

# WEAVING OUR WEB:

## THE STATE OF DIGITAL INCLUSION IN URBAN INDIAN AMERICA



**NATIONAL URBAN  
INDIAN FAMILY  
COALITION**

**NOVEMBER 2018** NUIFC REPORT



# CONTENT

<b>NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR</b>	<b>3</b>
.....	
<b>1: DIGITAL CONNECTEDNESS</b>	<b>4</b>
.....	
<b>CONTEXT</b>	<b>5</b>
.....	
<b>CURRENT RESEARCH</b>	<b>6</b>
.....	
<b>2: SHAPING THE RESEARCH</b>	<b>7</b>
.....	
<b>ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION SUMMARY</b>	<b>8</b>
.....	
<b>ADDRESSING BARRIERS</b>	<b>10</b>
.....	
<b>3: CONCLUSIONS &amp; RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>11</b>
.....	
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>12</b>

# NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



**American Indian families and children** are among the most vulnerable of America's urban populations. Today, more than 78% of American Indians live off reservation and these populations of American Indians residing off reservation often remain invisible within the context of the larger urban populations surrounding them. They also suffer disproportionate levels of poverty and the attendant issues that come with generational poverty. Recognizing and reacting to the myriad of needs that this population faces, Urban Indian organizations began developing and have been in existence since the 1950's, when Native families were first brought to urban areas by the Federal Relocation Program. These families and the organizations that provide culturally relevant services to them make up a rich tapestry of Native culture in the cities in which they reside.

To that end, it is with great pleasure and excitement that we bring you this report. Weaving Our Web: The State of Digital Inclusion in Urban Indian America. This work, two years in the making, seeks to discover if, how, and why American Indians and Alaska Natives living in 12 major population centers across the country access the internet. This report is also an important model of private/public collaboration and partnership and was made possible by our partners at Comcast Internet Essentials.

The 21st century marks times of great transitions and challenges as environmental challenges, globalization, and unprecedented broadband networks and internet-enabled technologies reshape social, economic, political, and ecological life for us all. Though much research exists on the state of broadband adoption—and corresponding programs aimed at alleviating the digital divide on reservations and in rural areas, there is little to no research evaluating the effects of the digital divide on the population of Native Americans who live in urban population centers.

While Comcast has increased broadband adoption nationally, connecting more than six million low-income people to the power of the internet at home, more work is needed to connect the hardest to reach populations, including urban Indians. With access to a robust national network of partners who serve various demographic groups, as one of the nation's largest residential high-speed internet providers, Comcast has a unique opportunity to influence the broader discussion around the digital divide through thoughtful and strategic research. It is our goal that these efforts lead to improved outreach to hard-to-reach populations and provide a better understanding of the state of technology use and connectivity among diverse populations.

In an increasingly digital world, American Indians who do not have in-home access to the internet are being left behind. Finding jobs, doing school work, maintaining ties with relatives living on the reservation, and being a part of the larger social fabric of Indian country is a vitally important function for the intellectual, cultural, and social connectivity of our families. It is the sincere hope of the National Urban Indian Family Coalition that this report will present a snapshot of the digital divide as it relates to urban Indians, and provide a series of policy recommendations that will ultimately serve to bridge that divide and create more equitable digital inclusion within our communities.

Klecko Klecko (thank you),

*Janeen Comenote*

(Quinault/Oglala/Hesquiaht)

**Executive Director**

National Urban Indian Family Coalition





# 1 | DIGITAL CONNECTEDNESS

**Digital connectedness is an essential part** of 21st century life. Being able to access and leverage technology means more job opportunities and higher wages; savings on everyday needs; more healthcare options; improved educational outcomes; a streamlined path to community and government resources; easy engagement in political and civic discussions; and a near-infinite collection of culturally and socially relevant information. Digitally excluded individuals and communities are left at a significant disadvantage from their connected counterparts. The digital divide, defined as the gap between those who have and those who do not have a broadband connection at home, is a primary barrier to digital equity.

