

Field Notes on Digital Inclusion | Part 1 | Beyond the Baseline: Seeing What the Data Cannot Count

[Originally published October 6, 2025 on LinkedIn](#)

Celebrating the Data

As someone who lives for data and research, I want to celebrate this important work from [Digitunity](#). Their new report, "**The United States Computer Ownership Gap Persists,**" reminds us that the digital divide is far from over. This October, Digitunity will release additional analysis exploring how factors such as age, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, and employment status relate to large screen computer ownership. I cannot wait to see that new research.

What the Numbers Reveal

Here in Illinois, the numbers are telling:

- 13.9% of households do not have a large screen computer
- 518,812 are "smartphone only" households
- 187,036 have "no computer" at all

That is **705,848 total households** without a large screen computer in our state.

Who the Numbers Miss

While these data points from the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) are invaluable and reflected in the [Cook County Digital Equity Map too](#), I keep thinking about the missing voices. People who did not respond out of financial shame, distrust, or digital fear. People who have been left behind by systems that assume connectivity equals inclusion.

And then I think about the stories behind those numbers. The grandmother too proud to say her Wi-Fi was cut off. The young man burned by an online scam. The family sharing one phone for everything. Their silence does not mean they are not there. It means we have not built systems safe or supportive enough for them to be seen.

The Geography of Exclusion

Digitunity's report also highlights the states with the highest levels of households without a large screen computer in 2024: Mississippi (22.8%), Arkansas (21.7%),

Louisiana (21.1%), West Virginia (19.8%), and Kentucky (18.5%). It is striking that several of these same states were once the starting points of the Great Migration, when millions of Black families left the South seeking safety, dignity, and opportunity in the North and West.

Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana were among the largest sources of that migration, their residents drawn toward industrial jobs and the promise of freedom in cities like Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and St. Louis. West Virginia and Kentucky tell a slightly different story. While both had notable Black populations, they were more often transit states than destinations, with limited industrial opportunities to anchor economic mobility.

Even so, the pattern holds. The regions people left behind for opportunity are still among those with the least digital access today. And the destination cities where they arrived are not that far ahead. The geography of exclusion has changed its shape, but not its reach. What was once a journey north for work has become a digital journey toward access, trust, and belonging.

From Migration to Digital Trust

This connection between migration, opportunity, and access has been central to my own research as a [Benton Opportunity Fellow](#). I have spent the past year studying census records that trace the journeys of families who moved north during the Great Migration, only to find new barriers in housing, education, and technology. Those records often tell their stories through what is missing. The gaps in family documentation mirror the gaps in family opportunity. The distrust of government systems runs deep, and history gives us plenty of reasons why.

Even as I type this, we can see how technology can be weaponized, and data can be manipulated. Those patterns do not just shape the past; they define the barriers we are still trying to dismantle.

What if the next wave of digital equity work measured trust alongside access?

What if we treated confidence and safety as infrastructure?

What if every household counted became a household connected, capable, and cared for?

Beyond Access: Measuring Belonging

I'm drawn to data that tells a fuller story, not just of who's connected or not, but who feels they belong. I see beauty in data that breathes, that paints pictures of people, not just points. Data visualization is art, and we need more artists in that space. Have you heard about the [CollabARTive Community](#)? If your research lives there, let's collaborate. I'd love to join you, bringing stories to the spaces where numbers live. Storytelling and data together can illuminate the heart of community.