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Lingering Inequalities in the Information Age: An Examination of Disparities in Internet Access Among People with Disabilities

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Key Words: Internet Access, Disability, Race, Ethnicity, Gender

Background

The internet and related digital technologies have become a life essential by providing people with access to government services, employment opportunities, and healthcare information, among others. This current era, dubbed the "Information Age", was championed as a great equalizer in ensuring that people, regardless of their disabilities, would be able to access resources that were otherwise unavailable due to structural barriers[1].

However, realizing this vision continues to be challenging for many, especially among people with disabilities, who face obstacles such as lack of affordability and lack of accessible features on the internet[1]. These disparities may be even more pronounced among people with disabilities who have other marginalized identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, and gender). Furthermore, these disparities persist in a legal environment, where people with disabilities have separate but unequal access to the internet because legislation often does not require the incorporation of universal design principles (i.e., accessible to all people regardless of age, disability, and other characteristics) for all digital technologies but instead opts to retrofit existing digital technologies with accessibility features upon request[2].

Key Takeaways

- People with disabilities reported lower rates of internet access compared to people without disabilities
- Non-Hispanic Black and American Indian or Alaska Native people with disabilities reported the lowest rates of internet access, highlighting the impact of intersectionality
- People with disabilities use the internet for fewer work-, daily-, and health-related activities
- Policy changes are needed to increase internet access among people with disabilities in the Southeast region, such as universal design legislation for digital technologies and free to low-cost Internet plans

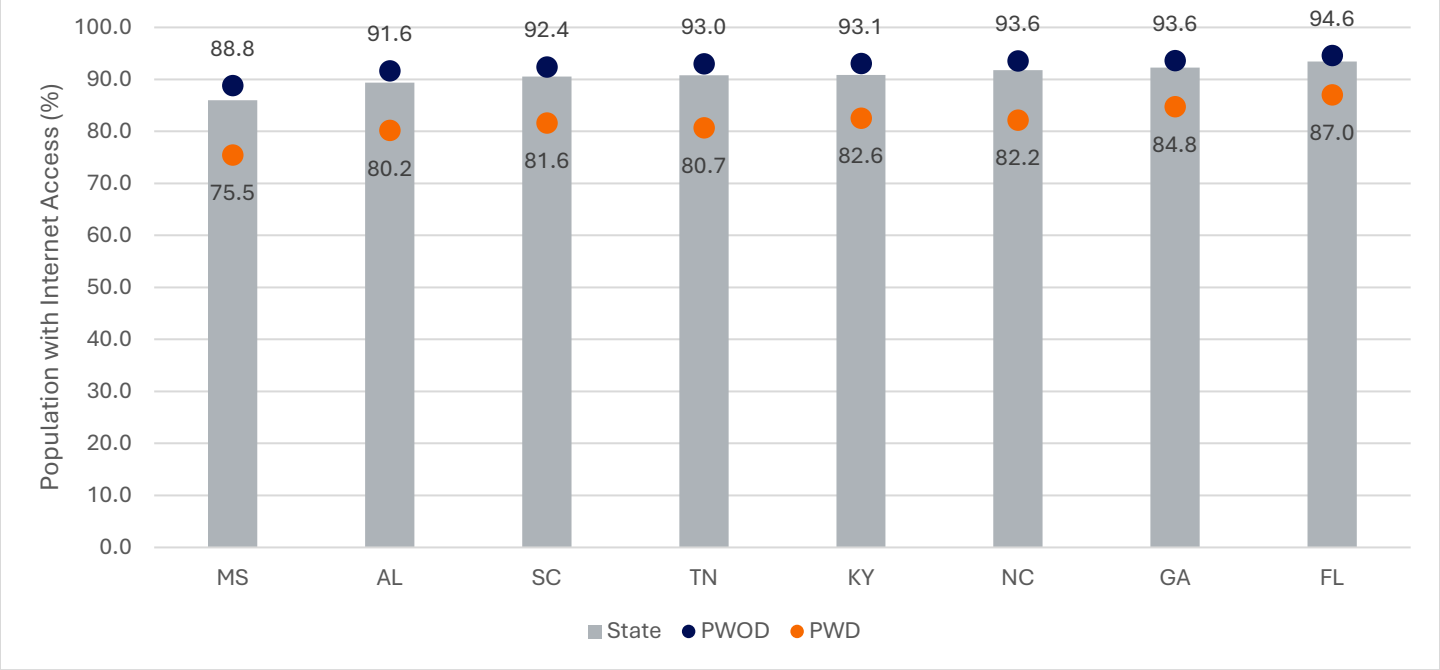
Multiple studies note that people with disabilities are significantly less likely to have internet access relative to people without disabilities [3–6]. Although there remains a lack of research adopting an intersectional framework that explores internet access among people with disabilities, prior research on the United States' general population suggests that racial/ethnic disparities exist [7]. Specifically, Black and Hispanic people tend to have lower rates of internet access relative to Whites and a greater reliance on internet access via mobile devices and public computers [7,8].