American Indians, as a unique segment of the population, face the largest digital divide in the United States<sup>1</sup>. Though research has been performed on the state of broadband connectivity and availability for American Indians living on reservations and in rural areas, none has specifically looked at the 78 percent of American Indians (3.7 million) living in urban population centers<sup>2</sup>. This lack of data undermines urban Indian service organizations' ability to identify and serve the needs of this historically underserved and significantly at-risk population.

Urban Indian-serving community based organizations have led the efforts to provide services to their communities, with little to no policy support and severe under-funding (NUIFC, 2015). These organizations have been on the forefront of promising local digital inclusion efforts, often relying solely on support received from community partnerships. However, additional investment and national resources could be used to generate a scalable model for digital inclusion in Urban Indian America. Additionally, it is intended to act as a resource for local digital inclusion practitioners within these communities.

<sup>1</sup>Based on an analysis of American Community Survey rates of computer ownership and in-home subscription internet, 2016 1-Year Estimates

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Table P1.



## CONTEXT

Having arrived in America's cities either by choice or through a series of federal policies spanning decades, early urban American Indians were expected to assimilate as citizens of a modern society. Indian termination policies, such as the Relocation Act of 1956, resulted in American Indians facing a series of social, cultural, and economic upheavals in their new environments. Despite these hardships, leaders emerged in cities, communities formed, and the first urban Indian community centers took shape. These centers became lifelines for relocated American Indian families, providing vital services and access to culture and community.

As tribal communities grew—and some American Indians moved to rural environments—two distinct realities emerged. Rural populations face a unique set of challenges that researchers have spent considerable time studying. Importantly, issues of isolation impacting rural residents also affect their urban counterparts. While the challenges of these two communities diverge, the importance of staying connected to family, culture, language, and government is a common concern.

Digital inclusion, as it relates to having reliable home-based internet, functioning internet-ready devices, and the skills necessary to leverage technology in a beneficial way, is a social and economic imperative. Those without a broadband connection and the digital skills needed to take advantage of it are unable to access a wealth of essential resources. Not only does this perpetuate existing societal and economic disparities, but it leads to exclusion of the many unique experiences and contributions of the American Indian community.

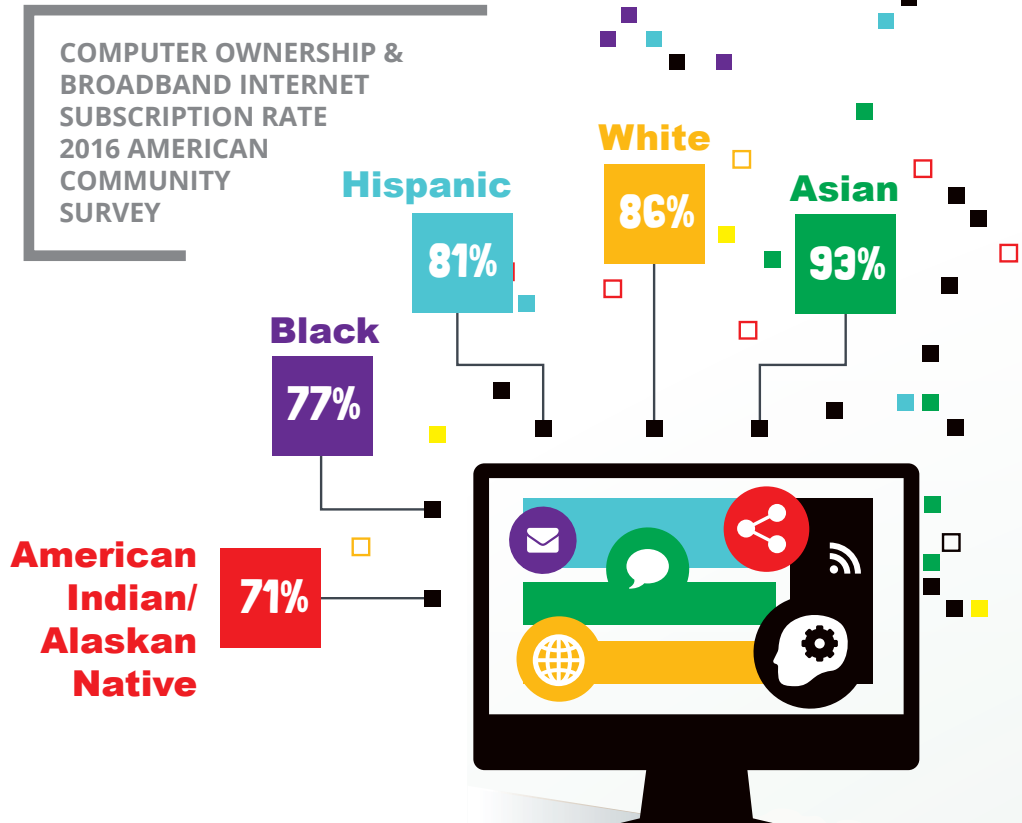
While much digital inclusion work has been done by tribes and community partners—including government agencies, nonprofits, and internet service providers—far more work remains. The unique barriers facing urban Indians must be examined and addressed. Additionally, increased data about the digital needs of urban Indians is critical as urban Indian service centers continue to look for ways to provide support and track trends within their communities.

