

**DIGITAL EQUITY  
IN EDUCATION**  
IN THE CORONAVIRUS ERA

**ABOUT**

This brief was created in partnership between Kids First Chicago and the Metropolitan Planning Council.

**KIDS FIRST CHICAGO**

Kids First Chicago's mission is to dramatically improve education for Chicago's children by ensuring high-quality public schools are accessible to all families. We believe that a healthy education environment where kids, schools, and communities thrive is the key to a world-class city. We believe that those closest to our students - families, community members, and educators - are best equipped to design policies and systems that will improve equity and lead to stronger outcomes for our students, our communities, and our city.

**METROPOLITAN PLANNING COUNCIL**

For more than 85 years, the Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC) has made the Chicago region a better, bolder place to live and work by partnering with businesses, communities and governments to address the area's toughest planning and development challenges. MPC works to solve today's urgent problems while consistently thinking ahead to prepare the region for the needs of tomorrow.

**NOTE**

Parents are attributed by first name and last initial to protect the identities of their children and families.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS NOT MADE THE INTERNET INDISPENSABLE—IT HAS REVEALED THAT IT ALWAYS WAS.**

On Friday, April 17, 2020, Illinois joined over 30 other states, and counting, in extending its mandated statewide school closure through the remainder of the 2019-20 school year, in response to the public health crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

**“THE NEED FOR INTERNET ACCESS HAS BEEN GOING ON FOR A WHILE NOW, BUT REMOTE LEARNING IS MAKING IT MORE EVIDENT.”**

—CLAIBORNE W., CPS PARENT

State and local officials are requiring the use of online instruction to effectively implement remote learning plans, but the “homework gap”—that is, the barrier that students face at school when they don’t have access<sup>1</sup> to a broadband internet connection at home—disproportionately plagues Chicago’s low-income families and people of color.

**About 1 in 5 children under the age of eighteen lack access to broadband, and are primarily Black or Latinx/a/o.**

<sup>1</sup> Access is defined here as families lacking a subscription to a broadband internet service. While we recognize this is referred to as “adoption” in the industry, we refer to it as access here, as the service remains inaccessible to many due to barriers such as cost.

As Claiborne W., a CPS father of four residing in Austin, said, “The need for internet access has been going on for a while now, but remote learning is making it more evident.”

With COVID-19 forcing school districts to adopt remote learning for the remainder of the school year, the students who were already the most vulnerable to falling behind will now face even more challenges to keeping pace with their peers.

**Without swift action to close the Digital Divide right now, we will witness a widening of the achievement gap.**

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a Community-Led Internet Service Subsidy Program to target Chicago’s most underserved communities.
- Expand WiFi hot-spot lending programs at schools and through community organizations.
- Partner with Internet Service Providers (ISP) and the philanthropic community to establish WiFi “SuperSpots” in key communities.
- Encourage ISPs to expand their low-cost broadband service offers.
- Pilot promising and innovative ideas to leverage city assets to expand WiFi coverage to communities in need.

# THE CRUCIAL NEED

## INTERNET SOLUTIONS TO CONNECT AND EDUCATE CHICAGO'S CHILDREN

As stated, 1 in 5 children under the age of eighteen lack access to broadband citywide, equating to more than 110,000 kids.<sup>1</sup>

Predominantly black and Latinx/a/o neighborhoods show startling gaps in internet connectivity, including:

- Just over 1 in 3 households in Austin, including 33%, or nearly 8,000 of all residing children
- Nearly 1 in 3 households in Humboldt Park, including 33%, or 5,100 of all residing children
- Nearly 1 in 2 households in West Englewood, including 46%, or 3,100 of all residing children

Increased internet access for these communities, some of which have seen disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 cases, would provide a plethora of telehealth and other ancillary benefits, in addition to closing the Digital Divide which contributes to a significant racial equity gap in Chicago's education landscape.

<sup>1</sup> There are just under 200,000 households that do not have in-home internet connections citywide. Gaps in internet connectivity have exacerbated inequities faced by residents of all ages across Chicago as they look for critical information and resources in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**110,000**

CHICAGO CHILDREN UNDER 18  
WITHOUT BROADBAND INTERNET

**46%**

OF WEST ENGLEWOOD CHILDREN  
UNDER 18 WITHOUT  
BROADBAND INTERNET

**8,000**

AUSTIN CHILDREN  
UNDER 18 WITHOUT  
BROADBAND INTERNET

**33%**

OF HUMBOLT PARK CHILDREN  
UNDER 18 WITHOUT  
BROADBAND INTERNET

**“I RECEIVED ONE CHROMEBOOK BUT I HAVE THREE SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN AT HOME. I’M ALSO A COLLEGE STUDENT AND WOULD NORMALLY GO TO THE LIBRARY TO USE THEIR COMPUTERS BUT CAN’T DO THAT NOW. WE’RE ALL IN THE HOUSE TRYING TO SHARE ONE CHROMEBOOK AND A CELL PHONE. IT’S REALLY HARD TO BE BOTH A PARENT AND TEACHER WITHOUT THE THINGS I NEED TO DO IT.”**

**—  
OLIVIA O., ENGLEWOOD PARENT**

Rena R., a CPS mother of twins living in the Austin community, cited the difficult challenge in effectively participating in remote learning for the many families in Austin who don’t have reliable internet at home.

Predominantly white, more affluent neighborhoods, without exception, show rates of connectivity near or above 90%.

You would need to combine more than 15 community areas north of Lincoln Park to find an equivalent number of children under 18 without broadband access across Chicago’s North Side as just the two community areas of Austin and Englewood.

