Austin: A Case Study in Connecting What's Available to What's Needed

As the "Silicon Hills" of the technology industry, Austin, Texas is leading the way in new technology innovations and careers. Austin residents demonstrate every day what amazing and creative possibilities can come from creating and using digital and communications technology. But 55,000 adult residents living in our city today are disconnected from this increasingly connected world.

The City of Austin's vision is for every resident to have access to the knowledge and resources needed to participate in our emerging digital society. We need affordable and available devices for all residents. And it is critical that all Austinites understand technology and its relevancy to their daily lives, whether for helping with their kids' homework, looking for jobs, getting access to health information, or accessing online government information.

The City of Austin considers residents of public housing to be of top priority in ensuring public access to community technology. Public housing residents have proven to be eager and dedicated participants in programs that give them tools to build digital skills and improve their standard of living. The City's partnership with the Housing Authority of the City of Austin and community digital inclusion programs is fundamental in empowering public housing residents to work toward self sufficiency.

Austin is fortunate to have a robust system of nonprofit organizations committed to digital inclusion, and a public housing community that is committed to exposing its residents to these beneficial opportunities. Austin also benefits from a competitive broadband market represented by four Internet providers: AT&T, Google Fiber, Grande Communications and Time Warner Cable. Internet access and usage in Austin outpaces the national average. But as technology continues to become more ubiquitous in the workforce, government services and interpersonal communication, the digitally excluded are falling further and further behind.

Representatives from Texas Time Warner Cable, Google Fiber, Grande Communications and AT&T speaking at Austin's Broadband Providers Forum about how they connect Austin

Residential technology usage research conducted by the City of Austin in partnership with The University of Texas at Austin's Technology and Information Policy Institute in 2014 shows that approximately eight percent (or 55,000 adult residents) do not have a home broadband connection, and roughly the same amount does not use the Internet at all. Of those 55,000 adult Austin residents not currently using the Internet, two-thirds are working age (18-65) and 84 percent have a high school education or less. Many of these residents lack the necessary resources to secure stable employment and maintain a comfortable standard of living. According to our research, cost was the top reason for not using the Internet, with two-thirds of non-users reporting that they cannot afford this technology. Relevancy is another major barrier to digital inclusion, with two in five of resident non-users stating that they were simply not interested in the technology. This means that tens of thousands of Austinites are not realizing the benefits digital technology can provide like online banking, electronic health portals and even social media.

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The City of Austin has a long history of supporting front-line programs that help residents overcome these barriers to digital inclusion. The City's Grant for Technology Opportunities Program (GTOPs) was launched in 2001 and since then has provided and been a match to more than $6.5 million dollars in support to digital inclusion programs throughout the community. From one-on-one trainings on building a resume, to new cognitive software for persons with disabilities, to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) camps for youth, the programs funded by GTOPs are paving the way for a more skilled and equitable society.

The Austin Children's Museum Tech Reach Program is a recipient of the Grant for Technology Opportunities Program (GTOPs)

Skillpoint Alliance's Empower Computer Proficiency Program is a 10-week training

GTOPs allows the City to build vital relationships with some of Austin's most dedicated and successful service organizations. Austin Free-Net provides free computer centers throughout the city and teaches basic computer skills like filling out online job applications. Skillpoint Alliance is a workforce development organization that offers in-depth computer training courses that empower residents to compete in today's modern job market. Texas Folklife's Stories from Deep in the Heart program helps youths use technology to tell their stories through radio documentaries that are broadcasted on public radio. These and other nonprofit organizations are the boots on the ground, sharing knowledge and providing tools for digital inclusion. It is the City's goal to help these organizations achieve their missions through financial and strategic support.

The City of Austin is also committed to ensuring public access to media and television production, equipment and training. Public access television promotes the creative power and First Amendment right to free speech for all members of the Austin community who wish to access media forums. Public access supports the premise that freedom of expression must be available to all members of our community, regardless of disability or ability on a fair and equitable basis that is non-discriminatory, non-commercial, non-exclusive, and content-neutral. The City of Austin has owned a public access television facility since 1974 and contracts with local nonprofit organizations that oversee daily operations. Austin public access strives to provide media facilities and equipment, manage cable operations, promote community dialogue and freedom of artistic expression, build the capacity of community media, encourage excellence with technology and service, and strengthen community support for and participation in public access to ensure its survival.

