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## **New report from Data & Society illustrates awareness of digital privacy and security harms among Americans with lower levels of income and education**

*Additional insights about mobile device use, demand for digital privacy and security training*

NEW YORK—September 27, 2017—A new report released by **Data & Society** offers the first in-depth analysis of the privacy and security experiences of low-socioeconomic-status populations in the United States.

The report finds that most of those living in U.S. households with annual incomes of less than \$20,000 per year are **acutely aware** of a range of digital privacy harms, but many say it would be **difficult to access the tools and strategies** that could help them protect their personal information online.

In light of the September 18th announcement by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security about **federal agencies' intent to collect social media information and search history** from a variety of immigrant groups, "Privacy, Security, and Digital Inequality" is especially relevant: In particular, the report finds that **foreign-born Hispanic adults** stand out for both their privacy sensitivities, and for their desire to learn more about safeguarding their personal information.

“Privacy, Security, and Digital Inequality” includes detailed comparisons across different racial, ethnic, and nativity groups, finding that there are substantial gaps across these groups when looking at **reliance on mobile connectivity**.<sup>1</sup>

“This study highlights the disconnect between the one-size-fits-all conversations about privacy-related risk that happen in Washington and the concerns that are most salient to the communities who have long experienced a disproportionate level of surveillance and injustice in their daily lives,” said **Mary Madden**, Researcher at Data & Society and lead author of the report. “When those who influence policy and technology design have a lower perception of privacy risk themselves, it contributes to a lack of investment in the kind of safeguards and protections that vulnerable communities both want and need.”

In light of new pressures surrounding immigration policy and status in the United States, the report is a highly relevant snapshot of the demand for privacy- and security-related training among some of the most vulnerable of these low-socioeconomic-status groups. The report also finds a disproportionate reliance on mobile devices, offering a potential starting point for those looking to provide educational resources.

“This report illustrates the many ways in which smartphones have become an indispensable source of internet access for those who may lack other technology resources in their homes and communities,” said **Michele Gilman**, Venable Professor of Law at the University of Baltimore and Director of the Saul Ewing Civil Advocacy Clinic. “Far from being a luxury, smartphones—with their many benefits and vulnerabilities—offer a critical source of connection to jobs, family, education and government services.”

Gilman, a poverty law expert, also served on the Research Advisory Board for the two-year research project, and co-authored a related law review article with Madden titled, "Privacy, Poverty and Big Data: A Matrix of Vulnerabilities for Poor Americans."

“Privacy, Security, and Digital Inequality,” is based on newly-released data from a nationally-representative telephone survey of 3,000 American adults. The survey, which included interviews in both English and Spanish, was made possible by a

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<sup>1</sup> The analysis of racial and ethnic minority groups in this report is limited by the survey sample size, and does not include detailed comparisons of Asians, Native Americans, and other subgroups. For instance, in this survey, out of 3,000 respondents, just 3% identified as Asian or Asian American.

grant from the Digital Trust Foundation and fielded in November and December of 2015.

## Key findings

One of the most notable gaps illustrated by the survey is that various low-socioeconomic-status groups continue to be disproportionately reliant on mobile devices as their primary source of internet access. In addition, there are also substantial gaps across racial, ethnic, and nativity groups when looking at **reliance on mobile connectivity**:

- 73% of smartphone internet users who have less than a high school degree say they **mostly go online using their cell phone**, while just 25% of college grads rely on their phones as a primary access point.
- 70% of foreign-born Hispanics who own smartphones and use the internet say that **most of their internet use takes place on their cell phone**, compared with 34% of white smartphone owners, 52% of blacks and 53% of U.S.-born Hispanics.
- 63% of smartphone internet users who live in households earning less than \$20,000 per year say they **mostly go online from their phone** compared with just 21% of those living in households earning \$100,000 or more.

The survey also includes a range of questions about various digital privacy and security concerns. For each of these questions, those living in households with annual incomes of less than \$20,000 per year are considerably more likely to say that they are “very concerned” about the possibility of these harms when compared with those in households earning \$100,000 or more per year:

- 60% of those in the lowest income households say the **loss or theft of financial information** is something they are “very concerned” about, while just 38% of those in the highest earning households say the same.
- 52% of those in the lowest earning households say that **not knowing what personal information is being collected about them or how it is being used** makes them “very concerned,” compared with 37% of those in the highest income households.

