

Town of East Hartford

Digital Equity Survey Results

Executive Summary:

In 2022, the Town of East Hartford was selected to participate in a national learning community led by the Philadelphia Federal Reserve Bank. The program, called *Reinventing Our Communities* (ROC), looks to expand and support economic and workforce development entities, aiming to achieve equity and economic growth. Our local ROC cohort of partners, led by East Hartford Works (EHW) the Municipal Department addressing economic and workforce development and the East Hartford Public Library (EHPL). We decided to focus on digital equity because we know that digital skills and access to technology are important to an individual's full participation in our economy and that lack of digital access and opportunity are contributing barriers to upward economic mobility.

East Hartford is a community of just over 51,000, with the second-highest diversity index in the state of CT (2020 Census). The East Hartford Public Schools are an Alliance District, a state of Connecticut designation for districts with among the lowest accountability index measures in the state. Often, our students are labeled "at-risk," meaning that they experience disparities in access, service use, and outcomes. The data supports this assessment: according to an East Hartford Head Start Community Needs Assessment from 2019, East Hartford households rank higher than the state average in food, housing, and transportation insecurities, with 42% of households being cost-burdened (spending 30% or more of income on housing costs related to rent or mortgage) compared to 36% statewide. The same survey reveals that close to 50% (46.6) of young people age 17 and younger are low-income (less than 200% of the poverty threshold: \$50,200 for a family of four) compared to just under 30% statewide. A recent US News and World Report overview identified our schools as having a 90% minority student enrollment, with almost 16% of students having a primary language that is not English and just over 50% of students being "college-ready." Students in East Hartford face barriers to achievement that include but are not limited to low parental educational attainment, low income levels, unemployment, and unstable immigration status. A less visible barrier to success is a lack of digital access and opportunity.

East Hartford East Hartford Public Library is a valued community resource with two newly renovated branches and a motivated, talented staff of 40 full- and part-time employees. It is also a library of low circulation, but high computer use. It is not surprising that we are behind compared to the rest of the state on computer ownership, device access and broadband infrastructure. Recognizing that digital inequity was a major local issue, in 2021, the library became a Digital Navigator Pilot library with funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services through the Connecticut

State Library. "Get Online" is a comprehensive digital navigation program following the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) model, providing personalized digital skills instruction, devices, and help signing up for home Internet. The program is currently funded through local American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars and will be expanded in 2023 to include a regional Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) outreach initiative funded through a \$250,000 FCC grant. Additionally, the East Hartford Fiber City project is underway, which will bring an open access network to every home and business in town, delivering the fastest home internet in Connecticut at highly competitive rates, broadening competition and choice of carriers (SiFi Networks America, Ltd, 2023).

As a state, Connecticut is behind the curve on digital inclusion work, including community needs assessment. With the Si-Fi initiative and the library's digital navigator program, East Hartford has been a leader. To better understand townwide digital access and opportunity to connect to resources, particularly education and employment supports, our ROC cohort created a survey for town-wide distribution. While we suspected a technology gap existed in our community, in order to better understand and begin to quantify that gap, we needed more knowledge about which devices were available to households and what connection capacity existed. With more complete data about devices we can better identify challenges and undertake solutions to support household access to computers and how to use them. ROC's primary program goal was addressing barriers to racial equity in local economies, so our survey methodology included extensive community outreach. In January and February 2023, our team took several approaches to gathering resident responses: connecting with Adult Learners when registering for classes, connecting with income-limited Jobs First Employment

Services participants and our local American Job Center, distributing both physical surveys and a flier with a QR code directed to the survey throughout high school classes, posting fliers in the public library and on a variety of social media networks. Our survey was anonymous and we let participants know that any data shared would not be associated with any individual identifying information. In two months, a staggering 802 responses were collected. To focus recommendations and action plans on the experience of working aged adults, respondents aged 18-33 form the bulk of the data below.

Definitions:

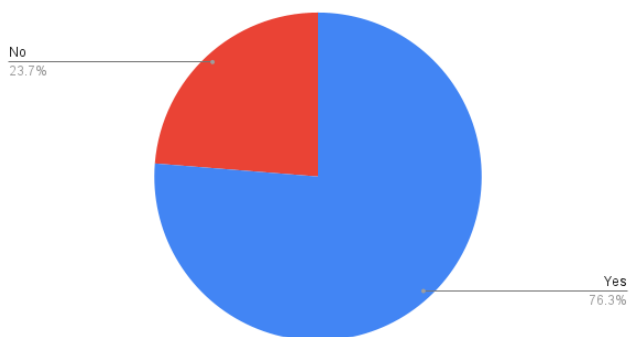
- *Working Age Adults* is defined by this survey as respondents aged 18-33.
- *Cell Phone Only* is defined as access to a cell phone without access to another device.
- *Managed Devices* is defined as a large screen device provided by a school or an employer.
- *Personal Large Screen Device* is defined as access to a personal desktop or personal laptop.