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Technological devices, capabilities and expectations are evolving daily, and the City of Austin recognized the need for strategic direction to keep up with changing community needs. In March of 2014, Austin City Council adopted a resolution that called for the development of a Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan that would act as a roadmap to address access and adoption of digital technology. This plan was developed over six months based on strategic insights from leaders in the nonprofit, K-12 and higher education, public health, business and entrepreneurial, public service and other key sectors. These leaders spoke to their sectors' challenges, assets and opportunities regarding technology and digital inclusion. And most importantly, they established priorities for taking action.

The foundation of the 2014 Digital Inclusion Strategy is an evolving set of Taking Action: Initiatives centered on objectives to help overcome identified challenges. Twenty-five action items, their primary audiences and accountability metrics are outlined across five action categories: Connect, Engage, Include, Integrate, and Coordinate. The City is now working with its digital inclusion partner organizations and individuals across all sectors to execute these Initiatives. Taking Action: Initiatives represents the top priorities from ongoing brainstorming and strategy sessions, but it is by no means complete. The 2014 Digital Inclusion Strategy remains a dynamic document, always open to new ideas for civic and social innovation. It will be updated annually to reflect progress made and new opportunities related to digital inclusion. The Digital Inclusion Strategy identified **dashboard goals** for digital inclusion:

To Understand and Increase Usage of Digital and Communications Technology
- 8% of adults do not use the Internet on any device
- Initiatives: Include 4.3.3, Integrate 4.4.1, 4.4.2, 4.4.3 , Coordinate 4.5.3, 4.5.4 & 4.5.6 will help to achieve this goal

To Address Potential Barriers to Digital Inclusion
- Relevancy is a barrier to non-users, 40% of whom are not interested in using the Internet
- Initiatives: Engage 4.2.6, Include 4.3.1 & 4.3.2 will help to achieve this goal

To Understand the Need for Digital Literacy Training
- 42% of non-users would need someone to help them to get online
- Initiatives: Engage 4.2.5, Coordinate 4.5.1 & 4.5.2 will help to achieve this goal

To Understand the Need for Access via Reliable & Affordable Devices
- Nearly all adults own cell phones, and 83% own smart phones
- Initiatives: Include 4.3.4, Coordinate 4.5.1 & 4.5.2 will help to achieve this goal

To Understand the Need for Language & Disability Accommodations
- 1 in 4 non-users feel they do not speak English well enough to use the Internet
- Initiatives: Include 4.3.5 & 4.3.6 will help to achieve this goal

To Develop Relevancy & Advocacy Campaigns Within Specific Communities & Populations
- Internet non-users primarily live in Southeast Austin
- Initiatives: Connect 4.1.1, 4.1.2, 4.1.3, 4.1.4, Engage 4.2.1, 4.2.2, 4.2.3, 4.2.4, & Coordinate 4.5.5 will help to achieve this goal

It is our connection to technology, creativity and collaboration that will allow Austin to thrive in this constantly changing world, leaving no one behind. Austin has the resources, knowledge and expertise to address the challenges we face in bridging the digital divide. The real challenge is that we must connect what's available to what's needed. We must determine how local government, public housing, the private sector and nonprofit organizations can work together to ensure public housing residents have the skills, devices and drive needed to participate in our digital world. Austin looks forward to continuing to partici-pate in and learn from local and national discussions about how we can connect communities across the United States.

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Office of Telecommunications & Regulatory Affairs

The City of Austin vision includes every Austin resident having an opportunity to be fully engaged in digital society, accessing and using digital and communications technology.

The City has a long history of supporting front-line programs that help residents overcome barriers to digital inclusion like cost, accessibility, and relevancy.

- **Understanding the needs of residents and communities** related to digital access and literacy is a top priority for the City of Austin.

