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New Research Confirms 34,000 Santa Barbara County Residents Lack Home Internet or Computer Access

Digital Equity Coalition for Santa Barbara County Releases Landmark Digital Divide Study and Announces Roadmap to 98% Connectivity

(SANTA BARBARA COUNTY, CA) — The [Digital Equity Coalition for Santa Barbara County](#) (SBCDEC), supported by the [Santa Barbara Foundation](#), released a comprehensive study of the digital divide across Santa Barbara County, revealing that approximately **34,000 residents — roughly 8 percent of the county's population — lack access to a home computer, internet service or both.** The study, conducted by Jamshid Damooei, PhD, of [Damooei Global Research](#) and commissioned by the Santa Barbara Foundation, provides the most detailed neighborhood-level analysis of digital inequity in the county to date.

“Digital connectivity is no longer a luxury — it is a basic necessity for full participation in modern society,” said Damooei. “Every day that residents remain disconnected is a day of lost opportunity in education, healthcare, employment and civic life.”

The study, titled “[State of the Digital Divide in Santa Barbara County: Access, Affordability and Digital Inclusion across the County](#),” draws on 2024 US Census data analyzed across all 23 ZIP codes and 102 census tracts in the county. The most significant findings include the following:

- Approximately 12,000 households lack a computer or internet subscription, representing around 34,000 individuals when applying the county's average household size.
- A household must earn at least \$71,360 annually to keep total digital costs — internet, devices and electricity — at or below five percent of income, the standard affordability benchmark. An estimated 60 percent of the county's population lives in census tracts where affordability is moderately to severely constrained.
- The three ZIP codes facing the greatest compounded need are 93434 (Guadalupe), 93458 and 93454 (Santa Maria), where digital access opportunity scores fall in the “Very Low” range and over 45 percent of households cannot afford the digital new normal.
- Older adults (65+) face the sharpest non-adoption rates, with technology anxiety, physical limitations and generational familiarity gaps compounding economic barriers in nearly every ZIP code.
- Children under 18 in more than half of the county's ZIP codes face gaps in home computer or internet access — a gap the study describes as “urgent” in the age of AI-integrated education.

The study introduces the Digital Access Opportunity Index (DAOI, report page 30), a 14-indicator composite score measuring the structural conditions — economic, social, linguistic and geographic — that shape each community's ability to participate in the digital economy.

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“This research makes visible what many in our community already feel: that not having reliable internet at home means falling further behind,” said Liz Thasiah, vice president of programs at the Santa Barbara Foundation. “The Digital Equity Coalition exists to change that, and this data gives us the roadmap to do so.”

In response to the study’s findings, the Santa Barbara County Digital Equity Coalition has launched the “SBCDEC Roadmap to 98% Connectivity,” a three-phase initiative designed to move Santa Barbara County from data to action.

Phase I — Quantitative Analysis (January – June 2026): The foundational research phase, culminating in the release of the updated “State of the Digital Divide” report. The SBCDEC Steering Committee and Data and Research Subcommittee will analyze findings to identify target audiences, primary inclusion gaps and information needs.

Phase II — Qualitative Analysis (July – December 2026):

SBCDEC partner organizations will convene community focus groups with priority populations in trusted, stipend-supported settings. The below community-based organization partners will facilitate sessions to surface motivations, hesitations and barriers to connectivity that quantitative data cannot capture.

- American GI Forum
- Family Service Agency
- Housing Authority of Santa Barbara County
- Nube Education Foundation
- Partners in Education
- University of California, Santa Barbara Communication Department

Stipends for focus group participants will be sponsored by the Santa Barbara Foundation.

Phase III — Resource and Engage (2027): Qualitative findings will be mapped to the SBCDEC partner ecosystem and presented at the 2027 Digital Equity Summit. SBCDEC partners will connect residents to programs — low-cost broadband plans, device lending, digital literacy classes and multilingual navigation support — and track delivery against the 98 percent connectivity goal.

“We have the data and active coalition partners aligned, and now will work toward building a roadmap for any organization to support digital access in the community,” said Shelby Arthur, strategic advisor and partner facilitator for the SBCDEC. “The question is no longer whether we can close the digital divide in Santa Barbara County — it is when.”

ABOUT THE SANTA BARBARA COUNTY DIGITAL EQUITY COALITION

The Digital Equity Coalition for Santa Barbara County (SBCDEC) was formed in 2021 with the belief that digital access is a fundamental right. Convened by the Santa Barbara Foundation, the SBCDEC brings together community organizations, schools, local governments, nonprofits and service providers to ensure that every resident — regardless of income, age, language or geography — has access to the digital tools and skills needed to participate fully in modern life. Learn more at SBCDEC.org.

ABOUT THE SANTA BARBARA FOUNDATION

Founded in 1928, the Santa Barbara Foundation actively connects donors, nonprofits, government, businesses and the people of Santa Barbara County to take on the most challenging needs facing our region’s communities. Recognizing that its work depends on the strength of the social sector, the Foundation is committed to the health and vitality of local nonprofits. Knowing that together we can do more, the Foundation mobilizes charitable giving and connects their expertise to that of donors, nonprofits and residents to create meaningful impact on the communities of our county. As lead convener of the Digital Equity Coalition, the Foundation provides strategic direction, funding support, and institutional infrastructure to advance digital inclusion across the region. SBFoundation.org.

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