# CURRENT RESEARCH

**One in five American households** does not have an internet connection at home (ACS, 2016). For American Indian households, this figure is closer to one in four. American Indians have the single lowest computer ownership and broadband adoption rates of any racial/ethnic group reported by the U.S. Census. The gap, of 6 to 22 percentage points, between American Indian households owning a computer and subscribing to broadband and other racial/ethnic groups, is significant and represents differential access to information and resources.

The story of broadband adoption is even bleaker when considering household income. 94 percent of households making more than \$75,000 annually have subscription broadband; that figure drops to 56 percent for those making less than \$20,000. The ACS does not provide broadband subscription data by income as it relates to racial/ethnic households, but does report on poverty rates. Here again, American Indian families are at a disadvantage, with over 25 percent falling below the poverty line.

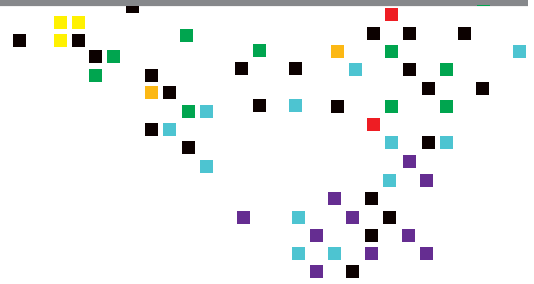
Understanding the broadband adoption data is foundational to any digital inclusion effort. Knowing why people are not adopting the internet at home and their general comfort level



around technology is also key. Research shows the main barrier to broadband adoption is actually a collection of issues related to relevance, including a perceived lack of need, lack of interest, and the related lack of digital literacy skills. According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS, 2017), nearly 60 percent of individuals without a home connection said they either didn’t need or were not interested in the internet. By comparison, only about one in five considered the internet to be too expensive. Further, a 2014 survey-based study sponsored by the NTIA and conducted by FCC economists and analysts from Connected Nation found that about two-thirds of non-adopting households would not consider subscribing to the internet at home at any price.



## SHAPING THE RESEARCH



**The NUIFC**, along with its member organizations who participated in our initial research phase, has been critical of the methodology and sampling used by the U.S. Census, stating that current survey practices lead to under- or mis-sampling of American Indians. Though data on broadband adoption does exist through the Census surveys, a robust analysis of the available data, as well as a greater understanding of the digital divide within urban Indian communities, is needed before conclusions can be reached.

In order to accomplish the goal of understanding population trends and needs while centering the participants of the study in an ethical and meaningful way, indigenous methodology was employed for the research and writing of this report. Indigenous methodology focuses on ensuring American Indian voices drive the direction of the study and the narrative it produces. It is grounded

in a community-based approach that acknowledges and respects indigenous voices and ways of knowing.