This brief summarizes findings from our recent research using data from the American Community Survey (2018-2022) and the National Telecommunication and Information Administration Survey 2023 examining internet access. The findings are focused on eight United States (U.S.) states served by the Southeast ADA Center: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Internet access disparities between people with disabilities and people without disabilities

Figure 1 shows differences in internet access between people with disabilities and people without disabilities in the Southeast region by state. Regardless of state, we observe significantly lower rates of internet access among people with disabilities compared to people without disabilities. These results are consistent with previous research noting internet access disparities between these two populations[1,4,6]. Furthermore, internet access may also be impacted by lack of accessible, affordable digital technologies necessary for accessing the internet coupled with webpages that are often inaccessible[9,10].

FIGURE 1: Internet access by disability status and state in Southeast region, ages 18 and older



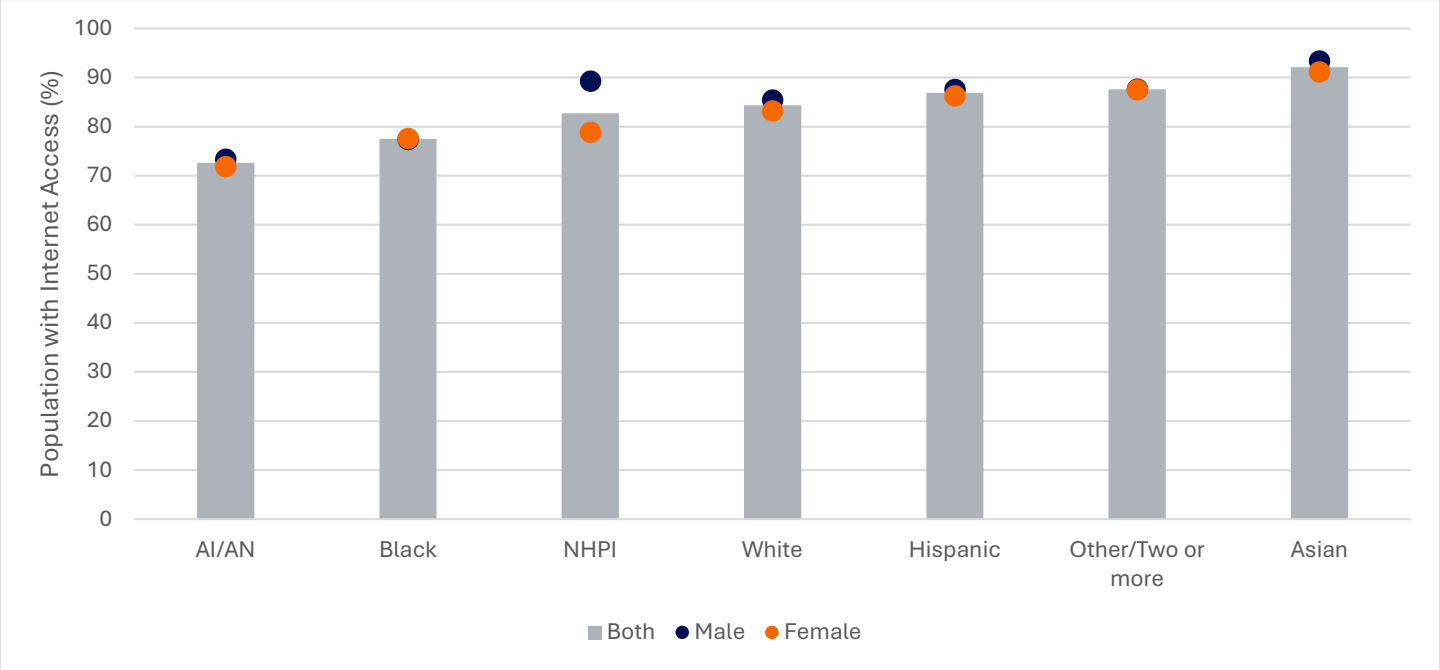
Data Source: For comparison, state internet access rates for the overall population are also included. Data Source: 2018-2022 American Community Survey.

Intersecting identities deepen internet access disparities

Figure 2 shows differences in internet access among adults with disabilities in the Southeast region based on race, ethnicity, and gender. In this figure, we adopt intersectionality as a framework and consider the role of barriers experienced because of one's disability and race as well as the unique challenges resulting from their intersection. Compared to other racial/ethnic groups, Black and American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN) reported the lowest rates of internet access in the Southeast region. Notably, Internet access rates were roughly similar among White, Hispanic, and Other Races, while Asian people reported the highest rates of internet access. These results highlight the importance of considering intersectionality [11] as it emphasizes the unique barriers faced by marginalized populations such as AI/AN and Black people with disabilities that lead to

disparities in Internet access.