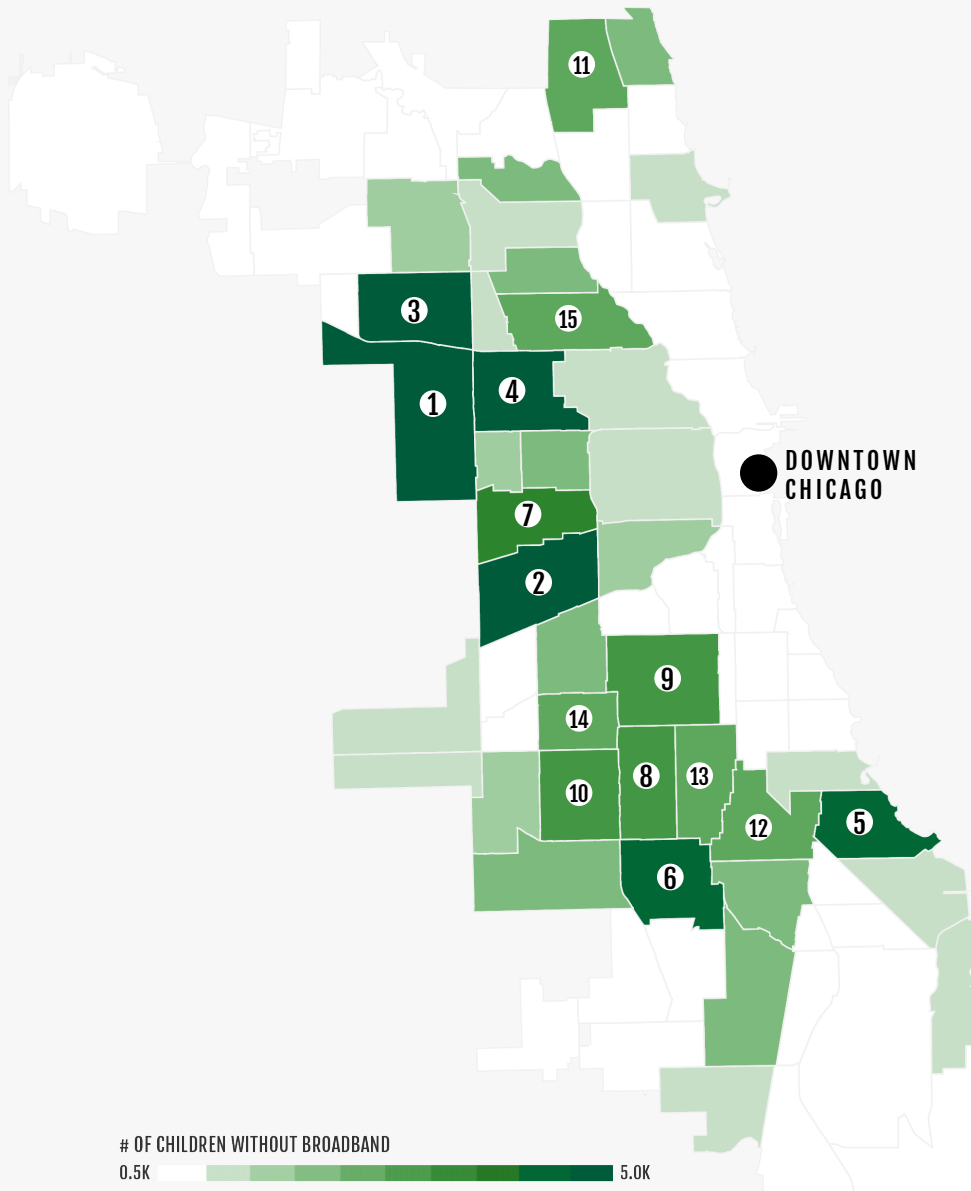
Aggregating to community areas can’t even fully capture the inequity, as there are individual census tracts in some communities where less than 40% of households have connections to broadband.

The country’s leading data and internet providers already have infrastructure in place in Chicago to allow for broad adoption within every household.

**THIS IS NOT AN INFRASTRUCTURE ISSUE,  
BUT AN ADOPTION ISSUE.**

One CPS parent on the South Side, who lost her job due to the COVID-19 closure, said that she now has to decide between paying for food, paying the gas bill, and paying for internet service to ensure her kids continue learning.

