# Bridging the Divide: Understanding the Digital Education and Online Safety Landscape for Youth in the United States

Sahil Sood,[1 2 3 4 5] Vedant Mehta,[1] Eshawnvie Kallu,[1] Jonathan Lin,[1] Arpita Jagga,[1] Jiann Chong[1]

[1] HYPE International

[2] Harvard College

[3] National Youth Representative Program, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

[4] Young Champions Network, United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)

[5] United Nations Association of the United States of America

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**Navigating Challenges to Digital Education for Youth in the United States**

Digital education has emerged as a cornerstone of learning and knowledge in the 21st century, with online platforms offering increasingly flexible, personalized, and efficient learning pathways that have become integrated into school systems countrywide. However, a cascade in technological equity has directly impacted educational understanding, thus making access to digital resources a pressing issue in the United States (US). Although developing countries may have a different level of technological access than the US does, the level of dependence on technology for education and lifestyle in the US has created challenges that threaten marginalized communities and vulnerable youth.

The digital divide remains an issue affecting youth worldwide. According to data from the American Community Survey, by 2021 97% of 3- to 18-year-olds in the United States had home internet access; however, access was unequal: while 93% had access through a computer, 4% could only access the internet using a smartphone1. Those without internet access at home or reliable computer access are at a disadvantage in today's digital world. Certain groups face greater barriers. Only 78% of youth from families where the parents had less than a high school education had home internet access, compared to 98% for those with parents having a bachelor's degree or higher1. Similarly, 86% of youth from the lowest income households had internet access, versus 99% of youth from the highest income households[1].

The digital divide itself may primarily focus on technological access, but just as important is technological literacy. Effectively utilizing digital tools and navigating online learning platforms remains crucial to a successful education in the 21st century. An article published in the Center for Strategic and International Studies discusses the importance of digital literacy, specifically stating that 90% of jobs in developed countries require basic technological understanding[2].

During the Coronavirus Pandemic, the digital education issue came to light, being nicknamed the "homework gap" due to the various demographics-related disparities. Solutions to the digital divide and the homework gap must make way for youth to have consistent, reliable, and enjoyable access to digital education. The potential of digital education should be realized by all young people, regardless of background, income, or any other circumstances.

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[1] COE - Children's Internet Access at Home. Ed.gov. Published 2023. Accessed January 18, 2024. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cch/home-internet-access

[2] Bandura R, Méndez EI. The Digital Literacy Imperative. Csis.org. Published 2022. Accessed January 18, 2024. https://www.csis.org/analysis/digital-literacy-imperative

**Government Initiatives for Accessible and Promoted Digital Education Among Young People**

The government's promotion of digital education is crucial to the children and adolescents of their nation. The government has and still is implementing policies that promote digital education to kids who live in impoverished places with programs such as Online or All, which helps families apply for low-cost internet nationwide. The U.S Department of Education has stated that the program "will not only raise the bar in education, but change the way we look at access to information for all students, no matter their age, race, economic status, or address"[3].

The U.S government has also passed an act stating the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 is to establish digital education and will award grants for the development of programs that increase students' access to digital learning resources[4]. Additional acts such as The Digital Learning Act of 2015 has been striving to promote students' education with many learning programs leaving citizens to say it has helped to create bridges over the "Homework Gap" in the nation.  Many programs and acts have been made to ensure more kids are receiving education than ever in the US.

Many other programs have been enacted especially with the global pandemic starting in 2020. To help students affected by the lack of resources, Article 4 voiced that "The FCC created the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) in May 2021 to support schools and libraries in providing the tools and services necessary for emergency remote learning.[5]" Additionally, in December of 2021, a $14 billion program called the ACP was established to help low income households be able to afford Internet for employment and education[6]. Initiatives were taken to establish internet in rural and impoverished places of the U.S. Starting with the rise of the generation of internet users, many educational programs have been enacted by the government to ensure students get the adequate learning resources they need.

