Dealing with the digital divide

Programs seek to boost fluency of youths, who then can help parents, grandparents become computer literate

By Angie Leventis Lourgos
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

By the numbers, 17-year-old Karen Martinez isn't likely to be Web savvy. Her Gage Park neighborhood has one of the lowest rates of online access in the city, and Latinos tend to lag other ethnic groups in terms of Web use.

But she and about 15 other youths from the Southwest Side have spent much of the summer mastering publishing software and uploading photos to create community Web sites. Martinez expects the content will entice her Spanish-speaking parents online more often, extending these digital lessons to other generations. "They use the Internet sometimes ... but these things don't stick," she said, noting that sporadic use doesn't lead to online fluency.

The summer youth project is part of the city's Digital Excellence campaign to address barriers to online access and use.

Roughly 25 percent of Chicago residents don't use the Internet, and 15 percent have limited access, according to a study by the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Iowa. The report, "Digital Excellence in Chicago: A Citywide View of Technology Use," was released last week.

Researchers, using a telephone survey, found that seniors and Spanish-speaking residents were far less likely to use the Internet than respondents who were younger and spoke English.

There wasn't much disparity between black and white residents in terms of online use, though white
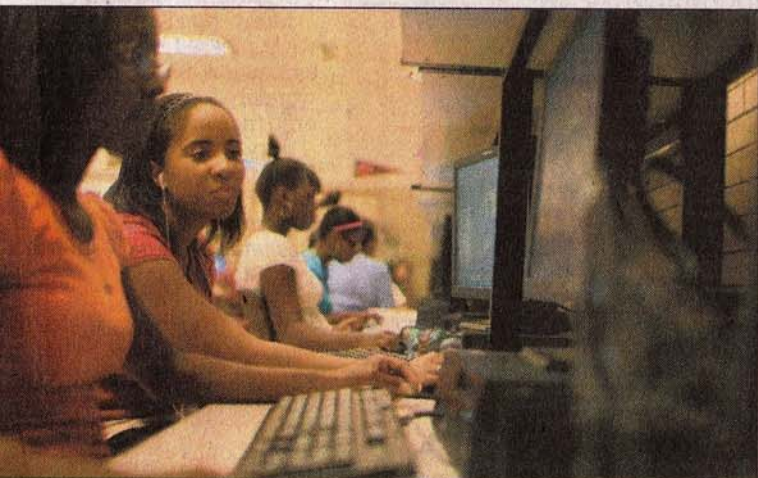
smine James (left) and Rachel Bradley work on designing a page layout ring a Web program. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/TRIBUNE PHOTO**

Kids help bridge digital divide

Steven Cooley and Denise Buie are part of a program to increase Web fluency. E. JASON WAMBSGANS/TRIBUNE PHOTO
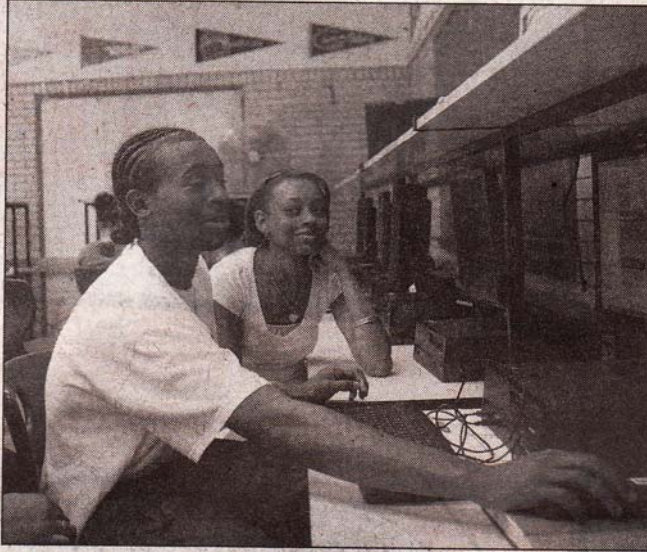
residents were more likely to have Internet access at home, said UIC professor Karen Mossberger, who co-authored the study. Black respondents were more inclined to use public libraries for Internet access than white respondents. Latinos reported the lowest levels of use or access.

Cost tended to be the main obstacle for black residents who lacked Internet access. White residents were the most likely to say they weren't interested in going online. Latino residents had more complex reasons, citing lack of time and concerns about privacy, as well as affordability, and lack of interest and resources.

On a neighborhood level, more wealthy areas like Lakeview boasted the highest rate of home access and use, and low-income neighborhoods such as Fuller Park and South Lawndale were among the least likely to use the Internet or have access at home.

There were some outliers. Low-income Englewood was digitally on par with the rest of the city, indicating that poverty is an obstacle that can be overcome. Mossberger said the results might be attributed to community development groups establishing more computer resources and training, or Englewood might have a larger population of youths, who

tend to be more comfortable online than older residents.

"Englewood is an interesting piece of the puzzle," Mossberger said.

The Armour Square area reported an unusually high percentage of residents who access the Internet at public libraries, though researchers don't know whether this correlates with a lack of home access or the quality and abundance of library resources.

Though public online resources are important, Mossberger said, home access is crucial because skills need to be honed daily, and the Internet should ideally be available at all times. Residents who lack these resources miss out on job opportunities, government services and basic information, she said.

"There are a lot of ways the Internet can help improve quality of life and give economic advantages," she said, adding that people who use the Internet at work make about $100 a week more than those who do not, controlling for education levels.

City leaders and various community groups will be looking to the study for strategies on how to expand Internet literacy. One suggestion was to create wireless networks in poverty-stricken areas, and a majority of respondents said they'd be willing to pay a small tax to fund such a project. Mossberger said other nations subsidize broadband Internet, making it more affordable.

Some smaller programs are ongoing, like a youth online newsletter on the Southwest Side, which was sponsored by the non-profit Local Initiatives Support Corporation. The non-profit also is creating a community Web site in the Pilsen area and wants to expand hours at computer resource centers and set up family workstations so children can help parents or grandparents use the Internet.

"If we don't get everyone computer literate, they're going to miss out on a lot of opportunities," said Norma Sanders, who helps run the youth newsletter project. "Because the gaps are real."