- 48% of the lowest income group say they are “very concerned” about **becoming the victim of an internet scam or fraud**, while just 24% adults in the highest earning groups report this.
- 38% say they are “very concerned” that **they or someone in their family may be the target of online harassment**, while only 12% of adults in the highest earning households report this level of concern.

Variations by education level are also pronounced, with those who have less than a high school degree expressing roughly the same level of concern as those earning less than \$20,000 per year. In addition, these concerns are also often accompanied by low levels of trust in the institutions and companies that these Americans rely on to be responsible stewards of their data.

“The path to restoring Americans’ trust in data-driven institutions has become increasingly fraught” Madden said. “Almost daily, Americans are waking to headlines that their data may have been compromised, misused or could become vulnerable through an ever-expanding array of data-driven technologies that leave consumer privacy by the wayside.”

Beyond broad variations in income and education, this report examines the experiences of different racial and ethnic groups and includes new analysis of Hispanic adults that considers their nativity (U.S. born vs. foreign-born).<sup>2</sup> In particular, foreign-born Hispanic adults, who are currently among the lowest-earning and least-educated groups in the U.S., stand out in a number of ways:

- 63% of the foreign-born Hispanic population say that they are “very concerned” about **being the victim of an internet scam or fraud**, compared with 42% of U.S.-born Hispanics, 46% of blacks, and only 24% of whites.
- 62% of foreign-born Hispanic adults say they are “very concerned” about **being unfairly targeted by law enforcement**, compared with 32% of U.S.-born Hispanics and only 13% of whites. In this case, black adults share a comparable level of concern: 54% say they are “very concerned” about law enforcement targeting them unfairly.

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<sup>2</sup> The analysis of racial and ethnic minority groups in this report is limited by the survey sample size, and does not include detailed comparisons of Asians, Native Americans, and other subgroups. For instance, in this survey, out of 3,000 respondents, just 3% identified as Asian or Asian American.

- 59% of foreign-born Hispanics say they are “very concerned” that **they or someone in their family could be the target of online harassment**. That compares with 35% of black adults, 34% of U.S.-born Hispanics, and just 14% of white adults expressing this level of concern about being the target of online harassment.

In addition, foreign-born Hispanic internet users are among the least likely to use privacy settings and almost half who use social media automatically share their location in their posts:

- 44% of foreign-born Hispanic internet users **say they use privacy settings**, compared with 64% of U.S.-born Hispanics who are online, 53% of black internet users and 68% of white internet users.
- 45% of foreign-born Hispanic adults who are social media users **say they automatically share their location in their posts**; that compares with just 24% of U.S.-born Hispanic adults, 29% of black adults and 21% of white adults who use social media.

The survey also asked respondents about their desire “to learn more” about a range of privacy- and security-related skills and illustrates a substantial demand for educational resources among low-socioeconomic-status groups. However, it is clear that there are considerable disparities in access to tools and strategies for those who want to learn more about protecting their personal information online:

- 48% internet users with less than a high school degree feel as though it would be **difficult for them to find the tools and strategies they would need** if they wanted to learn more about protecting their personal information online, compared with just 20% of high school graduates who have not attended college.
- 31% of internet users living in households earning less than \$20,000 per year say it would be **difficult to find the tools and strategies they would need** to learn more about protecting their personal information online, compared with just 17% of those in higher-earning households.

Yet, one of the largest gaps in confidence regarding access to tools and strategies is evident when comparing foreign-born Hispanic internet users with other racial, ethnic, and nativity groups. Among foreign-born Hispanics who are online, 59% say that if they wanted to learn more about protecting their personal information, it would be somewhat or very difficult to find the tools and strategies they would need. That compares to just 16% of U.S.-born Hispanic internet users, 17% of white internet users, and 21% of black internet users.

## **About the survey**

The findings in this report are based on the results of a nationally representative survey of 3,000 adults ages 18 and older living in the United States. The survey was funded by a grant from the Digital Trust Foundation, and the design included an oversample of adults with annual household incomes of less than \$40,000. Interviews were completed in both English and Spanish, according to the preference of the respondent. A combination of landline and cell phone random-digit dial samples was used to reach respondents regardless of the types of telephone they have access to. The margin of sampling error for the complete set of weighted data is  $\pm 2.7$  percentage points.

## **About Data & Society**

Data & Society is a research institute in New York City that is focused on social and cultural issues arising from data-centric technological development. For more, visit [datasociety.net](http://datasociety.net).

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