

Investing in Broadband to End Digital Redlining  
By Xavier Buck

During his State of the Union, President Biden reasserted his plans to expand high speed internet to everyone, particularly rural, tribal, and low-income communities, as part of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. [Congress is investing \\$65 billion](#), largely overseen by the Commerce Department and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and administered to states through grants, to bring overlooked communities into the digital world. At the [Payne Center for Social Justice](#), we're looking closely at the \$2.75 billion allocated for digital equity and inclusion efforts.

The digital divide has been primarily created by broadband companies who have avoided installing fiber cables in lower-income communities under the assumption that people in those communities would pay less. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2018 [American community survey \(ACS\)](#), "households with incomes below \$35,000 accounted for 28% of all households, but 60% of those without broadband subscriptions." One example of broadband disparities by income is in San Francisco where many public housing residents [face low quality to no access to broadband internet](#) because companies avoided installing it in these infrastructurally isolated communities. According to the same ACS data, when low-income households are disaggregated by race, [blacks are the least likely](#) to have broadband internet at home. Many of the same communities that were excluded from full economic inclusion in the postwar era because of racial discrimination in housing and banking are the same communities being digitally redlined today. There are also thousands of black households in rural parts of the country that disproportionately have been without broadband internet for years. Rural blacks are [twice as likely](#) as rural whites to not have broadband internet at home.

At the start of President Biden's term, 39 organizations penned a letter to the FCC and the Administration demanding they [abolish digital redlining](#). In response, President Biden appointed Jessica Rosenworcel to chair the FCC. Rosenworcel first worked to close the digital divide in schools and libraries by administering [\\$7 billion in funds from the American Rescue Plan](#), passed to relieve COVID-related economic burdens. The FCC administered these funds [directly to libraries and schools](#) as grants through their E-Rate program. Shortly after, Rosenworcel published an article calling for Congress to pass legislation that would [expand the E-Rate program](#). However, instead of funding an FCC program, Congress' broadband legislation in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act invites the private sector to expand broadband connectivity across America. Furthermore, Biden's proposed [budget request for FY 2023](#) does not include any increased funding for the FCC, which seems to signal a move

towards private sector solutions. While competition can potentially bring consumer prices down and increase efficiency, the companies who will likely install broadband internet across the United States are the same companies who have digitally redlined countless lower-income communities in urban cities.

It is imperative that we stay vigilant in our efforts to equitably implement broadband access. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, more than at any other time, that access to broadband is essential to learn, live, and grow in the U.S. economy. Our nation has made a significant investment in digital economies and futures and has allocated funds to do it equitably. However, there must be oversight and accountability in the market to assure every community truly has access to affordable and quality broadband internet. We learned in the pandemic that Americans do not have equal access to economic opportunity if they do not have access to broadband internet.