



Digital poverty: what still needs to happen

A Parent Zone Report – June 2021

Introduction

When lockdown was imposed in March 2020, some families were able to adapt easily; others faced significant obstacles. As children became suddenly dependent on digital technology for education and play, the penalties suffered by those who are excluded, or partially excluded, from the online world were thrown into sharp relief.

Schools moved online, some quickly, some slower, meaning that education, previously free in the UK, became something families had to afford. At the start of the first lockdown, only 5% of teachers in state schools said all their pupils had access to an appropriate device for online learning.¹

The government's laptop scheme delivered more than 800,000 devices to children; it was supplemented by initiatives from national and local government, technology companies and business, philanthropy, charities, and community organisations. It soon became apparent, however, that laptops were of little use without the connectivity to support them.

A significant proportion of families are reliant on mobile data to access the internet; our research at Parent Zone found that 11% of parents or guardians said the internet service or connection they had at home was inadequate to their needs. Oak National Academy led a successful campaign for their site and some other educational sites, such as BBC Bitesize, to be zero-rated for data.

There have been various attempts to assess the scale of digital poverty over the past year² and there is now more data. There remains no agreed definition of digital poverty, however, probably because it turns out to be less simple than it looks.

At Parent Zone, we have always believed that all families should have the opportunity to use digital technologies fully. We wanted to contribute to the discussions about digital poverty: in 2021 we commissioned Ipsos Mori to conduct research on our behalf.³

Talking to parents, we found widespread usage of digital tech, reflecting the ONS data that 'nearly 100%' are 'online.'⁴ Significant differences remain, however. These are partly differences of access to hardware; partly of different families' freedom and ability to connect; and partly of skills, including wider life skills.

To counter digital poverty effectively, we need to address all of these aspects, because being online is no longer a nice-to-have addition to family life; in many respects it *is* contemporary life.

¹ Montacute and Cullinane: Learning in Lockdown, Sutton Trust.

² See for example Lucas, Robinson & Treacy: [What is Data Poverty?](#) Nesta and YLab; and Ayllon, Holmarsdottir & Lado: [Digitally Deprived Children in Europe](#). Digigen; the survey developed by Onelaptop.org which schools complete with families; and Good Things Foundation and Carnegie Trust

³ A telephone survey among a representative sample of 468 parents or legal guardians of children aged 17 or under across Great Britain.

⁴ 96% British households have access to the internet: [Internet access – households and individuals, Great Britain: 2020](#)

The stats

We found that almost all families went online at least once a day. (99% of parents or guardians personally use the internet at least once a day). But their experiences differed significantly.

Lower social grade families** had fewer devices, older devices, and reported more educational setbacks to children.



11% of parents or guardians in social grades **C2DE** had no computer at home (desktop/laptop/netbook) compared to only **2%** in social grades **ABC1**.



27% of **C2DE** parents* said that since the first Covid-19 national lockdown started in March last year, a child in their household missed out on some of their education because they did not have an appropriate device to work on, compared to **8%** of **ABC1** parents.



66% of parents in **ABC1** households claim their household purchased a new device (computer, tablet or smartphone) since lockdown started in March 2020, compared to **48%** from **C2DE** households.



Since the first Covid-19 lockdown started, **10%** of parents from **C2DE** households claim their household went into debt (or overdraft) to pay for a device to connect to the internet, compared to **3%** from **ABC1** households.



* 'parents' in all these stats is shorthand for parents and guardians of children aged 17 or under in their household

** These social grades are based on the definitions used by the UK Institute of Practitioners in Advertising and derived from the occupation of the chief income earner:

- A:** higher managerial, administrative and professional
- B:** intermediate managerial, administrative and professional
- C1:** supervisory clerical, junior managerial
- C2:** skilled manual
- D:** semi-skilled, unskilled manual
- E:** state pensioners, casual workers, unemployed on state benefits



Since the first Covid-19 lockdown started, **8%** of parents from **C2DE** households went into debt (or overdraft) to pay for internet access, compared to **2%** from **ABC1** households



One quarter of households with five or more people (including one or more children) claimed to have no or only one computer (desktop, laptop, netbook) with **4%** having none at all and **21%** having just one computer.

Less of a divide, more of a fraying

The ‘digital divide’ is not simply a matter of being online or not, but of gradations. Not all devices are the same: a five-year-old laptop is likely to be much slower and less responsive than a new top-of-the-range model. Our research suggested that parents in **C2DE** households and parents who have a secondary-school level education were less likely to have bought a new device during lockdown.⁵ **C2DE** households were more likely to have gone into debt, or overdraft, to pay for devices or internet access.⁶

Lloyds Consumer Digital Index estimates that lower income groups with poor digital literacy spend £720 more a year going online than those with high digital engagement.⁷ There is a big difference between having a broadband package with 24-hour access to data and relying on expensive pay-as-you-go mobile data but there is currently no reliable research into how many people are limiting their time online because of issues of cost and access.

It seems likely that, rather than being altogether excluded, some households find it harder and more expensive to be online. That disadvantage tends to overlap with and amplify existing divides. As Helen Milner of Good Things UK has put it: *“In the UK there are nine million adults who are digitally excluded. It’s massively aligned with poverty and income levels. There’s also a north/south divide, so in the southeast of England 49% of adults are what’s called extensive internet users, but in the northeast that goes down to 18%.”*⁸

⁵ 66% ABC1 versus 48% C2DE; 70% degree or higher versus 50% with secondary school level qualifications.

⁶ 10% to pay for devices; 8% for internet access.