**No parent should be forced to make such choices.**



# # OF CHILDREN

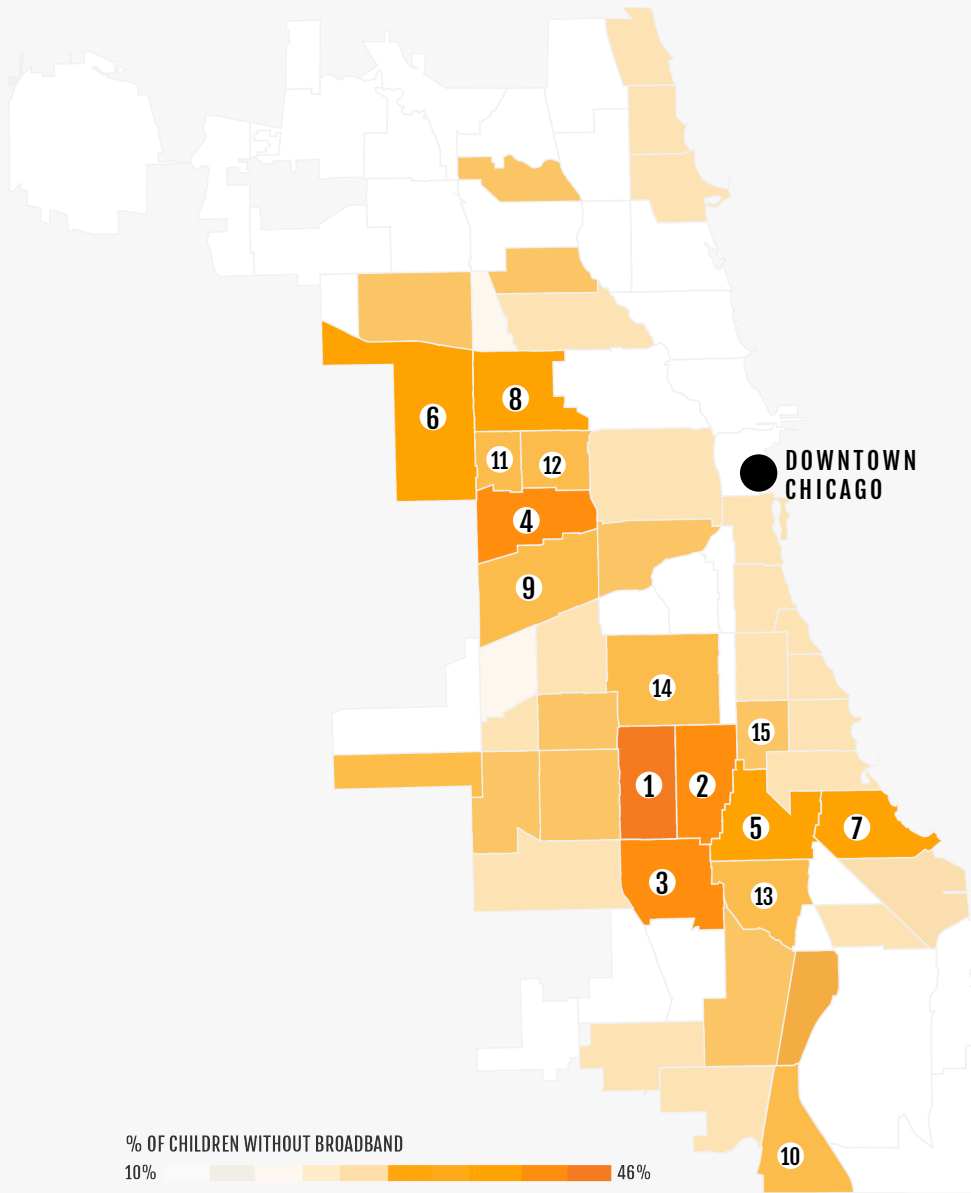
## UNDER AGE 18 WITHOUT BROADBAND ACCESS

Community areas with the highest concentration of children without access to broadband are predominantly concentrated on the South and West Sides.

### 15 MOST AFFECTED COMMUNITIES BY CITY AREA

1. AUSTIN	WEST SIDE	7,801
2. SOUTH LAWNSDALE	WEST SIDE	6,624
3. BELMONT CRAGIN	NORTH/NORTHWEST SIDE	5,218
4. HUMBOLDT PARK	WEST SIDE	5,195
5. SOUTH SHORE	SOUTH SIDE	3,994
6. AUBURN GRESHAM	FAR SOUTHWEST SIDE	3,744
7. NORTH LAWNSDALE	WEST SIDE	3,550
8. WEST ENGLEWOOD	SOUTHWEST SIDE	3,089
9. NEW CITY	SOUTHWEST SIDE	2,992
10. CHICAGO LAWN	SOUTHWEST SIDE	2,769
11. WEST RIDGE	FAR NORTH SIDE	2,609
12. GREATER GRAND CROSSING	SOUTH SIDE	2,539
13. ENGLEWOOD	SOUTHWEST SIDE	2,392
14. GAGE PARK	SOUTHWEST SIDE	2,366
15. LOGAN SQUARE	NORTH/NORTHWEST SIDE	2,327

U.S. Census Bureau. 2019. 2014-2018 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.



# % OF CHILDREN

## UNDER AGE 18 WITHOUT BROADBAND ACCESS

Community areas with the highest percent of children without access to broadband are predominantly concentrated on the South and West Sides.

### 15 MOST AFFECTED COMMUNITIES BY CITY AREA

1. WEST ENGLEWOOD	SOUTHWEST SIDE	46%
2. ENGLEWOOD	SOUTHWEST SIDE	38%
3. AUBURN GRESHAM	FAR SOUTHWEST SIDE	38%
4. NORTH LAWNSDALE	WEST SIDE	37%
5. GREATER GRAND CROSSING	SOUTH SIDE	34%
6. AUSTIN	WEST SIDE	34%
7. SOUTH SHORE	SOUTH SIDE	33%
8. HUMBOLDT PARK	WEST SIDE	32%
9. SOUTH LAWNSDALE	WEST SIDE	31%
10. RIVERDALE	FAR SOUTH SIDE	31%
11. WEST GARFIELD PARK	WEST SIDE	31%
12. EAST GARFIELD PARK	WEST SIDE	30%
13. CHATHAM	FAR SOUTH SIDE	29%
14. NEW CITY	SOUTHWEST SIDE	27%
15. WASHINGTON PARK	SOUTH SIDE	26%

U.S. Census Bureau. 2019. 2014-2018 American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

## SOME PROGRESS, BUT MUCH MORE IS NEEDED TO ENSURE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

In late March, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) released remote learning guidance that outlined expectations, strategies, and available resources for schools to implement remote learning beginning April 13th.

Acknowledging that CPS alone could not close the digital divide overnight, the district committed to leveraging existing inventory, purchasing new devices for distribution, and working with philanthropic partners to help narrow the gap to the best of the district's ability. One week into an effort to deploy more than 100,000 devices to its highest-need students, the district started by prioritizing schools with the greatest need based on a hardship index.