Survey Findings:

Among able bodied working adults in the US, ages 23 – 33 are most commonly associated with establishing a career. In fact, in 2023, the average age of a resident EHW most commonly supports in Career Coaching services is 38.

From our survey, among Working Aged Adults without access to a personal large screen device (i.e. operating on a cell phone only), a majority of respondents (50.8%) have a primary language other than English. State Demographic Data indicate that 22.8% of East Hartford households have a primary language other than English, suggesting that households with a primary language other than English represent a disproportionate amount of Working Aged Adults without access to a personal large screen device. (Migration Policy Institute, 2021). Our survey data also suggests that lack of access to devices disproportionately impacts Hispanic households, as 76.3% of respondents with cell phone only access, self-reported as Hispanic.

Cell Phone Only: Are You of Hispanic/Latino Origin?

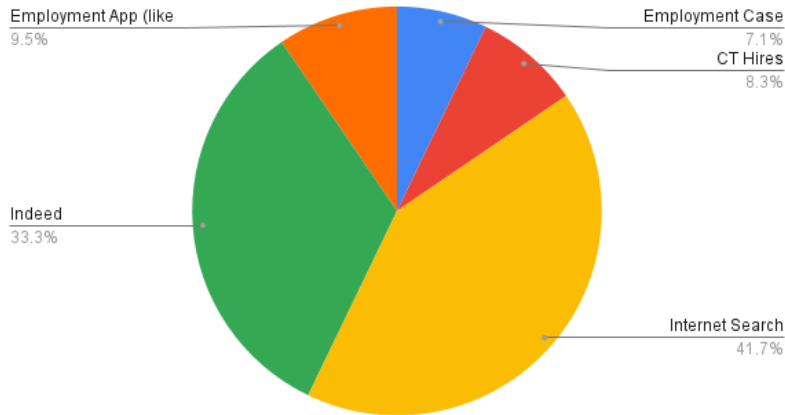


Working Aged Adults Personal Device Details:

Job seekers who did not have access to a large screen personal device struggle to optimize technology appropriately. Employment apps like *Snagajob* are designed for use on small screen mobile devices, yet we saw only 9.5% of these respondents use any specific employment app for

job seeking. Internet searches and websites like Indeed.com are designed for use on a large screen device. Here, we saw job-seeking strategies better suited for large screen devices being accessed on mobile devices: 42% of survey respondents with only a cell phone indicate that they use a generic internet search, with 33% indicating using Indeed. Around 8% of respondents or less, with only a cell phone, actually utilize case workers or the state supported workforce development website, CT Hires.

Cell Phone Only-Where do you Find Job Information?

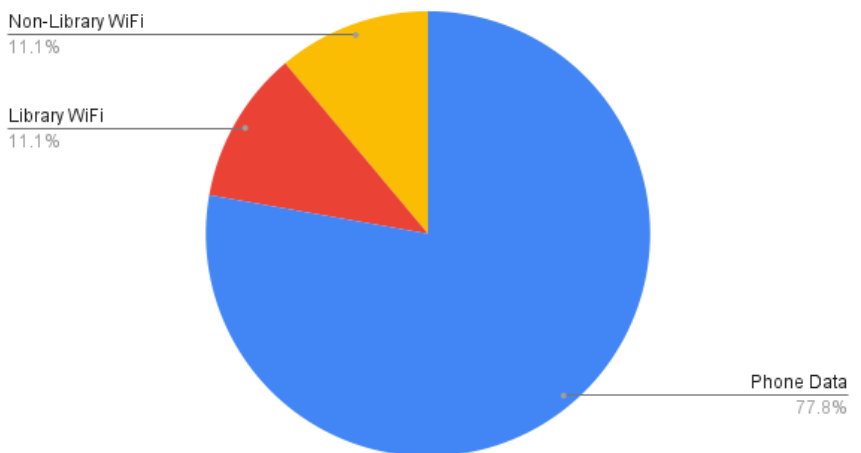


Based on reported behaviors, we see job seekers without access to a personal large screen device not using optimal strategies available to them, emphasizing the need for one-on-one instruction in technology use and improved access to large screen devices.

78% of respondents without personal large screen devices also reported accessing the internet primarily through their cell phone data plans. Many ‘unlimited’ data plans slow down when a user approaches a predetermined limit or degrade in performance during peak usage times, severely impacting both a job searcher’s ability to access information when they are able to and creating a homework gap (difficulty getting online to complete school assignments). These differences in access disproportionately affect Black and Brown households, impacting students and workers in these homes at higher levels than their White counterparts. (Schaeffer, 2021)

Though website encryption provides a greater level of security now than it did previously, users who rely on their cell phone in lieu of a large screen device put their personal data at greater risk when they access the Internet through open WiFi networks.

Cell Phone Only: Where Do You Access Internet?



Finally, creating and maintaining a resume using only a mobile device requires a high level of skill and is likely to leave users unable to tailor their resume to each job they are applying to.