FIGURE 2: Internet access by race, ethnicity, and gender for people with disabilities in the SE Region



Data Source: 2018-2022 American Community Survey.

Modeling the impact of disability, gender, and race

To further explore how different characteristics relate to internet access, we analyze how disability, gender, and race impact the probability of having access to internet relative to a base group defined as White men without disabilities. Table 1 presents our results. Among individuals without disabilities, American Indian and Alaska Native men have the lowest probability of having Internet access relative to White men, with a 6.3 percentage point lower probability. Similarly, it is American Indian and Alaska Native women who have the lowest probability of having access to internet among women without disabilities.

The pattern for men repeats among those with disabilities, indicating that American Indian and Alaska Native men with disabilities have an 8.4 percentage point lower probability of having access to internet relative to White men without disabilities. Among women with disabilities, we observe the largest impact of race on the probability of accessing internet among Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women.

Table 1: Marginal effects on the probability of having internet access (%) relative to White men without disabilities

Data source: 2018-2022 American Community Survey.

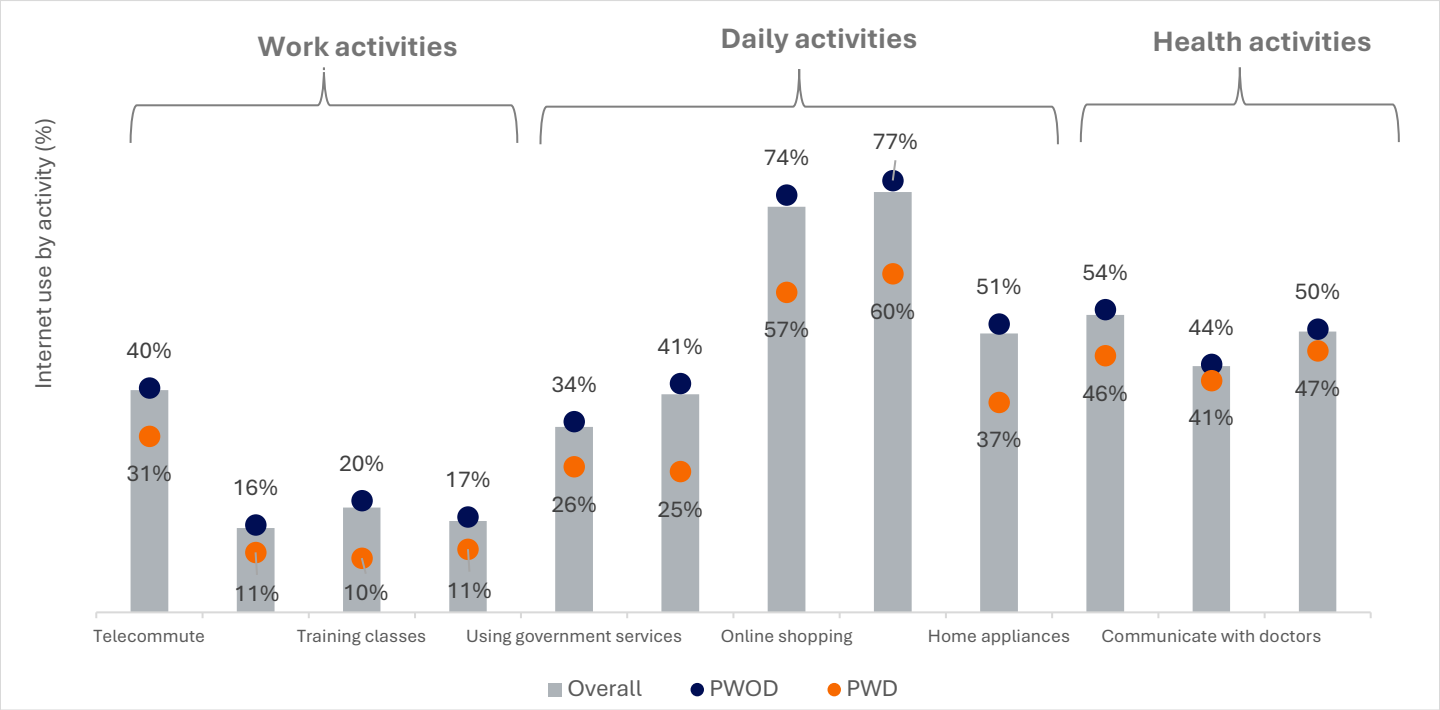
Internet Access	Without disabilities		With disabilities	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Race and Ethnicity				
White		0.2	-2.2	-1.5
Black	-3.0	-2.5	-5.5	-4.0
AIAN	-6.3	-5.0	-8.4	-8.1
Asian	1.8	1.7	0.6	0.1
NHPI	-2.1	-2.6	-1.6	-8.4
Other/Two or more	0.3	0.0	-2.2	-1.1
Hispanic	-1.7	-0.7	-1.0	-0.5