Most recently, the city and CPS, in partnership with the Sprint 1Million Foundation, have taken the laudable step of ensuring all 12,000 students in temporary living situations in the district will receive an internet access device.

**Despite this initial effort, there are roughly 100,000 children who desperately need reliable internet to participate in remote learning.**

Closing CPS is crucial to curbing the continued spread of COVID-19, but the transition to remote learning comes with enormous challenges — namely, a reliance on digital learning resources that has exposed the city's profound digital divide.

**“THIS HAS IMPACTED MY DAUGHTER’S ACCESS TO SCHOOLING. IT’S HARD TO FILL IN THE GAPS. WE NEED ACCESS. ACCESS TO THE INTERNET, TO LAPTOPS.”**

—  
HUMBOLT PARK FAMILY

The Vice-Chair of the Local School Council of a CPS high school in South Shore noted that they are “very concerned by questions from parents who do not appear to have access to internet connections in their home.”

A family from Humboldt Park, who uses their neighbor's internet, recently shared their challenges: “This has impacted my daughter's access to schooling. It's hard to fill in the gaps. We need access. Access to the internet, to laptops.”

**There are far too many Chicago children who are unable to learn without essential internet services.**

Inequitable access to effective internet connections contributes to opportunity, achievement, and equity gaps—gaps that have existed for far too long, and that the current COVID-19 closure is only widening further.



# RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

## TO CLOSE THE GAP IN INTERNET ACCESS AND ENSURE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

Crisis can prompt leaders to take bold action. And the digital divide is one that we can solve now, ensuring that all Chicago families are connected to the internet during the COVID-19 crisis. Concrete steps must be taken to rectify internet access inequities and help improve educational opportunity and access for those in greatest need of assistance.

We propose several practical, immediate actions the city of Chicago, the civic philanthropic community, and the private sector could take to swiftly connect those without home internet access. Each of these partners has an essential role to play in promoting educational equity during the coronavirus era and ensuring that all students can access instruction over at-home internet connections.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish a Community-Led Internet Service Subsidy Program to target Chicago's most underserved communities.
2. Expand WiFi hot-spot lending programs at schools and through community organizations.
3. Partner with ISPs and the philanthropic community to establish WiFi "SuperSpots" in key communities.
4. Encourage ISPs to expand their low-cost broadband service offers.
5. Pilot promising and innovative ideas to leverage city assets to expand WiFi coverage to communities in need.

**"WE NEED TO PROVIDE BASIC INTERNET FOR FREE AND MAKE IT EASILY ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL PARENTS IN NEED RIGHT NOW."**

**—  
CLAIBORNE W., AUSTIN PARENT**

# 1 ESTABLISH A COMMUNITY- LED INTERNET SERVICE SUBSIDY PROGRAM TO TARGET CHICAGO'S MOST UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES.

The City of Chicago should partner with Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to implement a subsidy program that makes fast, reliable broadband at home affordable. Well-established community-based organizations (CBOs) and other community anchor institutions could administer the program on behalf of the city and partner with ISPs to identify qualified participants. To qualify for the program, each family of a school-aged student would self-certify to a designated CBO that they attend a Title I-eligible school and that they do not currently have broadband service at home. The service provider would be reimbursed (using local or philanthropic funds) to cover the cost of providing internet service.

We estimate that at \$100 a year to subscribe to a low-cost broadband service, the total cost to connect the 200,000 Chicago households that lack reliable internet connectivity, would be roughly \$20 million.<sup>1</sup> Connecting all 110,000 children in the city that currently do not have access to the internet would cost a maximum of \$11 million for a year, but would likely be much less given a large percentage of households will have multiple children.

<sup>1</sup> Pricing based on the current Comcast Internet Essentials program at \$9.95/month with two months free and the AT&T Access program at \$10/month with two months free.

## 2 EXPAND WIFI HOT-SPOT LENDING PROGRAMS AT SCHOOLS AND THROUGH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS.

The city and the civic philanthropic community should make funding available for hotspot lending programs operated by schools and community anchor institutions.

CPS is already deploying some hot-spot devices to families, including ensuring all students in temporary living spaces have access to both the internet and a device, but the need for school principals to prioritize the implementation of remote learning plans creates an opportunity for community-based organizations to step in and help deploy hot-spot devices to a broader subset of students and families. Several cities have already implemented such programs and they can be set up quickly.<sup>1</sup>

At roughly \$45 per hot-spot device for 200,000 households, funding to procure the devices would equal approximately \$9 million. ISPs, through their charitable foundations, could offer in-kind service for the duration of the COVID-19 closure or beyond.

If WiFi hotspots become limited or difficult to procure, the city could diversify and establish a program to secure smartphones that could be used as hotspot devices. At an average cost of \$70 per smartphone, which would also provide families with WiFi as well as texting and streaming capabilities, the city's 200,000 households could receive WiFi access for roughly \$15 million under the expectation that ISPs will provide the service in-kind.

<sup>1</sup> Hot-spot devices cannot serve as a long-term solution for households as they often do not provide the same data speeds and bandwidth as broadband.

# 3 PARTNER WITH ISPs AND THE PHILANTHROPIC COMMUNITY TO ESTABLISH WIFI “SUPERSPOTS” IN KEY COMMUNITIES AND NEIGHBORHOODS.

