



The Impact of Digital Divide on Immigrant Communities in the US
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Abstract

In the current digital era, significant gaps in internet access and involvement still exist in the United States among immigrant populations, especially those of Latin and African descent. These groups encounter difficulties in the areas of work, education, healthcare, and social interaction as a result of socioeconomic disadvantages, poor digital literacy, and language hurdles. These immigrant groups face substantial barriers that prevent them from thriving in a digital society, despite the broad availability of technology to most Americans. The underlying causes of these difficulties are not particular to any one group of immigrants, but rather are a reflection of larger structural problems that affect the entire immigrant community collectively. Targeted interventions that address these common barriers to bridge the digital divide and promote a more inclusive and equitable society for all should be taken.

Introduction

In an increasingly digital world, where over 97.1% of Americans have used the internet (Forbes, 2024), significant disparities still exist in digital access and participation among immigrant communities. Despite the widespread availability of technology, Latin American and African immigrants in the United States face significant barriers in accessing digital resources, which impacts their employment, education, healthcare, and social engagement. These challenges highlight a growing digital divide that perpetuates social inequalities and limits opportunities for these communities. This paper examines the differences between Latino and African immigrants within the digital divide within four different aspects (employment, education, healthcare, and social inequalities), then attempts to find the root cause of the hardship for both groups.

Employment

Due to restricted access to technology and limited digital literacy, immigrants from Latin America and Africa confront significant job obstacles in the United States. Firstly, their inability to participate in online training programs and job applications, which are essential for adjusting to the demands of the American labor market, is hampered by their limited internet connection and lack of digital literacy. For example, compared to the 74% of the U.S. population as a whole, only about 45% of immigrants from Latin America utilized the internet to look for work (Gonzales, 2017). Additionally, both groups' access to better employment options is restricted by the fact that they frequently hold low-paying positions without access to training in digital skills. Compared to 60% of the general population, just 35% of African immigrants have access to online job training programs, making their situation even more difficult (Ghanem, 2020). As a result, immigrants from Latin America and Africa are under a significant employment disadvantage to the same degree.

Education

Immigrants from Latin America and Africa have considerable obstacles in their educational pursuits, mostly because of differences in digital availability and navigating the complex education system in the US. Firstly, a significant obstacle to academic performance is that 40% of African immigrant children and 35% of Latin American immigrant children do not have access to a computer at home (NLC; Batalova, 2022). Secondly, the student-to-computer ratio in schools with a large Latin American immigrant population is 10:1, which is double the national average of 5:1, aggravating their disadvantages in school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Moreover, African and Latino immigrants typically emigrate from countries where the education system is structured much differently (e.g. standardized testing, pathways to higher education, and special education services). The above suggest Latino and African immigrants share the same types of hardships and to approximately the same degree in their pursuits for better and higher education.

Healthcare

Due to their limited access to technology, lack of digital literacy, and language barrier, immigrants from Latin America and Africa encounter considerable challenges while trying to obtain social services and healthcare in the United States. Firstly, contrary to 40% of non-immigrants, just 25% of Latin American immigrants have used telehealth services, indicating a significant gap (Lara, 2023). Similarly, just 20% of immigrants from Africa reported using telehealth services (Levine, 2022). Both groups are unable to adequately obtain and use vital online healthcare services and health information due to limited digital literacy and access. For example, during COVID-19, telehealth was crucial for people to access medical care safely from home, reducing the risk of virus exposure. Immigrants from Latin America and Africa had an increased risk of exposure to the virus due to a less dependency on telehealth. Other obstacles for immigrants include poor digital resources and linguistic roadblocks, which impede their capacity to efficiently navigate social assistance systems. Specifically, language problems and a lack of digital skills prevent over 30% of immigrants from Latin America and 35% of immigrants from Africa from receiving social services online (Liévano, 2023; Batalova, 2022). Important social services for immigrants would be government-aided physical and mental healthcare, and if these immigrant groups are shut out of the online aspects of these services, they could lose access to them altogether. Consequently, these interrelated problems suggest Latino and African Americans face similar difficulties to the same degree under the healthcare system in America.

Social Inequalities

Significant social injustices and lack of digital community engagement are faced by African and Latino immigrants in the United States, and these issues are frequently made worse

by restricted access to technology. Firstly, nearly 50% of Latin American immigrants report experiencing prejudice on online job applications (Van Hook, 2019). Similarly, over 45% of African immigrants encounter digital profiling and racism on online platforms (Levine, 2022). This can include targeted online harassment or bias in algorithmic content moderation. Second of all, only 40% of Latin American immigrants use social media for activism and community engagement compared to the 65% participation rate of the U.S. population as a whole (Gonzales, 2017). Furthermore, this percentage falls to 30% for African immigrants, indicating even more disengagement (Ghanem, 2020). The compounded effect of limited digital engagement and discrimination can leave these communities further marginalized in the digital era. These difficulties emphasize the similarity of issues that immigrant groups from Africa and Latin America face in terms of social prejudice and community engagement in a digital environment.

Analysis

The four main points above illustrate how both Latin and African immigrants face challenges in the digital divide. Comparing the two, both seem to suffer to the same degree in the American job market, education system, healthcare, and social prejudice. So perhaps the cause of hardships isn't unique to certain immigrant groups and is attributed to something else entirely. So what is the root cause of the digital divide in these immigrant groups? Noticeable patterns like limited digital literacy, language obstacles, and socioeconomic hardships affect both Latin and African immigrant groups. This paints a picture that it could be a common thread for the rest of the immigration population.

As discussed above, limited digital literacy, language obstacles, and socioeconomic hardships combine to create the digital divide in immigrant communities in general. Lower income levels are one socioeconomic element that can limit access to digital devices and internet services. In 2021, the median wealth of immigrant households was \$104,400, significantly lower than the \$177,200 median wealth of U.S.-born households (Pew Research Center, 2021). Language obstacles are another important factor that exacerbates the digital divide for immigrants in general. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 47% of immigrants reported their English is less than very well, which makes it challenging to use digital platforms where the majority of content is in English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Yet another hardship for immigrants is that they are under greater disadvantage in digital skills than the general population. Reports showed that 33% of immigrant workers have no digital skill and 29% have limited skills (PIAAC, 2014). With that being said, employers have said that 92% of jobs now require some sort of digital skill (NSC, 2023). These three factors compound and keep immigrant groups further behind in the digital divide.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a larger problem of institutional impediments that impact immigrant populations overall, which is revealed by the digital divide among African and Latino immigrants in the United States. Due in large part to low levels of digital literacy, language obstacles, and socioeconomic disadvantages, these groups experience comparable difficulties in the areas of employment, education, healthcare, and social participation. These barriers not only make it difficult for them to prosper in a digital world, but they also keep social injustices alive. Given the parallels between African and Latino immigrants' experiences, it seems likely that more general structural problems affecting immigrant communities rather than particular racial or ethnic groupings are the true cause of these hardships. Targeted interventions that take into account these common obstacles are necessary to address the digital gap, making sure immigrant groups are able to take full advantage of and engage in the digital world. In order to close the gap and build a more inclusive and equitable society for all, we must overcome language and socioeconomic obstacles, improve access to digital resources, and improve digital literacy to all.

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