

For most Mexicans, the digital age is still out of reach

January 24 2012, By Lauren Villagran

Israel Vasquez, 12, has no computer or Internet access at home, but he needs both to do his homework.

Luckily, his rundown neighborhood in this city, an extension of the vast urban sprawl beyond the Mexico City limits, is home to a [computer](#) center where he can finish his homework; study his favorite subjects, history and geography; and chat with friends - all for free.

Mexicans have access to first-world infrastructure and high-velocity Internet speeds in Mexico City, in pockets along the border with Texas, and in business centers like Monterrey and Guadalajara, but the vast majority of Mexicans live beyond the reach of the digital age. About 82 million people - 70 percent of Mexicans - have no access to a computer or the Internet, according to the Mexican Internet Association, or AMIPCI.

Just 35 percent of Mexican households had a computer at the start of 2010, according to a joint report by AMIPCI, civil organizations and Mexico's national Congress. Access statistics worsen when split along economic lines: The report shows the penetration of computers in Mexican households at the top of the economic pyramid was 5.5 times that of households at the bottom.

"The success of companies, universities, organizations and people depends a lot on the digital knowledge that they have," said Javier Allard, director of Mexican Association of the [Information Technology](#)

[Industry](#), or AMITI.

Allard and other experts say Mexico's ability to compete in the [global economy](#) - and narrow the country's gaping chasm between rich and poor - are on the line.

Mexico ranks No. 2 for [economic inequality](#) among the 34 nations belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, behind Chile. The OECD report on global inequality indicated that a nation's technological progress had a greater impact than globalization on the spread between the very rich and very poor.

Technological progress in Mexico, however, has so far panned out unevenly. In terms of Internet access, Mexico falls behind Colombia, Brazil, Venezuela, Chile and Argentina - countries where between 30 percent and 40 percent of the population is connected online.

A Mexico City-based nonprofit organization called Proaccesso is working to bridge this sizable "digital divide" with subsidized computer centers, like the one Vasquez uses, that provide access where there has been none.

In a Nezahualcoyotl neighborhood call Hope, the buildings are affixed with makeshift street signs that bear the names of ranchera songs like Me Voy and Adios - "I'm leaving" and "Goodbye." There are houses built of scrap wood and metal among the modest concrete-block homes, but the streets are paved. Nezahualcoyotl is known for its high crime rate and, lately, for an influx of the country's violent drug cartels.

The Proaccesso centers are modular, built with recycled materials and outfitted with dozens of computers.

When Vasquez and his mother, Maribel Fonseca, visited recently, a

security guard stood watch on the street outside.

"I like that he comes here because this place is very calm and safe," Fonseca said. "We used to go to the cyber cafes, but they are more expensive, and there is less security."

Proaccesso has won funding from public and private sources, including the federal and Mexico state governments, Microsoft Corp. and Dell Inc. and its Centers for Learning and Innovation. Microsoft donated \$1.7 million in software licenses, while Dell donated the computer equipment needed to outfit two of Proaccesso's 70 educational centers in Mexico state.

The mission, said Proaccesso President Aleph Molinari, is to "use technology to democratize the access to education." He said he envisions expanding the program nationwide.

There have been other public initiatives to guarantee public access to computers and the Internet, including Mexico City's installation of dozens of free cibercentros, or computer centers, in the city's metro stations.

Antonio Eduardo, a computer science major at Mexico City's National Polytechnic Institute, recently visited a metro computer center. He doesn't have Internet access at home, he said, so he visits the centers regularly because "it's cheaper and it gives me the opportunity to stay on top of my work."

More than half the Mexican households that don't have a computer or Internet access said they hadn't purchased equipment or contracted Internet service for lack of money or economic resources, according to the joint report by the Mexican Internet and information technology (IT) organizations and Congress.

The report calls for a cohesive "digital agenda" of the kind that many other nations possess and Mexico lacks. Mexico is the only country in the 34-nation Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development that doesn't have an official national "digital agenda."

Such an agenda would outline technology IT and communications goals to improve security, economic, social and cultural development; increase transparency and civil participation; and boost business competitiveness.

Mexico may be lagging, but there is some good news: The report also showed that Internet access is spreading, with the number of Internet subscribers projected by the joint study to grow 17 percent through 2013.

Allard said that, despite drawbacks, Mexico is still a technology IT leader in Latin America.

"I believe without a doubt that Brazil, Mexico and Argentina have IT leadership" in the region, he said. "Investments and exports have increased significantly. That there are important weaknesses, well, yes there are, unfortunately."

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