- The City conducted a residential technology usage survey in partnership with UT-Austin, and similar research will occur every three years to **track progress over time**.

- The 2014 study found that **55,000 Austinites** do not use the Internet at all. **Two in three Internet non-users are working age**, and most have only a high school education or less.

- The Grant for Technology Opportunities Program (GTOPs) began in 2001 and has provided and been a match to **more than $6.5 million** for community programs.

- The City also provides financial and staff support to Austin Free-Net, a nonprofit with more than 100 computer stations available for **public access and free training** throughout Austin.

- The City partnered with Google Fiber for Community Connections and selected 100 social good locations to receive a free gigabit Internet connection that will **spark social innovation**.

- The nonprofit and public facilities selected for Community Connections **represent diverse community needs** including arts & culture, education & workforce, public entities, and social, health & well-being.

- The Digital Inclusion Strategy was adopted by Austin City Council in Fall 2014 and serves as a **roadmap for addressing access and adoption** of digital technology in Austin.
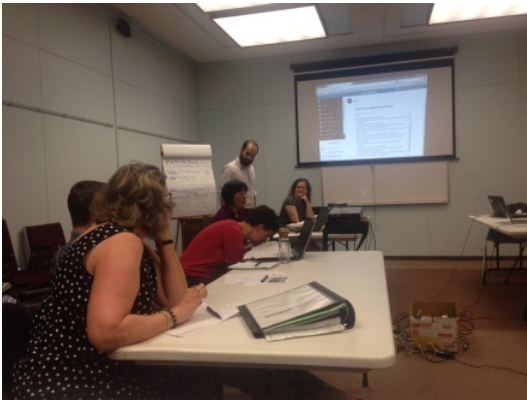
- The foundation of the plan is an evolving set of *Taking Action: Initiatives* centered on objectives for overcoming challenges across five action categories: Connect, Engage, Include, Integrate, and Coordinate.

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Statement of Purpose: Serving the Community

The 2014 Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan lays out the City Council's resolution calling for a roadmap that addresses access and adoption of digital technology within Austin. The foundation of the Austin Digital Inclusion Strategy is an evolving set of Taking Action: Initiatives centered on objectives that can help overcome identified challenges. The Digital Inclusion Strategy is based upon the outcomes of the Austin Digital Assessment, a residential technology usage study conducted every three years, that evaluates and assesses residents' access to technology resources and literacy and training programs.

The Austin Digital Inclusion Strategy highlights five broad initiatives that together will realize Austin's vision for digital inclusion. Three of these are foundational strategies that enable Austin's residents and relevant sectors to be digitally-connected and engaged. Two growth strategies build on this foundation of technological strength to ensure coordinated service delivery. Together, these five initiatives provide the path to ensure every Austin resident has an opportunity to be fully engaged in digital society.

Connect: The City and its partners in digital inclusion should embrace technological innovation to help connect residents to programs and services.

Engage: The City and its partners recognize ongoing community engagement is essential to emphasize the importance of having everyone connected.

Include: The City and its partners endeavor to enhance the ability of digital inclusion program providers to serve local residents, and explore new ways of advancing digital inclusion directly to residents.

Integrate: The City should work with its partners to integrate the Digital Inclusion Strategy with community planning initiatives across all sectors.

Coordinate: To coordinate these efforts and increase the scale of digital inclusion initiatives, the City and its partners should raise additional funds and plan for efficient implementation of important programs and services.

The Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan's 25 initiatives will drive many specific benefits for Austin, city residents, and engaged sectors. These benefits fall into six goal areas, which are displayed throughout the Plan to indicate progress on the digital inclusion indicators.

Goals	2014 Baseline Indicators
To Understand and Increase Usage of Digital and Communications Technology	8% of adults do not use the Internet on any device
To Address Potential Barriers to Digital Inclusion	Relevancy is a barrier to non-users; 40% are not interested in using the Internet
To Understand the Need for Digital Literacy Training	42% of non-users would need someone to help them to get online
To Understand the Need for Access via Reliable & Affordable Devices	Nearly all adults own cell phones, and 83% own smart phones
To Understand the Need for Language & Disability Accommodations	1 in 4 non-users feel they do not speak English well enough to use the Internet
To Develop Relevancy & Advocacy Campaigns Within Specific Communities & Populations	Internet non-users primarily live in Southeast Austin

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Digital Inclusion in Austin

Austin residents demonstrate every day what amazing and creative possibilities can come from creating and using digital and communications technology. But 55,000 adult residents living in our city today are disconnected from this increasingly connected world, with most living in under-served communities.