**What steps is the government taking to ensure that young people can use programs online in a safe, empowering, and inclusive way?**

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[3] U.S. Department of Education and Civic Nation Launch Nationwide Campaign to Help Students and Families Cut Costs and Access Affordable High-Speed Internet | U.S. (2023, June 14). Department of Education. Retrieved January 21, 2024, from https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-and-civic-nation-launch-nationwide-campaign-help-students-and-families-cut-costs-and-access-affordable-high-speed-internet

[4] Digital Learning Equity Act of 2015. (2017, November 9). Congress.Gov. Retrieved January 21, 2024, from https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/3582

[5] What People Are Saying About the Digital Learning Equity Act of 2015. (2017, November 9). Retrieved January 21, 2024, from https://www.capito.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/digital-learning.pdf

[6] Advancing Digital Equity for All: Community-Based Recommendations for Developing Effective Digital Equity Plans to Close the Dig. (2022, September 23). Office of Educational Technology. Retrieved January 22, 2024, from https://tech.ed.gov/files/2022/09/DEER-Resource-Guide_FINAL.pdf

With the rising popularity of digital platforms among young generations, a plethora of unique problems regarding safety and health are surfacing. With nearly 75% of the world's teens being active online in recent years, online platforms are becoming a major part of life for young people. Unfortunately, this involvement is also exposing young adults to harmful content that has been shown to negatively affect user behaviors. For example, sexual predators, cyberbullies, data collection, and misuse of data are all prevalent threats that have been affecting the mental and behavioral health of teens around the world[7].

In order to combat this growing problem, the government has initiated a series of steps tackling different aspects of digital harm. One of the first steps was the creation of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) created in 2000. It addresses the harmful effects of targeted advertising on children. The legislation requires "verifiable consent" before data can be collected from underage users. In 2013, the law was amended so that it could better help protect children via safeguarding their "personal information," which includes cookie trackers, geolocation data, and audio-visual information. Following COPPA state-dependent protection programs helped cope with some loopholes left by COPPA. For example, the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) protects data consent and personal information for youth up to the age of 16. Further reforms have also been passed in state-specific settings that expand the inclusivity of protection programs by opening them up to higher age groups. Additionally, two new regulation laws are currently on the Senate floor: The Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act (CTOPPA) and the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA). Both laws will strengthen protection regarding online collection and personal information while also addressing a larger, more inclusive age group[8].

Unfortunately, these programs alone will not have a significant impact on securitizing youth online. In order to expand this impact, the government also made changes that strengthened the personal protection that each family can give their kids on the Internet. For instance, the government-mandated specific parental controls to be automatically activated—such as limits on when a child or teen can be online, parental access to a child's messages or account, or age verification[9]. By creating these safety options, young internet users can not only have access to networks of protection but can also be sheltered by their guardians so that they don't suffer from technological dangers online.

**Main Challenges to the Youth's Protection from Online Threats in the United States**

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[7] United Nations. "Child and Youth Safety Online | United Nations." United Nations, Accessed. January 20, 2024. www.un.org/en/global-issues/child-and-youth-safety-online.

[8] Thomson, Freya. "Is the U.S. Government Doing Enough to Protect Children Online?" Open Access Government, 2 June 2023, Accessed. January 20, 2024. https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/u-s-government-doing-enough-protect-children-online/160137/

[9] Huddleston, Jennifer. "Improving Youth Online Safety without Sacrificing Privacy and Speech." CATO Institute. 2023. Accessed. January 20, 2024. https://www.cato.org/briefing-paper/improving-youth-online-safety-without-sacrificing-privacy-speech

With more and more of the youth gaining access to the Internet and connecting with others globally across networks, a myriad of online threats poses a challenge to the safety of these children. In the United States (US), the great amount of access to the Internet has caused several problems in regards to their safety and privacy. This has especially impacted the marginalized youth, as some may lack digital education and safety.

Almost every state in the US has a law on anti-bullying, with some including forms of cyberbullying. However, the US still lacks a federal law specifically against cyberbullying. The effects of this remain prevalent as about 37% of children between the ages of 12 to 17 have experienced bullying online and 83% of young people agree that social media giants should regulate cyberbullying to a greater extent on their platforms[10]. With a federal law passed specifically against the act of cyberbullying, the law would provide a uniform legal framework across all states and decrease online bullying, as federal punishments would be consequences of these acts. The prevention of hate speech to vulnerable individuals is key to the health and safety of our future generation.