Differences in internet use by activity type

In addition to disparities in access, people with disabilities report less frequent use of the internet across a range of everyday activities. Using data from the 2023 NTIA survey, we examined how individuals engage with digital technologies in work, daily life, and health-related domains. The analysis reveals consistent gaps in digital participation between people with and without disabilities.

In the realm of employment, individuals with disabilities are significantly less likely to use the internet for telecommuting, applying for jobs, or participating in training and certification programs. The largest gap is in using the internet to participate in training and certification programs. They are also less likely to engage in online commerce, government transactions, or home automation activities. The largest gap in the use of the internet for daily activities is in accessing online banking and online shopping. Perhaps most concerning are the disparities in health-related internet use: people with disabilities are less likely to access electronic health records, communicate with healthcare providers, and search for health-related information online.

FIGURE 3: Internet use by activity in the SE region, ages 18 and older



Data Source: For comparison, internet use rates for the overall population in the SE region are also included. 2023 National Telecommunications and Information Administration survey data

Improving internet access for people with disabilities requires policy changes

Our results show that people with disabilities, and especially those who are multiply marginalized, are less likely to report having access to the internet compared to people without disabilities. At the same time, they are less likely to use the internet for everyday activities related to work and health. These findings highlight the importance of developing policies that foster internet access (e.g., free to low-cost plans) and universal design for digital technologies, especially among populations that have multiple marginalized identities. This requires understanding that people with disabilities face unique barriers to Internet access that are only amplified by coupling it with experiences of racism and sexism. Given that people with disabilities have a lower employment rate relative to the general population, greater efforts need to be made to ensure that they have internet access despite socioeconomic inequalities. Addressing this disparity is paramount because the internet has become an essential utility that is used to access a wide array of information, services, employment opportunities, and many other necessities.

Policy recommendations

In recent years, many services have been moved online, and people increasingly rely on websites for all aspects of daily life. Several U.S. government agencies have addressed issues arising from this growing reliance on the internet.

U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ): The DOJ views inaccessible websites as a barrier comparable to physical obstacles, denying people with disabilities equal access. Since 1996, it has held that the ADA applies to web content and, by February 2020, had entered into 175 settlement agreements addressing information and communication technology accessibility[13]. On April 24, 2024, the DOJ issued a final rule requiring state and

local government websites and apps to meet WCAG AA standards under Title II of the ADA, ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities[14].

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS): On April 26, 2024, HHS issued a final rule under Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act to strengthen protections against discrimination in health care, including addressing bias in health technology and improving physical and digital accessibility[15].

U.S. Access Board: In January 2017, the Access Board published a final rule requiring websites funded by federal agencies to be accessible to people with disabilities. These accessibility requirements are mandated by Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

In line with these regulations, the DOJ settlement agreements, ADA Title II regulations, the HHS' final rule under Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act outline several practical steps that can be taken when addressing website accessibility for all people.

1. Set a specific technical standard that state and local governments must follow to meet their existing obligations under Title II of the ADA for web and mobile app accessibility[13].
2. State and local governments' web content and mobile apps usually need to meet WCAG 2.1, Level AA[13].
3. State and local governments' mobile apps usually need to meet WCAG 2.1, Level AA[13].
4. Establish, implement, and post online a policy that web pages will be accessible and create a process for implementation[14].
5. Ensure that all new and modified web pages and content are accessible[14].
6. Develop and implement a plan for making existing web content more accessible[14].
7. Provide a way for online visitors to request accessible information or services by posting a telephone number or e-mail address on the home page[14].
8. Enlist people with disabilities to test pages for ease of use on an annual basis[14].

Data and methods

This research used the 2018-2022 American Community Survey data, which measures internet access by asking respondents, "At this house, apartment, or mobile home – do you or any member of this household have access to the Internet?": (1) Yes, by paying a cell phone company or Internet service provider; (2) Yes, without paying a cell phone company or Internet service provider; (3) No access to the Internet at this house, apartment, or mobile home. This research also used the 2023 National Telecommunications and Information Administration Survey (NTIA) – a national survey of Internet use in the United States.

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The mission of the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University is to advance the civic, economic, and social participation of people with disabilities through research, policy, and outreach. Learn more at bbi.syr.edu.