Vision for Digital Inclusion

The City of Austin's vision is for every resident to have access to the knowledge and resources needed to participate in our emerging digital society. We need affordable and available devices for all residents. And it is critical that all Austinites understand technology and its relevancy to their daily lives, whether for helping with their kids' homework, looking for jobs, getting access to health information, or accessing online government information.

Willie Mae Kirk Library is a key Austin institution where residents can access computers and receive one-one-one technology training assistance.
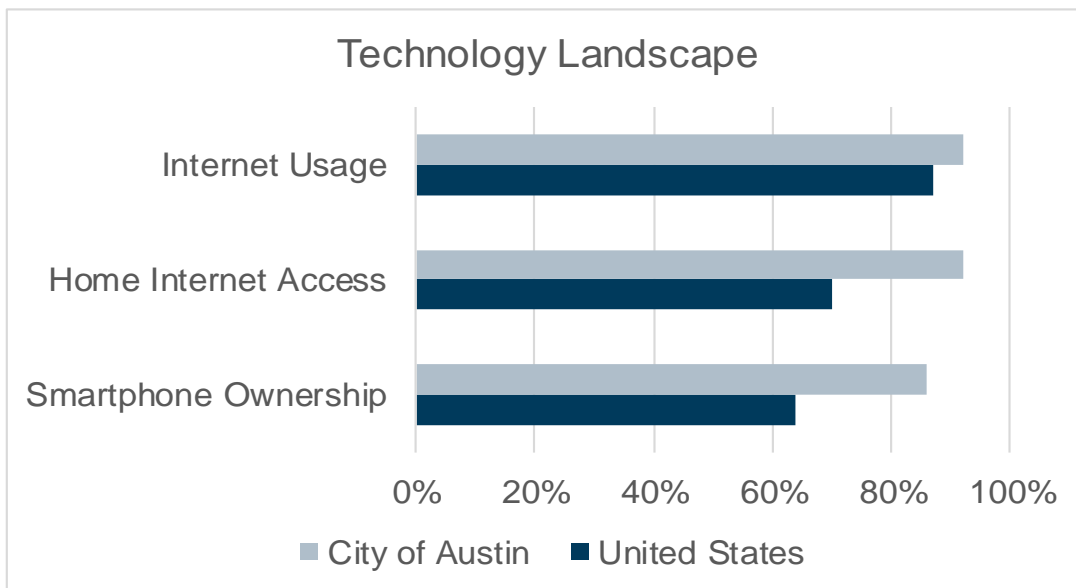
Austin Overview