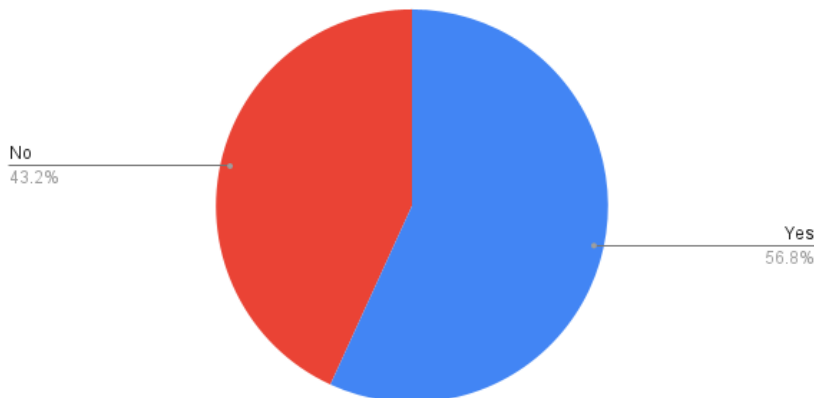
In our high school age respondents (age 14-17) we found 32.2% were without a personal large screen device, so had access to a cell phone only or had access to a managed large screen device through their school. Of this 32.2%, 56.8% identified as being of Hispanic/Latino origin. Our data suggests that in any given grade at our public high school, roughly one third of students in any grade will not have access to a personal large screen device.

Our survey illuminated another trend: as respondents age, they are more likely to report their race as White and are more likely to report having access to a personal large screen device. 77.8% of respondents aged 46-60 reported their race as White and 78.5% of survey respondents aged 46-60 report having access to a personal large screen device.

Implications:

We know that individuals in device-deficient households experience disparities in accessing education and employment. Research tells us 74% of US adults use a computer at work and 81% of US Adults use a computer in everyday life (US Department of Education). In 2019, a survey conducted by Adobe found 57 percent of executives valued soft digital skills as much of a need as common “hard” skills. As artificial intelligence, automation, and remote work fundamentally transform our labor market, technology access and ability impacts employees and potential workers in virtually all sectors and occupations. Yet, research shows that nearly 32 million Americans struggle to use a computer (Mamedova et al., n.d.), and half of all Americans say they are not confident in using technology to learn (DigitalUS, 2020). Moreover, many adult education instructors have not been trained in best practices to offer digital literacy instruction. This digital divide threatens to impede economic recovery efforts, as

High School Students without Access to a Personal Large Screen Device: Are you of Hispanic/Latino Origin?



more than 8 in 10 mid-level jobs require digital skills (Digital Resilience in the American Workforce (DRAW), 2021). Further, persistent gaps in access to technology and opportunities to develop digital skills exacerbate societal disparities, disproportionately

impacting Black learners and workers and other people of color (Bergson, 2020). A 2020 study from Deutsche Bank showed Black and Hispanic Americans were experiencing a “racial tech gap”, particularly in urban areas, that was threatening positive gains in both employment and wealth (in a digitized economy). This data, presented at the national level, is echoed in our findings as well, where participants identifying as Hispanic report lower levels of internet access and device ownership.

Monster.com notes that African-Americans and women are the heaviest users of mobile technology (small screen devices), but finds that many businesses are still not on the mobile-friendly bandwagon for recruitment, justifying they’ll only miss out on a few millennials. *Monster* acknowledges what we often see in East Hartford: talent access and workforce diversity suffer, due to the inability of many businesses to connect with users who have varying digital skills and access.

Conclusions:

Our data supports the development of a cohesive, transparent plan including multi-lingual outreach, targeted device distribution, and digital skills training for those with the greatest need. Digital inclusion is a spectrum, with broadband connection and device access being only the beginning; workers require support and ongoing instruction to gain digital resiliency, make the most of their potential, and become highly valued employees in an organization. These findings may be of particular interest to employers, looking to recruit and hire a truly diverse workforce. Regardless of role in the digital economy, there are concrete steps that can be taken by individuals, employers and community anchor institutions to lessen the impact of the digital divide on the American workforce.

- Public libraries and other community anchor institutions can adopt the Digital Navigator model (National Digital Inclusion Alliance, 2022), and prepare to offer instruction to job seekers at all levels of their career.
- Employers can offer applications in multiple languages, view their job application on a mobile device to ensure accessibility and position their technology for re-use.
- Adult Educators can incorporate digital literacy training into their curriculum.
- Job Seekers can contact regional workforce boards to understand what free computer classes are available.
- Career Services Organizations or Community Organizations offering career service support can provide access to computers and digital literacy instruction for job seekers.

Our local survey supports findings at the national level, and we hope future projects will continue to deepen and enrich our understanding of how to best serve our community.

As systemic changes occur on the federal and state level through seeing the internet as infrastructure as well as the roll-out of the Digital Equity Act (DEA) and Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Act (BEAD) we are at a unique moment where effective advocacy and meaningful local efforts can lead to significant change: advancing digital equity and intentionally upskilling the workforce of tomorrow.

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