Round table discussions involving leaders and staff from 13 NUIFC member centers representing four major geographic regions were conducted to gather representative input from the urban Indian community. Discussions were held in Seattle, Minneapolis, Denver, and Nashville throughout the summer and fall of 2017. Corporate broadband adoption program representatives were also invited to participate. Staff from Internet Essentials from Comcast were present at all round table discussions. The discussions focused on connectivity and the impact of digital exclusion on urban Indian communities, in addition to recommendations for further research during phase two of this project.



**NUIFC's network of affiliates was leveraged to participate in four regional round table discussions to provide input on:**

- 1** The current state of digital inclusion, including the organizations' connectivity, technological resources, digital literacy training profiles, their members' broadband adoption rates and usage, and their members' barriers to adoption.
- 2** The best methodology to broaden the scope of research on digital inclusion among the American Indian population, including survey construction, design, and participation.
- 3** The most effective way to convey focus group and further study findings to benefit the broader American Indian community, participating organizations, and their members.

For K-12 students, access to school computers can be limited, as is access to the library.



## ROUND TABLE

### Discussion Summary

**Although each organization** and regional round table discussion had unique offerings and feedback, there were commonalities which speak to the shared history and experiences of American Indians living in urban settings, including the perceived benefit of digital inclusion and understood barriers to it.

Many of the group's perceptions around digital inclusion were consistent with current research on the digital divide for the general population, but some differed:

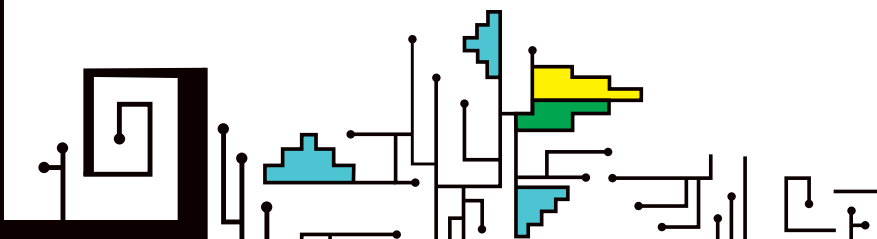
**Educational:** For K-12 students, access to school computers can be limited, as is access to the library. Using mobile devices, if available, is difficult for homework completion and may be subject to expensive (and restrictive) data plans.

**Travel and Money:** For families who rely on out-of-home internet, careful planning is needed to determine access points, hours of operation, and travel to and from these locations. Money and time spent obtaining access could be better spent elsewhere. As online banking and shopping provide increased savings and convenience, families without a home connection do not reap the same benefits.

**Applying for and receiving resources:** Families with health and social services needs who lack a home internet connection are at a particular disadvantage as government resources are becoming increasingly digital.

**Tribal and cultural preservation:** Indian service centers often rely on websites, social media, and email to communicate key information to their community members. Tribal communities likewise rely on internet access as things like elections, language resources, and critical news updates move online. Social media in particular is vital to the American Indian community for cultural news and events.

**Online education:** The ability to enroll in and complete online degrees and certificate programs is especially important for those requiring the flexibility to work, care for family, and remain culturally connected while continuing their education.





## CASE STUDY:

The Evergreen State College, in Olympia, WA, is a unique institution that has held close relationships with local tribes for several decades. The Native Pathways program (formerly the Reservation-Based, Community-Determined Program) emerged from these relationships and allows native students, or those who are affiliated with tribes, to complete their bachelor's degrees through evening, weekend and online programming. Though it was historically a reservation-based program in rural areas throughout western Washington, students can now attend classes two nights a week at one of several approved urban sites or through a recently launched hybrid program that combines online and in-person instruction. The addition of the urban sites and online hybrid option is making it possible for more native people to earn degrees than ever before. It is especially compelling for urban Indians, as it

provides the flexibility to complete academic work while moving freely between reservations and city dwellings. This is an important part of allowing families to benefit from employment opportunities in the cities while maintaining cultural and family ties, as well as civic engagement, back home on the reservation.