Austin is known for live music, technological innovation, and a strong sense of community. It is home to 23 public libraries including a history center, numerous recreation and neighborhood centers, multiple universities, and thousands of nonprofit organizations. Austin as a whole benefits from having greater access to and knowledge of technology, and it exceeds the national average in Internet usage, home Internet access, and smartphone ownership. But within Austin, some residents, particularly those in underserved areas, are falling behind the increasingly advanced citywide norms of technology access and adoption.
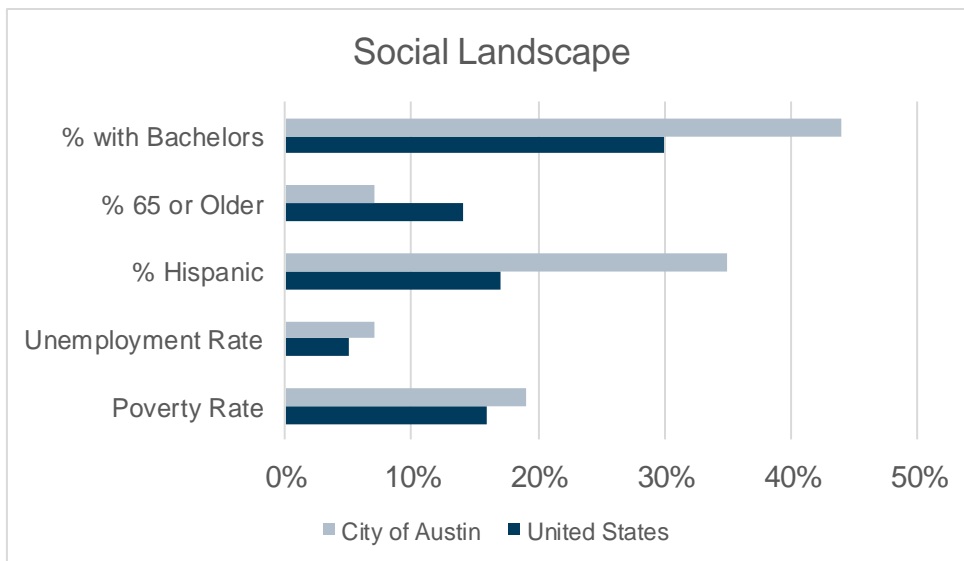
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Barriers to Using the Internet and Social Landscape

Social Landscape

(Chart: Social Landscape — horizontal bar chart comparing City of Austin and United States)

Category	
% with Bachelors	
% 65 or Older	
% Hispanic	
Unemployment Rate	
Poverty Rate	

Axis: 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

Legend: City of Austin, United States

Internet Usage Disparities

92 percent of Austin residents identified as Internet users in a City of Austin / UT survey conducted in 2014, compared to 87 percent nationwide. The rate of home Internet access is much higher in Austin (92 percent) than in the rest of the country (70 percent). And 86 percent of Austin residents own smartphones compared to 64 percent nationwide.

Non-Users: Barriers to Using the Internet & Interest in Training Opportunities

Internet non-users in Austin face some major challenges in accessing and using technology. The high cost of the Internet was the most commonly reported barrier when non-users were asked why they do not use the Internet. Privacy and security concerns were also highly rated concerns. Relevancy continues to be a challenge in Austin, with more than two in five Internet non-users reporting that they simply are not interested in using the Internet. At the same time, many non-users did express an interest in participating in free technology training. Non-users were asked which skills they would most like to learn. Learning to create and edit their own content was the top-rated skill, followed by email and professional software like Microsoft office.

Barriers to Using the Internet	Training Opportunities: Computer Skills of Interest to Non-Users
Listed in Rank Order	*Listed in Rank Order*
#1 Too expensive	#1 Learning to create or edit my own work (writing, photos, videos, website, etc.)
#2 Privacy & security concerns	#2 Email
#3 Not interested in using the Internet	#3 Software (learning Microsoft Office, etc.)
#4 No one to teach them	#4 Job Searching and online job applications
#5 Not enough time	#5 Social Media
#6 Using the Internet is too difficult	
#7 Someone else uses the Internet for them	
#8 Do not speak English well enough	

Social Landscape

Certain social factors may contribute to some disparities in technology skills. Although 44 percent of Austin residents have a Bachelor's Degree or higher, there is significant variation across different regions of the city. When comparing educational attainment across Austin's ten Districts, the rate of earning at least a Bachelor's degree ranges from 18 percent in District 2 to 74 percent in District 10. Seven percent of Austin residents are unemployed, and 19 percent live in poverty. Many programs in Austin are dedicated to teaching residents how to use technology to improve their quality of life.

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Digital Inclusion Partners & Resources

Residents receive computer training at an Austin Free-Net computer lab in the Austin Resource Center for the Homeless.

Digital Inclusion Community Partners

Austin is fortunate to have a robust system of nonprofit, community, and City organizations committed to digital inclusion. The City has a long history of supporting front-line programs that help residents overcome technological barriers. Austin Free-Net is a City-funded nonprofit that provides free computer training throughout the city and operates public access computer labs at 17 locations. All of Austin Public Libraries have computers available for public use, and some libraries offer free one-on-one training. The City's Digital Inclusion Community Engagement Strategy involves working with neighborhood associations and other community organizations to connect with residents with technology resources.