The city of San Francisco recently launched a [partnership](#) between the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) and national nonprofit organizations, EducationSuperHighway and the 1Million Project Foundation, to provide connectivity support for thousands of students in San Francisco who lack home internet access, including the deployment of up to 25 WiFi “SuperSpots.” The SuperSpots are being installed in locations to serve students from underserved communities who need to participate in distance learning due to COVID-19 and related school closures. The SuperSpot equipment, installation, and operating costs are fully covered by philanthropic funding from the 1Million Project Foundation and EducationSuperHighway, and will remain in place for the remainder of the school year.

The cost of the SuperSpot routers is roughly \$2,000 per router. Each router provides access to approximately 120 students that are within a range of 1,000-1,500 feet.

The City of Chicago, in partnership with CPS, the philanthropic community, and ISPs could implement a similar program and provide internet access to thousands of unconnected families by strategically-locating the routers throughout the city.

# 4 ENCOURAGE ISPs TO EXPAND THEIR LOW-COST BROADBAND SERVICE OFFERS.

—

The city should call upon all ISPs to develop and/or augment their offerings of low-cost broadband service to residential consumers. While some broadband providers have such programs, others do not. The city could, for instance, obtain commitments from commercial and noncommercial ISPs to promote awareness of these programs, to extend the availability of existing programs for a longer period of time, and to open eligibility to more users.

# 5 PILOT PROMISING AND INNOVATIVE IDEAS TO LEVERAGE CITY ASSETS TO EXPAND WIFI COVERAGE TO COMMUNITIES IN NEED.

## **USE BUSES TO CREATE MOBILE HOTSPOTS**

At Austin Independent School District (AISD), the district has retrofitted its buses with WiFi capabilities up to a distance of 200 feet. AISD is strategically positioning these buses daily at apartments and in neighborhoods identified as having the highest needs. Using the WiFi “SuperSpot” approach, the city, either through Chicago Transit Authority or CPS’s private bus contracts, could implement a similar program to provide internet access to areas of the city that need it the most.

## **ENSURE SCHOOLS, LIBRARIES AND OTHER PUBLIC ENTITIES PROVIDE INDEFINITE ACCESS TO THEIR NETWORKS EVEN WHILE CLOSED**

The city should continue to work with ISPs to ensure that WiFi for schools, libraries, and other public locations remain open to their communities. The Federal Communications Commission has already encouraged schools and libraries closed due to the coronavirus pandemic to open their WiFi networks for public use.<sup>1</sup> This would be a negligible cost to both CPS, Chicago Public Libraries, and other public agencies.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.shlb.org/news/shlb/2020/03/FCC-Empowers-Schools-Libraries-to-Open-Wi-Fi-to-Community-Use/>

**“WHILE MY FAMILY HAS INTERNET AT HOME, IT IS NOT AS FAST AND STABLE AS IT SHOULD BE, AND OUR KIDS STRUGGLE TO USE THE ONLINE PLATFORMS FOR TAKING TESTS. FOR THE MANY FAMILIES IN AUSTIN WHO DON’T HAVE RELIABLE INTERNET AT HOME, IT MUST BE EVEN MORE DIFFICULT TO TRY TO CONDUCT REMOTE LEARNING.”**

**—  
RENA R., AUSTIN PARENT**

**EXECUTING THESE RECOMMENDATIONS IS FEASIBLE IF CITY, CIVIC, AND BUSINESS LEADERS MAKE IT A PRIORITY**

Implementing these recommendations is possible through a combination of federal stimulus funds, philanthropic support, and private sector commitments. The City of Chicago received nearly \$47 million dollars in flexible Community Development Block Grant funds through the recent CARES Act. A portion of these funds could be used to expand broadband access where it is most needed, and these dollars should be leveraged to attract additional commitments from industries such as tech.

The future vitality of Chicago’s economy depends on the education of our young people, and it is in the best interest of the private sector and philanthropic community to help ensure educational equity. This is a solvable problem.

**Now is the time for our public, business, and civic leaders to step up.**

# CLOSING STATEMENT

Crisis forces us to confront head-on the inequities that make quality education out of reach for far too many Chicagoans. Crisis also brings forth generosity, ingenuity, and resilience — strengths that are built into the fabric of our city. Strengths that can close our digital divide and see us through this pandemic.

## TRANSLATION

The sudden shift to remote learning and virtual class has its challenges for families. The lack of devices creates conflict with students' schedules with classes overlapping. On top of that, the reduced space in homes is not appropriate for the students to concentrate on work or exams—more so when there is limited and unstable internet connection. Parents should receive technology support to reduce the stress of helping and supervising their students. In some cases, this problem is more pronounced for parents that have English as a language barrier and for students that are English language learners (ELL).

**“EL CAMBIO REPENTINO AL APRENDIZAJE REMOTO Y CLASES VIRTUALES TIENEN SU DESAFÍO PARA LAS FAMILIAS. LA FALTA DE DISPOSITIVOS CREA CONFLICTOS CON LOS HORARIOS DE LOS ESTUDIANTES YA QUE LAS CLASES SE CRUZAN. ENCIMA DE ESO, LOS ESPACIOS REDUCIDOS EN CASA NO SON APROPIADOS PARA QUE LOS ESTUDIANTES SE CONCENTREN EN SUS TAREAS Y EXÁMENES— MAS SI LA CONEXIÓN AL INTERNET ES LIMITADA O INESTABLE. PADRES DEBEN RECIBIR APOYO PARA CAPACITAR SU CONOCIMIENTO DE TECNOLOGÍA Y ASÍ REDUCIR EL ESTRÉS DE AYUDAR Y SUPERVISAR A SUS HIJOS. EN ALGUNOS CASOS, ESTE PROBLEMA ES MÁS PRONUNCIADO PARA PADRES QUE TIENEN EL INGLÉS COMO BARRERA Y LOS ESTUDIANTES DE APRENDIZAJE DE INGLÉS (ELL).”**