⁷ [Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020](#)

⁸ [Bridging the gap: 5 takeaways on digital poverty](#)

A continuum of skills

In the past, online skills have often been narrowly defined: the ability to set up an email account, for example, or upload files, or use a search engine. Our research found that most adults had mastered these levels of skill.⁹

What people are actually able and willing to do when they're online, however, is also affected by what they are able and willing to do offline. Social, cultural and personal disadvantages rooted in economics, gender, and ethnicity all have an impact on identity online. This is not a simple equation – people often show resilience in very challenging circumstances – but there is an overlap between online and offline disadvantage.

“It is traditional literacy, rather than digital literacy that causes problems in online information navigation,” as Ellen Helsper argues in *The Digital Disconnect*.¹⁰ Literacy here should be understood not simply as being able to read and spell (though that matters, and we should remember that functional illiteracy rates remain obstinately high in the UK, at 16.4% of adults¹¹) but also as the ability to collaborate with other people, to understand social conventions and to judge whom and what to trust.

It's important to see digital poverty as a continuum. The focus on hardware and connectivity, or even on traditional, technical skills, should not obscure the other, very real obstacles that some families face. Researchers who followed a two-year digital inclusion scheme designed to tutor and help 30 disadvantaged young people in England to use computers concluded that they were “*locked into patterns of narrow, task-oriented usage. They do homework or use the internet to help with family chores, while more affluent peers*

use it to explore and try things out.”¹² The digital world is sometimes thought of – and the early digital utopians certainly framed it like this – as a neutral and democratic space. But privileged young people may well have a freedom to roam, explore and play that is denied to their less advantaged counterparts.

Discussions about disadvantaged young people too often focus solely on what they should be doing online, defined as instrumental activities such as acquiring an education, saving money, or applying for benefits or jobs. They rarely emphasise what they could be doing: playing, creating content, pursuing activities that aren't strictly productive, that are exploratory, critical, and open-ended. If ‘skills’ are interpreted purely technically, disadvantaged young people are likely to be further disadvantaged. High-level technical mastery comes from developing enthusiasms, from immersion in online experiences. There is a need for an emphasis on digital social skills – not simply technical skills, but also soft online skills, such as sociability, civility, collaboration, and judgement – to enable all young people to thrive in the digital world.

The anxiety about safety that has dominated discussion of children online hasn't always helped. In our understandable concern to keep vulnerable children safe, we may be exacerbating disadvantage.

⁹ Most respondents had at least one adult in their household who, without assistance, could set up an email account (98%); upload files online (95%); and use search engines (100%)

¹⁰ Ellen J Helsper: *The Digital Disconnect, The Social Causes and Consequences of Digital Inequalities*, Sage, 2021

¹¹ Figures from [The National Literacy Trust](https://www.parentzone.org.uk/research/the-national-literacy-trust)

¹² Davies, Eynon and Wilkins (2017) quoted in Ellen J Helsper, *ibid*

Conclusion

It is often rather glibly said that young people are a generation of digital natives, perhaps reflecting the fact that adults often have very little idea what children are doing online.

What they're doing varies widely. The easy assumption that they're all confidently exploring may lead us to overlook the real digital divide, which is less generational than one of poverty and opportunity.

ONS data showing that 'nearly 100%' of households are 'online' can lead to the assumption that everyone is digitally included. While most households go online every day, there are in fact many different forms of digital engagement.

This is not to say that the emphasis on devices and connectivity is wrong. Ensuring that all children have access is an essential first step. After a slow start, serious efforts were made to get devices to children who need them during the pandemic. On connectivity, the government itself has argued that high speed broadband should be seen as a utility – and it seems unarguable to us that in the 21st century access to broadband should be a right, like access to water.

Hardware and connectivity are only the beginning, however. The strong links that showed up in our research between parental social grade and education and digital advantage suggest that digital poverty is unlikely to be overcome *simply* by handing out laptops or making infrastructure available and affordable.

As young children start to use the internet, they should be learning digital norms, the soft skills of being online – listening, reflection, confidence, imagination, creativity, empathy, judgement. All children should be enabled to explore and fully inhabit the digital world, to grow up online and develop their digital lives in whatever directions are fruitful for them. That means that they need the chance to play online, to explore, invent, socialise, to break things, to use platforms in ways that the designers and the authorities didn't necessarily intend.

Conclusion (continued)

Digital poverty should be coordinated across government, and should be seen as a vital part of the levelling up agenda. At present, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport leads on digital inclusion as a policy area; the Department for Education works with children; and the Department for Work and Pensions with those who are unemployed and older.

A more coordinated approach from government would allow for better data, which could provide insights into the needs of specific groups, such as ethnic minorities, refugees, looked-after children, and those with disabilities, and would enable better tracking of progress.

Parents must be included in efforts to build online competence. Disadvantage, both between generations and between families, is likely to be reinforced if adults aren't given

the means and the confidence to help their children range freely online. When innovating solutions to digital poverty, parents and those with lived experience of digital disadvantage should be involved, along with policymakers, technologists and design thinkers.

At Parent Zone we believe that all children – which has to mean their parents, too – should have opportunities to master the technologies of the future. Digital technology is seamlessly integrated into family life for many in the UK. All families should be able to take advantage of the opportunities it offers, with parents having the confidence to help their children navigate digital hazards and seek out the possibilities and benefits of being online.

Technical note

The research referred to above was conducted by telephone interview by Ipsos MORI between 8/1/21 and 13/1/21 with 468 parents or legal guardians of children aged 17 and under screened from a nationally representative sample of 2,158 adults in Great Britain. Data are weighted by age, government office region, working status and social grades within gender and ethnicity, to national offline population proportions.

Within the 468 parents and legal guardians:

- 178 parents or legal guardians whose highest level of education was a secondary school qualification
- 239 degree-level or higher
- 110 in households of five or more
- 310 social grades **ABC1**
- 144 social grades **C2DE**

Tables are available [here](#).

Get in touch

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