Competitive Broadband Marketplace

Austin also benefits from a competitive broadband market represented by four Internet providers: AT&T, Google Fiber, Grande Communications and Time Warner Cable. All four providers contribute to ensuring Austin residents, businesses and organizations have access to reliable and affordable Internet. Google Fiber partnered with the City of Austin for the Community Connections Program to award 100 nonprofit and public facilities a free gigabit-speed Internet connection to spark social innovation.

Representatives from Texas Time Warner Cable, Google Fiber, Grande Communications and AT&T speaking at Austin's Broadband Providers Forum about how they connect Austin.

Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan

The City of Austin's Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan calls on the City to leverage these community assets to promote digital inclusion in Austin. We can empower Austin residents through increased digital skills that contribute to improved education, job preparedness, health resources, social connections and more.

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Community Assets

Public Access Computer Labs and Computer Training Facilities

Public Access was identified as a fundamental **principle of digital inclusion** in the International City/County Management Association's *Building Digital Communities: A Framework for Action* (2011). *Public Access* and other principles have been integrated into the City of Austin's Digital Inclusion Strategic Plan as guiding elements around which the City and its partners should dedicate programmatic time, resources, strategic development and more. Ensuring that all residents have access to safe and reliable spaces for digital access is a top priority for Austin's digital inclusion strategy.

Public access computer labs and computer training facilities are some of Austin's most highly utilized facilities for digital inclusion programming. While public computer labs are available in all 10 Council Districts, there is ongoing demand for increased locations, longer public access hours and more one-on-one training.

Community Connections Sites

Availability was also identified as a fundamental **principle of digital inclusion** in *Building Digital Communities: A Framework for Action* (2011). *Availability* needs to become more ubiquitous both in individual households and in multi-user environments that can empower local communities to stay connected.

Google Fiber partnered with the City of Austin for the Community Connections program. Community Connections awarded a free gigabit-speed Internet connection for ten years to 100 nonprofit and public facilities in fiberhoods that qualify for Google Fiber service. Community Connections sites include 23 libraries, 16 public schools, three institutions of higher education, a public housing computer lab, public health organizations, and numerous nonprofits providing resources in the arts, community-building, education, workforce development, youth services, LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) support, legal aid, media training and equipment, aging resources and more.

Neighborhood Organizations and Associations & Planning Contact Teams

Relevance was also identified as a fundamental **principle of digital inclusion** in *Building Digital Communities: A Framework for Action* (2011). *Relevancy* is an ongoing challenge for those residents who do perceive Internet access to be an unnecessary or unaffordable luxury, as opposed to a critical utility to meet daily living needs in our increasingly digital world. Neighborhood-based groups are tuned into their residents' needs and can be great assets in communicating the importance of digital literacy.

It is important to engage with neighborhood and planning organizations to develop grassroots campaigns for digital inclusion, as these community leaders connect us to local communities. One example of how the City of Austin Digital Inclusion program has engaged with these organizations is our work with East Town Lake Citizens Neighborhood Organization. In collaboration with Austin Free-Net, the three entities are organizing a block walk and neighborhood survey, in order to identify whether the residents of the neighborhood would want and benefit from the creation of a public access computer lab with computer training.

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Internet Users by Council District