**— ALMA S., BACK OF THE YARDS PARENT**



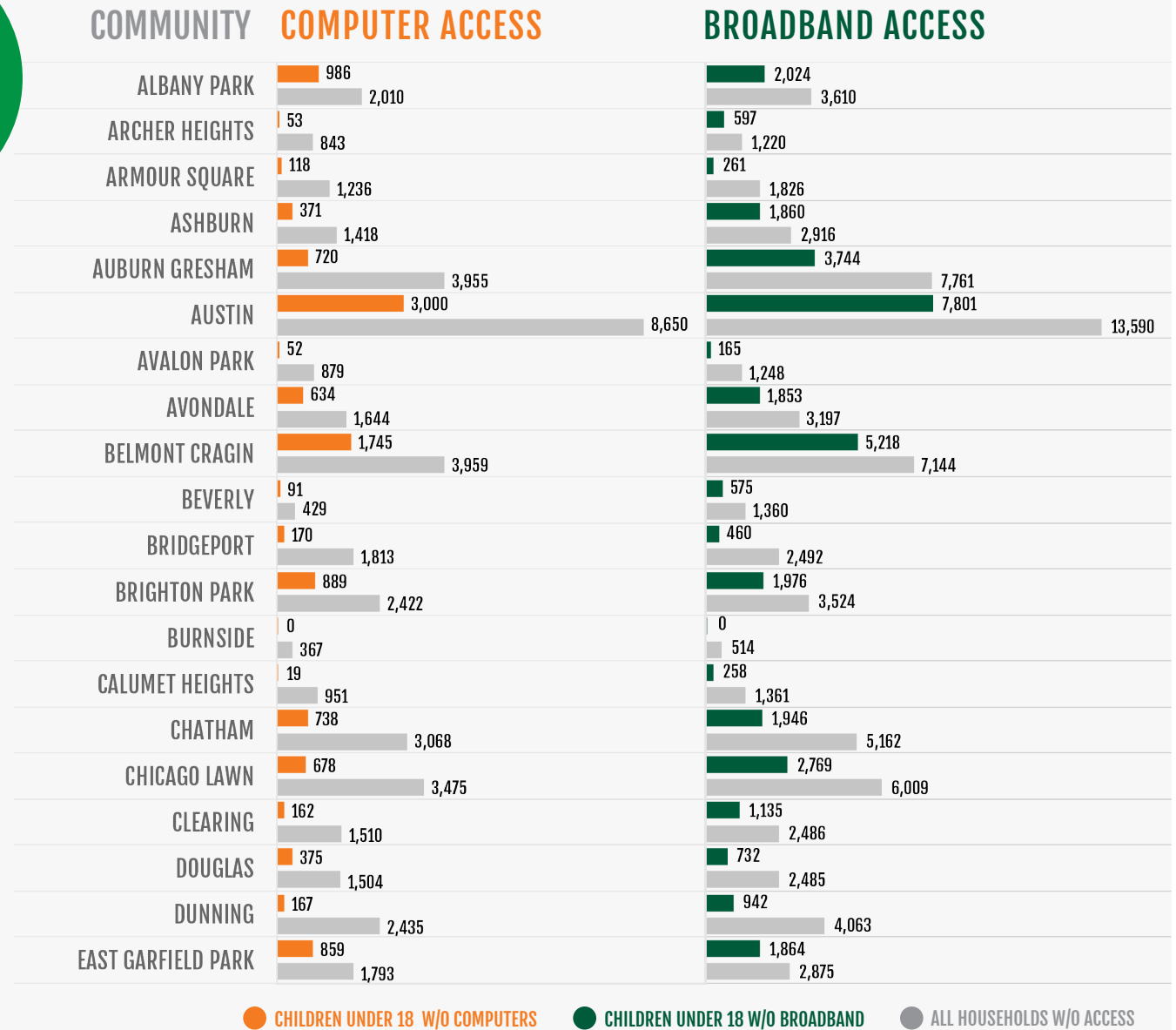
# APPENDIX

CHICAGO KIDS AND HOUSEHOLDS WITHOUT ACCESS TO  
COMPUTERS AND BROADBAND



# CHICAGO KIDS & HOUSEHOLDS WITHOUT ACCESS TO COMPUTERS & BROADBAND

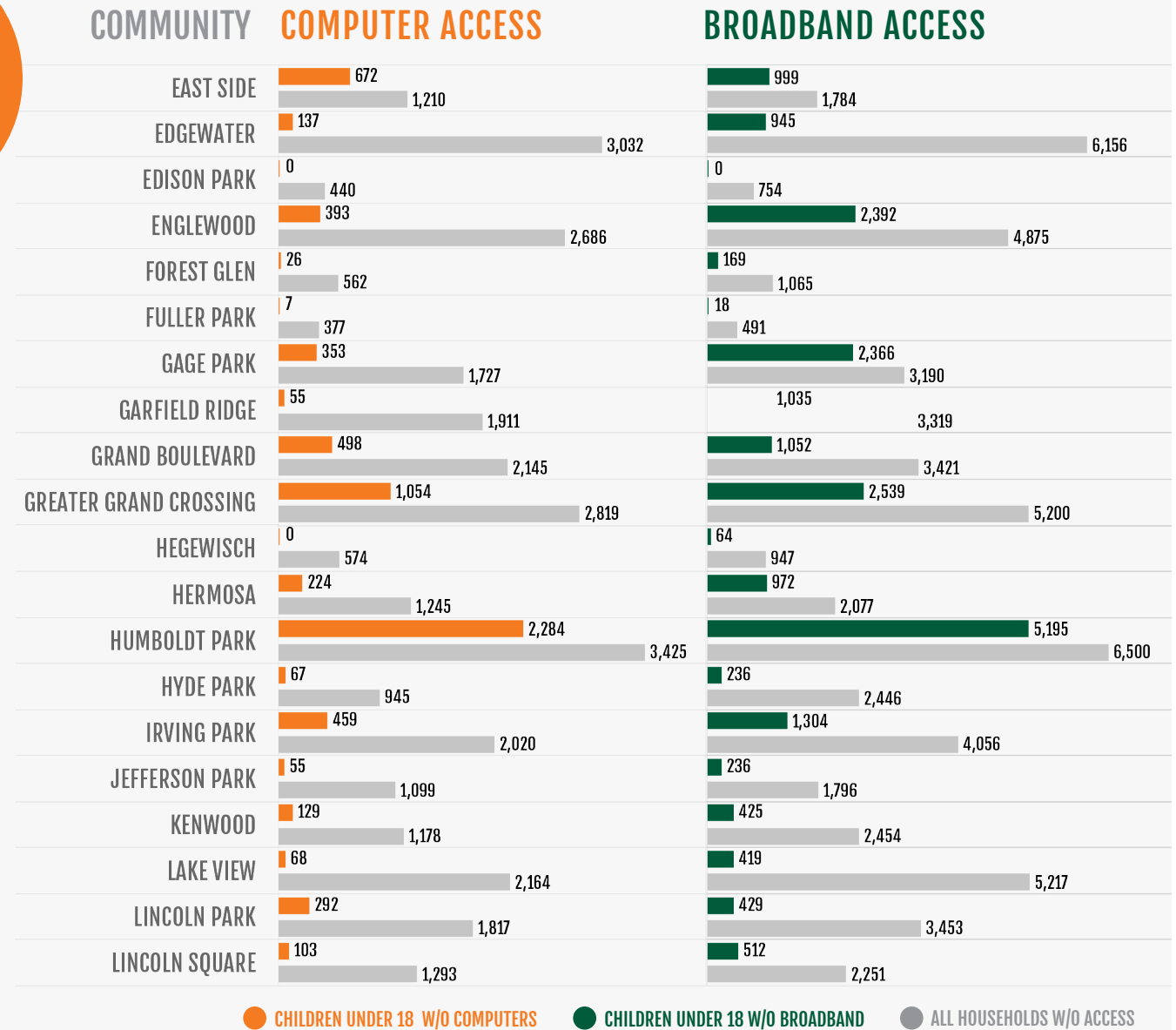
ALPHABETICAL  
BY COMMUNITY AREA  
**A-E**





