



The low-income families digital divide

Greater Hobart Community



Australian Government
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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.

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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: Greater Hobart

The project community is located in the Greater Hobart area which is predominantly urban, with the project site characterised by a significant proportion of low-density public housing.

The community is notoriously underserved by public transport with buses providing only a limited service, leaving residents dependent on cars adding an additional layer of financial stress for residents.

Currently, the area has limited permanent public spaces for socialisation or gathering. Many places within the area lack basic walking paths or lanes for bike riding, making it very difficult for community members to access community infrastructure.

The average weekly earnings of people in the community are low, with rent accounting for more than 30% of expenses for more than a third of renter households.

Single parent households make up 18% of the population and are mainly headed by women (79%).

The case study site is home to many small communities from China, India, Vietnam, and Nepal. However, English is the only language spoken at home by most residents (around 82%).



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

Access

Income Q1	<div style="width: 57.3%;"></div>	57.3
Income Q2	<div style="width: 68.4%;"></div>	68.4
National	<div style="width: 72%;"></div>	72

Affordability

Income Q1	<div style="width: 84.6%;"></div>	84.6
Income Q2	<div style="width: 94.1%;"></div>	94.1
National	<div style="width: 95%;"></div>	95

Digital Ability

Income Q1	<div style="width: 43.5%;"></div>	43.5
Income Q2	<div style="width: 55%;"></div>	55
National	<div style="width: 64.9%;"></div>	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

Education presents a challenge with fewer students graduating from Year 12 compared to the average across Australia and a significant percentage completing only up to Year 10.

The provision by schools of digital devices for the students' own use is patchy and varies from school to school while the switch to online home-based learning during the COVID-19 quarantine lockdowns in 2021 placed additional pressure on families to purchase new digital devices and more data.

The student populations in the schools (primary and high school) are diverse and highly disadvantaged.

Community Resources

Digital inclusion is an emerging, yet challenging priority for several community organisations and social services in the region. The local library offers a range of programs aimed at improving the community's digital capabilities, as well as free access to Wi-Fi and digital tech charging stations. However, there is limited awareness of the services offered by the library, including data and computers, and families attitudes towards the library are mixed.

The not-for-profit organisations in the area supported residents to access to general learning programs, such as those that help with reading, writing, and maths. Another national not-for-profit organisation also provided families in the region with mobile home data dongles. Staff at these organisations assist people to navigate essential online forms and websites, like Centrelink. The local council aims to support digital inclusion in the area by promoting the available programs through a community newsletter and community social media accounts.

Finished school at Year 10



Finished Bachelor's degree



Bottom socioeconomic quartile



Local Families

The six Tasmanian families reflect broadly the demographics of the case study site. Each family comprised a single parent household, with between one and four children. Five households were led by women mirroring the over-representation of women in single parent households in Tasmania and nationally. Each of the six families described themselves as Tasmanian-born with multi-generational ties to the state. One family also identified as having Aboriginal heritage. English was the only language spoken at home across the participant cohort. Four families lived in public or social housing. One family lived in a property previously owned by the state government but subsequently sold to a private landlord. The final family rented a small flat attached to the property of a private landlord. Each parent left school in Year 10 although three of the parents then went on to complete a tertiary (Certificate 3), trade-based qualification.

Technology in the Home

Access is a significant barrier for families. Yet, making sure that their children have access to both data and suitable digital technology at home is a non-negotiable for parents, particularly when children reach school age. Parents are highly aware of the need to ensure that their children enjoy the same digital access and opportunities as their peers. The number and type of devices per household varied significantly; three of the six families were mobile only. For all of the families, including those with other devices, mobile phones were the primary means to access online services/information (including school websites) and communicate (including via social media) with members of their social circle.

Connectivity in the Home

Two households were without a home broadband connection, relying on expensive mobile-only plans as a solution. Three other households struggled to meet the monthly cost of home broadband, while the remaining family shared the costs with their landlord. Having access to the internet was a non-negotiable for every family.

Online Safety

Online safety meant different things to different parents. One family had issues with online scams, and had lost (and recovered) substantial amounts of money. There were also issues with buy-now-pay-later apps. Parenting style, attitude and capacity to regulate children's online activity varied significantly. Some families monitored the online activities of their primary school-aged children and used parental controls to restrict access to digital content. For another family, limiting the child's "digital footprint" (including posting content they may later regret) and minimising the possibility of online bullying while gaming was more of a concern.

Attitudes to Technology

Parents and carers were capable and confident with technology to varying degrees. One parent described herself as "not good with technology" and very reluctant to use social media except for the purpose of promoting her own business. She relied on her brother's advice and help for all things digital. Another family was very skilled in repairing and repurposing technology including creating home security cameras using old mobile phones.

Key Findings

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

There is a shortage of primary health providers, particularly GPs, making it difficult for families to obtain an appointment and increasing reliance on mobile phones to access digital (repeat) scripts. There is also a shortage of specialists, particularly paediatricians, resulting in long waiting lists and requiring families to access mainland specialists via telehealth appointments.



Families are very switched on and proactive when it comes to their children's online safety. Parents work hard to establish and reinforce clear online behaviour rules they think are suitable and relevant for their children, such as rules relating to the non-disclosure of personal and identifying information, or addressing concerns of online bullying while gaming.