The Internet also contains inappropriate material for certain age groups, especially for the youth. Age verifications are present on websites that contain material not suitable for the youth in the US, however they are easily bypassable and inconsistent, making it easy to gain access to content not suited for underage individuals. In a study done by Jumio, only 39% of Americans have confidence in websites that contain age-restricted material for digital age verification[11]. Children with less guardian supervision in their life may feel inclined to lie to these "age checks" to gain access to content they should not be seeing. Age verification debates also apply for online chat rooms, where in some chats, age is never checked. This leads to a multitude of problems, including online predation. According to the Child Crime Prevention & Safety Center, about 500,000 online predators are actively online a day, and 89% of this inappropriate behavior to children takes place in Internet chat rooms[12]. Marginalized individuals can fall susceptible to these attacks due to isolation and manipulation, or just limited digital literacy.

These problems of cyberbullying and cybersecurity need to be addressed in the US as the Internet continues to grow across the country. Without digital education, prevention of these attacks on our youth will remain a major issue in our society.

**Concluding Remarks**

[10] 11 facts about cyberbullying. DoSomething.org. (n.d.).
https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-cyber-bullying#
[11] Digital Identity in 2022: Jumio Global Consumer Research. Jumio. (2022, December 19).
https://www.jumio.com/digital-identity-2022-research/#digital-identity-key-findings
[12] Children and grooming / online predators. Child Crime Prevention & Safety Center. (n.d.).
https://childsafety.losangelescriminallawyer.pro/children-and-grooming-online-predators.html

In the today's digital world, the protection of young people from online threats has become a paramount concern. Governments worldwide have recognized the need for comprehensive measures to ensure the safety and privacy of youth in the digital realm.

One of the key legal instruments in the United States is the Child Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA). Enforced by the Federal Trade Commission, COPPA mandates obtaining parental consent before collecting personal information from children under 13, significantly impacting the protection of children's privacy online[13]. In the European Union, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) establishes strict rules on processing children's personal data, emphasizing the need for explicit parental consent[14]. The United Kingdom's Online Safety Act further reinforces the duty of care on online platforms to shield users, particularly children, from harmful content[15].

Governments actively engage in educational and awareness programs to empower young people, parents, and educators with the knowledge needed to navigate the digital landscape safely. These campaigns address responsible internet use, recognizing and reporting online threats, and understanding the risks associated with specific online activities. The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) in the UK plays a crucial role in combating child sexual abuse material online, operating a hotline for reporting illegal content and collaborating with internet service providers to block and remove such material[16]. Additionally, the global observance of Safer Internet Day underscores international efforts to promote online safety, with government support and participation[17].

Despite these initiatives, challenges persist. The dynamic nature of online threats requires continuous adaptation of measures. Critiques highlight gaps in implementation and enforcement. Future considerations should explore emerging threats and advancements in technology, making an ongoing collaborative effort between governments, technology companies, and the public necessary.

In conclusion, government measures to protect young people from online threats encompass legal frameworks, national initiatives, and practical measures. As we navigate the complexities of the digital age, it is imperative to recognize the significance of the issue and the need for proactive, collaborative efforts. Governments play a pivotal role in shaping policies that safeguard the digital generation, emphasizing the importance of ongoing vigilance, education, and adaptation to effectively address evolving challenges in the online world.

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[13] Federal Trade Commission. (n.d.). Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule ("COPPA"). https://www.ftc.gov/legal-library/browse/rules/childrens-online-privacy-protection-rule-coppa
[14] European Union. (2016). Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (General Data Protection Regulation). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32016R0679
[15] UK Government. (2021). Online Safety Bill: Full regulatory impact assessment. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/online-safety-bill-supporting-documents
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[17] Safer Internet Day. (n.d.). About. https://www.saferinternetday.org/en-US/