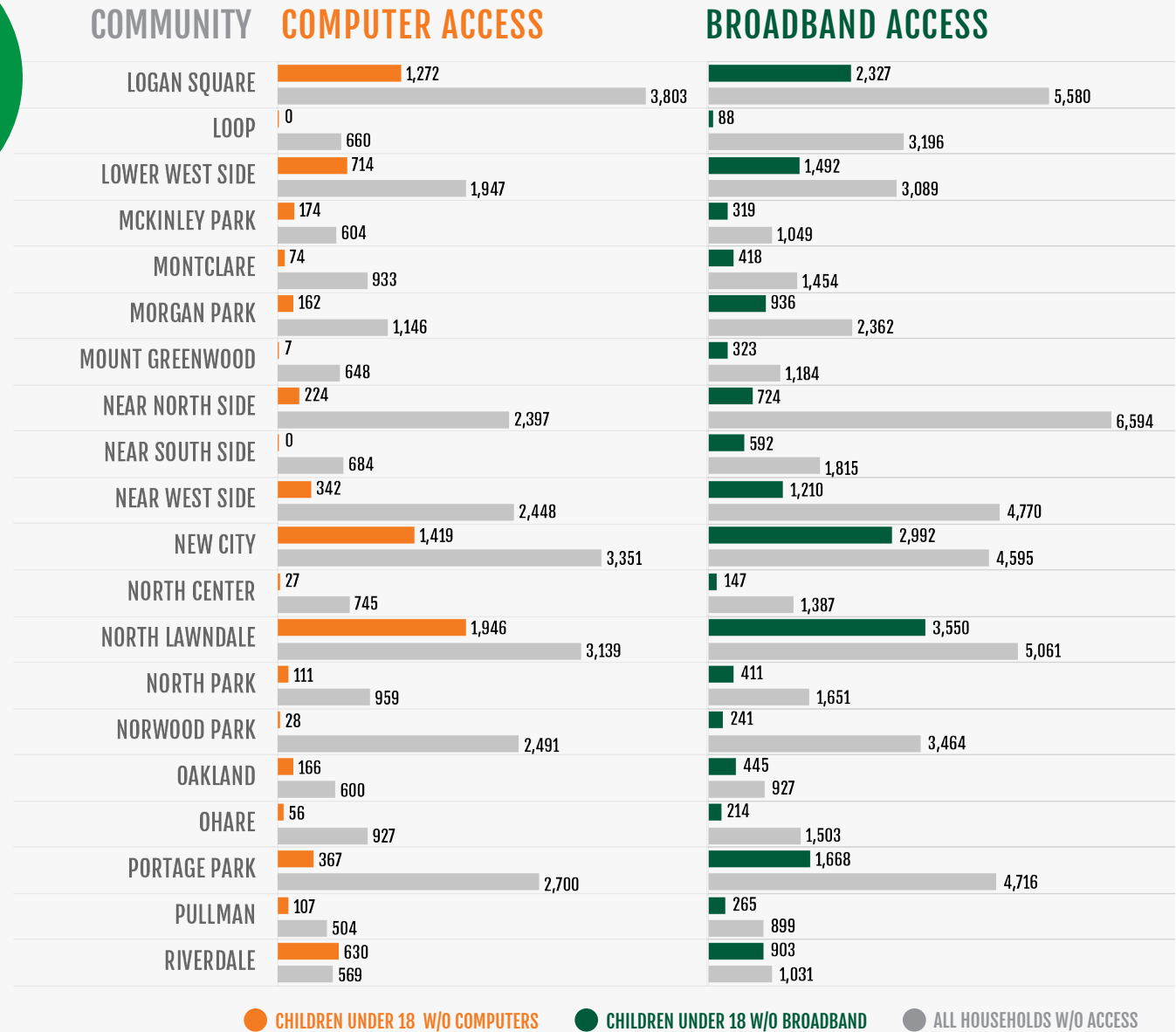
# CHICAGO KIDS & HOUSEHOLDS WITHOUT ACCESS TO COMPUTERS & BROADBAND

ALPHABETICAL  
BY COMMUNITY AREA  
**E-L**



**CHICAGO KIDS  
& HOUSEHOLDS  
WITHOUT  
ACCESS TO  
COMPUTERS &  
BROADBAND**

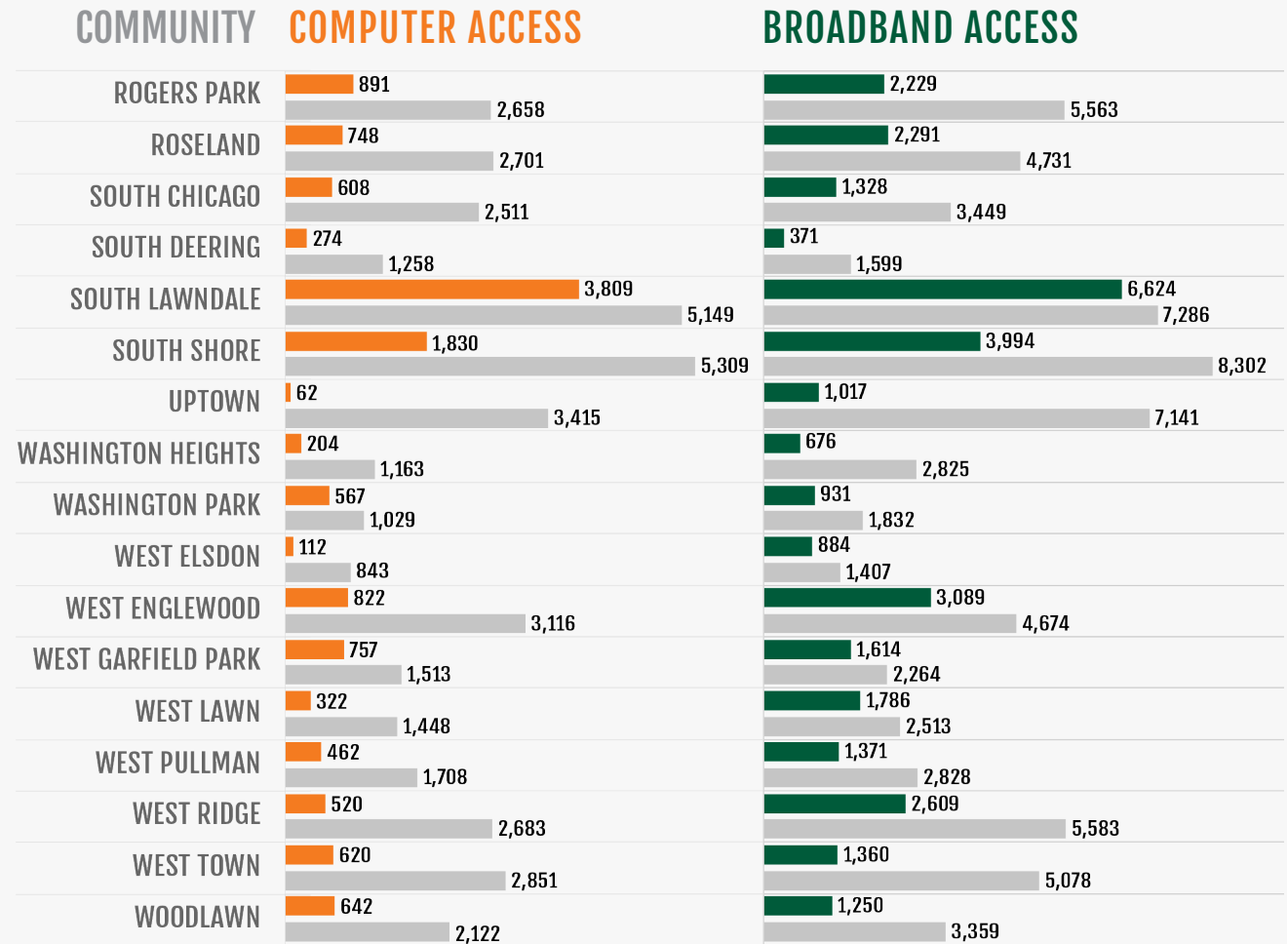
ALPHABETICAL  
BY COMMUNITY AREA  
**L-R**





# CHICAGO KIDS & HOUSEHOLDS WITHOUT ACCESS TO COMPUTERS & BROADBAND

ALPHABETICAL  
BY COMMUNITY AREA  
**R-W**



● CHILDREN UNDER 18 W/O COMPUTERS
 ● CHILDREN UNDER 18 W/O BROADBAND
 ● ALL HOUSEHOLDS W/O ACCESS

**THANK YOU**



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