Appropriate and affordable housing is a key barrier to digital inclusion. The size and layout of families' houses (such as having an appropriate number of bedrooms) compromises their digital inclusion, influencing things like digital learning and the ability to access telehealth appointments.

Gaps in Digital Inclusion in Greater Hobart

X The traditional opening hours (9am – 5pm) of key community services, such as the library, create barriers to digital inclusion by limiting the access of key groups, including people who work and who need after-hours access. The library is also underutilised by young people and there are other challenges related to engaging the community.

X There is a lack of dedicated, properly resourced digital inclusion programs designed to support all age groups (not just older Australians). Some community-based organisations, like libraries and other community support services, are filling this gap by ensuring staff have dedicated digital inclusion support responsibilities within their existing roles, or through informal digital inclusion support processes like ad hoc tech support.

X Families need access to devices other than mobile phones. This is particularly necessary for filling out forms and important for navigating critical websites like MyGov. Mobile-only families are reliant on community-based service providers for access to other devices like laptops and tablets. Access to affordable, appropriate data is also an issue.

X There is an over reliance by service providers on Facebook as a way of promoting programs. Many services in the area rely on social media, particularly Facebook, to promote their services. This places an additional burden on bricks-and-mortar services like the library who have become something of a clearing house for other, online service providers. As most information from service providers and schools is now communicated via Facebook, parents risk missing out on information, either because the algorithm didn't push the post to the parent's feed or because the information got lost in a crowded feed.



Solutions For Advancing Digital Inclusion in Greater Hobart



Use existing cross-sectoral partnerships to develop and deliver properly funded place-based digital inclusion programs. Tasmania has an existing multi-sector network of organisations who already work closely together on digital inclusion adjacent issues, like 'traditional' literacies, and who support similar cohorts of clients. Organisations like Libraries Tasmania, 26TEN, Neighbourhood Houses, Yourtown, and The Smith Family could provide individuals and families with multiple entry points into a digital inclusion program that provides digital skills training and, crucially, access to devices and data. Similarly, local trade training and registered training organisations should be considered and included in this network as they provide additional potential entry points into a dedicated digital inclusion program.



As part of establishing a dedicated digital inclusion program, a cohort of peer-to-peer, local digital inclusion (paid) mentors should be developed to help deliver training in locations such as the library and local neighbourhood houses. Both organisations already use local peer volunteers to deliver related programs (such as Be Connected) and would be well-placed to support a cohort of digital inclusion peer mentors to support program participants. For the library, having a cohort of diverse (age, gender, socio-economic background) digital inclusion mentors from across the area could have the added benefit of increasing library access and use within the community.



Data and digital devices should be taken to the people. Consider adapting the mobile library concept; taking a van/trailer equipped with books and a librarian into the community to create a mobile digital inclusion space with data and devices for residents to use as way of encouraging people to engage with the library. Additionally, services like free Wi-Fi should be made easily available outside the traditional 9am-5pm hours.



Set up support for further learning. Four of the families within the project were considering further study and qualifications to move back into work. Supporting pathways for further learning would help with access issues and help to build the kind of digital capabilities relevant to changing life circumstances and deliver the kind of bridging processes needed to make a difference.

Digital Inclusion in the Greater Hobart Community: Renee's Story

"It's a necessity to me."

Renee, a single parent, lives with her five year-old son Will. Renee and Will manage disability and health conditions, and after escaping family violence, have settled well in a public housing property. Renee works with service providers to manage her anxiety and depression and is proactive in addressing her and Will's Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Will has also been diagnosed with failure to thrive and developmental delay, and they both receive support through NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme) plans.

Setting up digital systems to improve her and Will's quality of life has been a priority, but at a great cost. Renee paid for the installation of the NBN (National Broadband Network) connection when she first moved into the house seeing it as essential for her safety and security.

Renee applies her digital skills daily - such as adjusting the lighting within the home to create a calm environment for Will and keeping track of medical appointments - but struggles with the cost of investing in the digital technology that meets their needs as well as the cost of internet access. Renee explained the importance of having a smart phone capable of coordinating seamlessly with her other devices and her decision to 'go that extra expense' and purchase an iPhone on a plan:

"An iPhone might be considered a luxury to a lot of people. It's a necessity to me because I understand the interface and I've already got that integration. And it means that looking at information between my phone, my tablet, and my computer works a lot more smoothly."

Because Renee relies on low, means-tested government welfare payments, she adopts

strategies to reduce utility bills during peak periods. She shuts the house when hot and wears extra clothes rather than turning on the heating when cold. Her vegetable garden has been a priority partly to ensure a supply of fresh food. Allocating funds to digital technologies is a highly considered process and in addition to improving her home environment, she prioritises her and Will's health and disability challenges. While she can afford video streaming, this is not just about accessing entertainment.

"For me watching stuff online is me regulating; Will watching stuff online is him regulating; hooking stuff up to the internet system is enabling me to have more functionality in the home."

Renee is a critical thinker who questions her sources of digital information and preferences content creators with lived experience. She thrives in digital communities and applies knowledge gleaned there to develop strategies that enable her to manage her health challenges.

"I also have routines set up. Remembering to take my tablets, remembering to take the bins out, remembering which bins to take out. And it sends the reminder to my watch and my phone."

Support comes mainly from family and via online NDIS participant forums, but also through a not-for-profit organisation and the local neighbourhood house. Renee is passionate about the NDIS doing more to support the digital tools required to enable her and Will's independence and improve their quality of life.



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

