaming is a key activity that families use to encourage creative thinking and self-directed digital skill development amongst children, but it deepens the need for greater digital literacies and awareness amongst parents, particularly in terms of cyberbullying, financial purchases, privacy, and social connectedness.

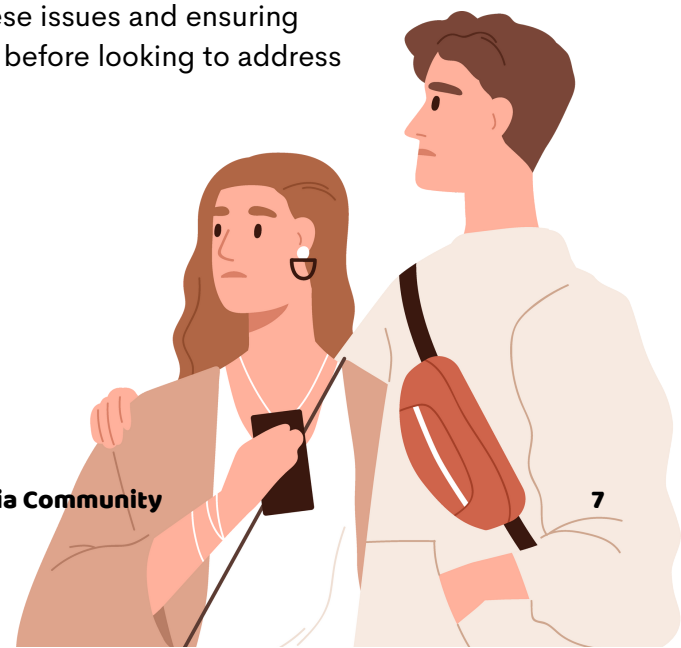
Gaps in Digital Inclusion in Regional Victoria

- **Community members are aware of the services and organisations that can provide social and digital support, but they are often unsure as to which ones they are eligible for or how to access them**. Community organisations are working towards embedding digital inclusion programs or activities (like digital skills training) within their current programs but there are limited dedicated digital inclusion programs (beyond school-based programs and those designed for seniors at the library).

- **Cost is a huge barrier for families to manage and overcome.** Besides the cost of buying a device, families have to spend money to maintain their device (like paying for mobile or home internet data each month or doing an update to the operating software on a mobile phone). Families might also have to spend money and time to learn how to use a device (like going to a digital skills program at the library), but many families can't afford these programs.

- **People don't have a lot of digital skills.** Community members are used to going in to organisations or service providers in person to receive support. After COVID, this has had to shift online, and many community members don't have the skills to be able to complete online tasks. The forced shift to online has meant some people dislike or are unsure about technology, and they don't really want to learn digital skills or use technology. Community members want to connect in person and feel disenchanted by online environments and online opportunities.

- **Other inclusion issues need to be addressed first**. There are high rates of food insecurity and poor mental health within the community. The priority for many organisations is addressing these issues and ensuring safety/security for community members before looking to address digital inclusion.



Solutions for Advancing Digital Inclusion in Regional Victoria

- **Support existing sectoral mapping processes to strengthen cohesion between community organisations, government, and essential service provider offerings.** Building connections between providers will help to avoid double ups and make it clearer to people about how they can access digital inclusion support through the community networks they're already a part of.

- **Strengthen the capacity of community organisations and service providers to embed digital literacy support across all existing programs.** Organisations and providers are already prioritising ways to hook community members into the digital inclusion space through existing interests and needs, like using a sewing app with members of the CALD community who are part of a sewing course at a community centre as a jumping off point.

- **Create additional digital literacy resources and infrastructures that are responsive to the needs (in areas of health, finances, education levels) of the community.** This could include, for example, creating resources that describe how to complete online tasks, such as accessing Centrelink forms, filling out visa applications, and submitting job applications, in Easy English and in languages other than English. These resources can be stored at the library (hard copy and online) and community centres. This recommendation also extends into reviewing and prioritising the renovation or upgrading of community infrastructure, such as the library, to better create community spaces which can support digital inclusion needs, such as study for school work or continuing education (free Wi-Fi, quiet study areas, children's spaces).

- **Addressing data affordability challenges.** Create greater ease of access to long term affordable data plans, such as through reduced eligibility requirements for access to the existing data distribution plans offered by community service organisations. Advocate for more consistent reliable connectivity via home internet (to accommodate the community's desire to access the internet and to be online in their own homes).

Digital Inclusion in the Regional Victoria Community: Ella's Story

"It's okay though because I have other devices at my grandma's house."

Ella is 11 years old and currently lives with her dad, Andy, and her two siblings, Daisy (13) and Louise (9). Andy has sole custody of the three girls. Ella and Daisy have no contact with their mother, but will frequently go to stay with their grandmother, particularly when Andy is away travelling for work.

Ella has access to several different devices at her different family members' houses, which has prompted her to develop complex digital skills that respond to the different household contexts.

When she is at her dad's house, Ella mainly uses her school provided Chromebook laptop to do different digital activities, like using the Google Classroom suite to complete homework, playing online games, Skyping with her friends, and doing online shopping.

As the Chromebook is the most consistently available device for Ella to use when she is at her dad's house, she has taught herself, and learned from friends, how to navigate the school-based restricted access permissions on the laptop so that she can access diverse content, such as entertainment platforms like Amazon Prime and Roblox.

"I don't really know, I searched up how to unblock Netflix and it came up with these things called VPNs...my friend found out how to download like Roblox, Netflix, and all that but she won't show me because she's like 'it's a secret'...I know what she did but it doesn't work anymore because they [the school] found out about it."

When she is at her grandmother's house, Ella mainly uses one of several second-hand mobile phones given to her by extended family members. These devices are damaged with limited functionality, remaining at her grandmother's house while various adult family members save up to be able to fix or replace them with a newer device.

Ella uses the phone to access her social media accounts on Instagram and Snapchat, which she is not allowed to access when she is at her dad's house due to his concerns around online safety and cyberbullying. Ella has taken some of her dad's concerns about privacy onboard; she has set her accounts to private and primarily uses them to connect with her extended family members.

"I put my account on private...and then I have my grandma there...she went into hospital ages ago...she called me so many times through Instagram, or, like, she sometimes calls me through there."

Ella's differential access to digital devices, as well as the varying levels of parental mediation present within each household, creates opportunities for learning that both limit and encourage her growing digital capabilities and independence.

Ella's story emphasises the need to consider the link between parents' digital abilities and approaches to digital inclusion, as well as the impact that other important support structures like schools and access to social networks play in shaping low-income families' experiences of digital technology.

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For more information and more publications in the series visit qut.to/bctvy