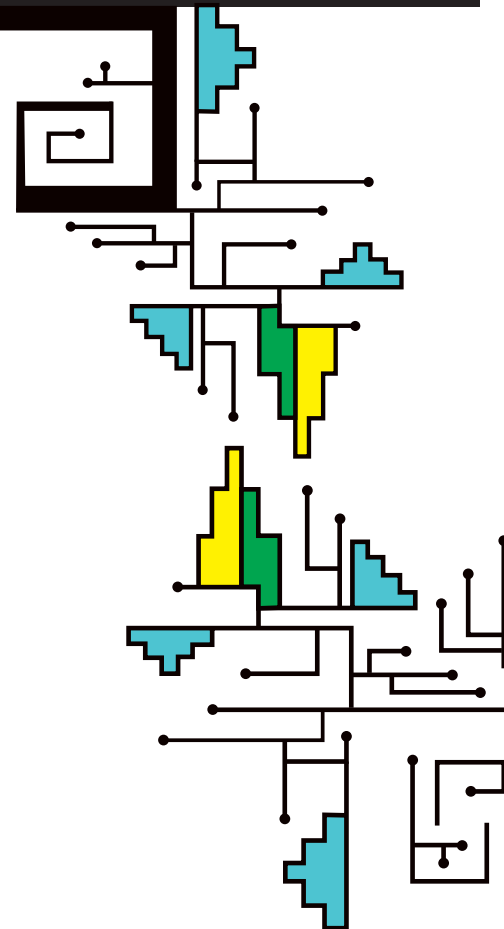
This program provides an accessible pathway to higher learning for native peoples by freeing up weekdays so they can work, care for family, or access important services. The online option also allows for the 50-100 students from varying cultures and communities to come together in a collaborative space to share cultural knowledge and experiences. What students are able to achieve through this program is a vital part of nation building for tribes and contributes to stronger urban Indian communities as well.

**Economic mobility:** With respect to creating online businesses, many groups mentioned the importance of distributing and/or selling native art, music, and jewelry through e-commerce sites. These types of businesses provide opportunities for community members to engage with their culture in a financially viable way.

**Participating urban Indian organization leaders also presented a number of barriers they have encountered, including:**

- Cultural obstacles to technology and external aid programs where individuals, communities, and even organizations are hesitant to engage.
- Need for increased localized and culturally relevant digital literacy training.
- Cost of devices, software, and internet access for both centers and individuals.

Participating leaders also cited limited resources for supporting the digital inclusion needs of their community. The lack of current and substantial data on urban Indians and broadband adoption makes understanding and addressing the issue exceedingly difficult.





## ADDRESSING BARRIERS

**Round table participants** identified a variety of ways to ensure digital equity, such as robust and ongoing partnerships with external organizations and continued collection and analysis of data and research in collaboration with Native communities. Organizations offering broadband adoption programs should:

- Earn the trust of the respected members of the community. This involves building relationships with Native service organizations and taking time to attend and participate in events. It also means sharing knowledge and emphasizing transparency in any decision-making process that impacts the community.
- Make digital inclusion programs more relatable and compelling through culturally relevant marketing.
- Support Native organizations delivering culturally relevant digital literacy training, education, and research.
- Exchange knowledge and best practices for addressing the needs of highly mobile community members.

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# CONCLUSIONS

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Round table participants** all agreed on the need for more detailed information on the state of digital inclusion within their communities. However, each round table acknowledged the need to study the issue through a culturally competent framework that places control over measurement tools and results in the hands of the community. Further, the groups strongly recommended continued research through a national community-based survey. This next phase has already begun, with all of our round table participants distributing a survey through their organizational networks.

Following the data collection, results will be released in a follow-up publication.

While these results will help answer some questions, more organizations must come to the table in order to drive digital inclusion in urban Indian America. This is increasingly critical as technologies and the Internet of Things (IoT) become even more embedded within the global economy. We urge those interested in inclusivity efforts to utilize these recommendations for engaging with urban Indian communities:

### 1. Utilize culturally competent methodologies to study digital inclusion

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The current data on the digital divide for urban Indian populations does not take into account the unique circumstances and needs of our communities. Those wanting to support further research should do so with the trust, leadership, cooperation, and guidance of urban Indian service organizations, native nonprofits, and indigenous researchers throughout the entire process.