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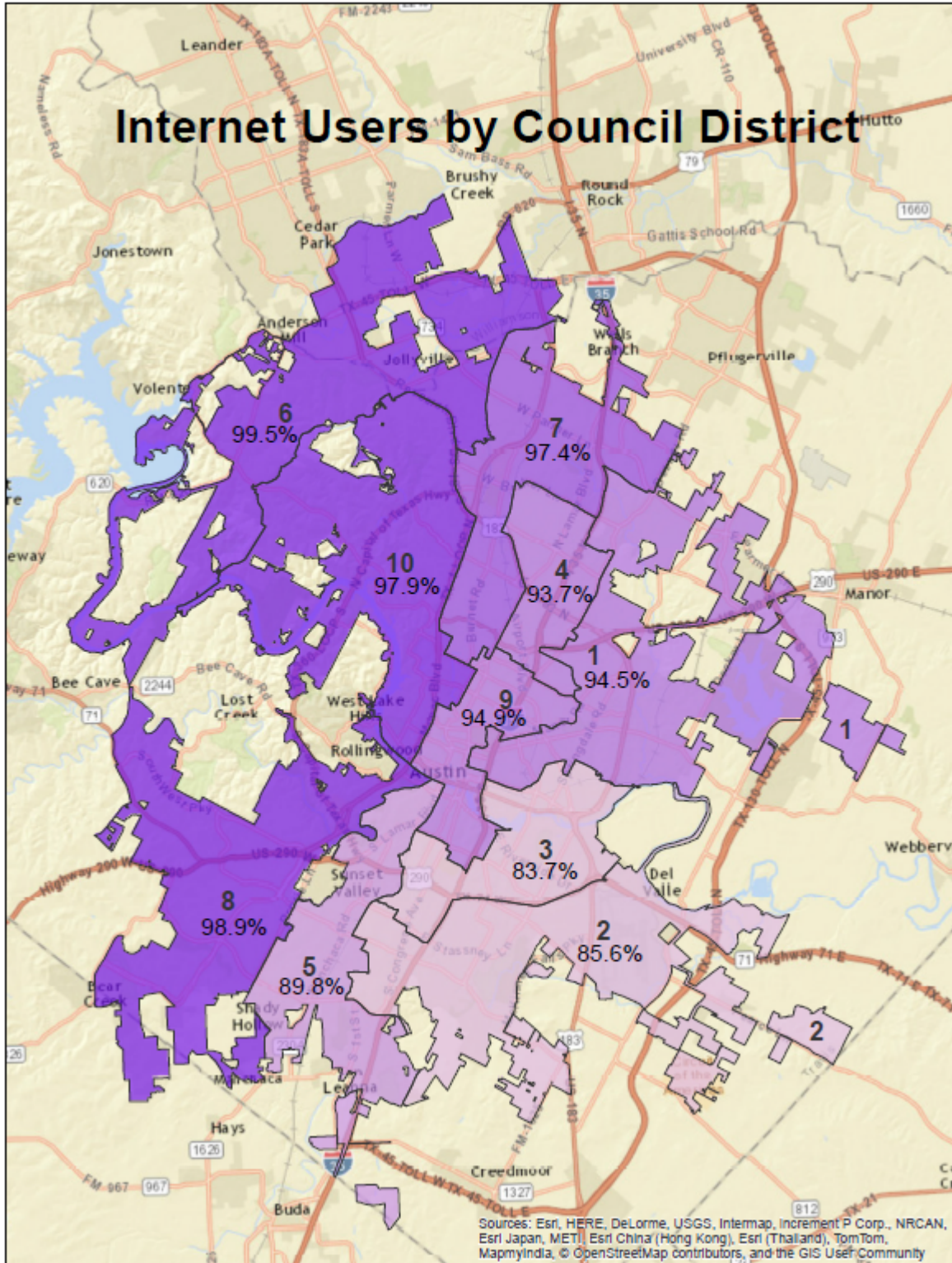
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Acknowledgements & Data Sources

Staff from the City of Austin's Digital Inclusion Program compiled this report on technology usage, challenges and assets in Austin. The City thanks its Digital Inclusion partners across the city that provide front-line service delivery to residents in need. Please contact the Digital Inclusion program for more information or to learn about partnership opportunities at digital.inclusion@austintexas.gov or (512) 974-3510.

Data Sources: Technology Landscape
Austin Digital Assessment (2014)
Pew Research Center Internet Project Survey (2014)

Data Sources: Social Landscape
Decennial Census, U.S. Census Bureau (2010)
American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau (2013)

Data Sources: Barriers to Using the Internet
Austin Digital Assessment (2014)

Data Sources: Training Opportunities: Computer Skills of Interest to Non-Users
Austin Digital Assessment (2014)

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