### 2. Involve community and local partners

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Digital equity relies heavily on all stakeholders to examine issues of broadband adoption disparities in communities. We hope the research will inspire community involvement, including the building of local, mutually beneficial partnerships. These relationships provide an opportunity for digital stakeholders to demonstrate their leadership in improving both educational and economic outcomes for urban Indians through effective policies, funding, and advocacy.

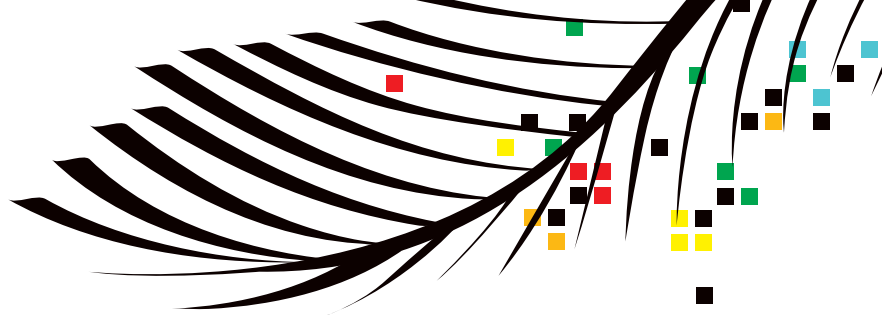
### 3. Let the native voice drive the narrative

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The distribution of best practices and research results should always be in the control of the participating communities so they may use the information in ways that are most beneficial to them.



**National Urban Indian  
Family Coalition**



## **MISSION:**

**NUIFC elevates a national voice and sustains Indigenous values and culture through a strong network of urban Indian organizations.**

## **Our goals:**

- To build a movement that promotes advocacy and mobilizes systems to integrate Urban Indian issues in policy discussions and implementation
- To build positive and mutually supportive relationships with tribal governments and other institutions for the betterment of our children and families who live in urban communities
- To create, through dialogue, a shared understanding of the barriers, issues, and unique opportunities facing urban Indian families
- To collectively develop and share strategies to address the issues facing AI/AN families in cities
- To sustain indigenous values and culture within urban communities

The National Urban Indian Family Coalition advocates for American Indian families living in urban areas by creating partnerships with tribes, as well as other American Indian organizations, and by conducting research to better understand the barriers, issues, and opportunities facing urban American Indian families. Program models, policy critiques, and best practices will be developed through sharing data with participating organizations. We envision building a network of urban American Indian Organizations to strengthen urban American Indian families by reinforcing cultural identity, education, and healthy families while respectfully working to harmoniously bridge the gap between tribal governments and other institutions. Ultimately, we seek to strengthen the voices of urban American Indian peoples and their access to resources. By including NUIFC members in these critical conversations and including Urban Indian issues in national dialogue regarding Native America, we ensure that the concerns of our families are addressed and that Urban issues are include in national policy work.

One of the primary intentions of creating the NUIFC is to ensure access to traditionally excluded organizations and families, and to focus attention on the needs of urban Indians. The National Urban Indian Family Coalition is dedicated to remaining an access point for the exchange of ideas and dialogue regarding Urban Indian America.



## WITH OUR APPRECIATION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

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The NUIFC would like to extend our deepest appreciation to the urban Indian organizations, policy makers and Native community members in the cities in which we conducted the roundtables as well as the following individuals who helped draft this paper.

This report was written and researched by Kendra Aguilar, Doctoral Candidate from Te Whare Wananga O' Awanuiarangi, an Indigenous-Maori University based in New Zealand; Janeen Comenote, Executive Director of NUIFC; and Katherine E. Allison, Fellow with the Strategic Data Project, a program by the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University. Special thanks to the Internet Essentials from Comcast team for their support of the writing and research of this report, and their participation in each round table discussion.

NUIFC would also acknowledge Eunique Yazzie from Eunique Designs, an American Indian creative company, for the design and layout of this report.



For a listing of the NUIFC member centers  
and additional information about urban  
Indians please visit our website at

[WWW.NUIFC.ORG](http://WWW.NUIFC.ORG)

