Chapter 10
Social Inclusion of Australian Children in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT
This chapter presents evidence on the access to the Internet for Australian children aged 5-15 years at a small area level, based mainly on the 2006 census data. It shows that there are areas of Australia, particularly in regional Australia, that have relatively low proportions of children who have access to the Internet at home. The geographical distribution of these areas is correlated with risk of social exclusion as measured by Child Social Exclusion Index. There was also a positive correlation between the proportion of children in an area with access to the Internet at home and average educational outcomes. The chapter concludes that there is some evidence of a digital divide for Australian children based on location of residence and socio-economic factors, which may have significant implications for children’s ability to participate in society both now and in the future, and this requires further research.

INTRODUCTION
School-aged children are significant consumers of government services, both directly and indirectly; those relating to health and education being the most obvious ones. As the way of delivering these services has changed over time to include a range of internet-based platforms, so access to the internet has become increasingly important. There is a considerable literature on the digital divide in Australia that shows that low income and less educated people are less likely to have access to the internet at home (see, for example, Lloyd and Bill, 2004). Evidence on the access of children aged 5-15 years is more limited. While most children have access to the internet at school, access at home is not so widely available. The purpose of this paper is to ask a question, is there an evidence of a digital divide among Australian children and if so, what are the possible factors associated with this divide? It presents the results at a small area level about children’s access to the internet at home as reported in the 2006 Census conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.
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These results will be compared with an index of social exclusion for Australian children developed at a small area level and also with key domains and variables within the index.

The existence of a digital divide among children has important implications for e-governance. The inability of some children to access the internet at home is likely to limit the ability of government to provide information and services electronically to children. This may be especially important for children living in regional and remote Australia where the access to physical services such as libraries and health care may be more limited. The lack of opportunities to develop the skills necessary to function in a digital environment may hinder the transition from school to work and restrict opportunities to actively participate in society as an adult, not only in the economic sphere, but more widely.

Social inclusion and social exclusion are multidimensional concepts that take a wider measure of advantage and disadvantage than the traditional income measures. For children, the concepts have been linked in a rights-based framework to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child to include:

- The right to non-discrimination,
- Adherence to the best interests of the child,
- The right to life, survival and development,
- The right to participate and to have their views taken seriously, the right to be protected from harm.

Other researchers have focused on key variables associated with good outcomes for children both in the present and in their future as adults (see Bradshaw, Hoelscher and Richardson (2006) for a survey of these frameworks).

Researchers (see for example Barnes et al., 2007; Bradshaw et al., 2008) in the area have used a range of indicators in an attempt to measure multiple deprivations for children but a standard list of indicators usually includes measures from most of the following domains:

- Economic or material well-being,
- Health,
- Education,
- Physical environment including housing,
- Risk and safety - risk factors including crime, child abuse and child accident statistics,
- Social environment.

The results reported here have been developed as part of a longer-term project on the risk of social exclusion for Australian children aged 0-15 years (for a more detailed discussion of results see Harding et. al., 2009; Daly et. al., 2008; Abello et. al., 2012). The project has developed an index of risk at a small area level which ranks areas of Australia according to their concentration of children at risk of social exclusion based on a number of indicators developed for the project. This chapter focuses on results for school-aged children, 5-15 years of age as it is among this age group that access to the internet at home is likely to have the most impact. Internet access in the family may also be significant for parents dealing with younger children (aged 0-4) but is likely to have less direct impact on a child’s ability to connect with peers, activities, school work and services.

This chapter begins with a review of the literature relating to the importance of access to the internet at home as a socially inclusive tool for children and a description of the range of services and information relevant to children that are supplied by governments digitally. Section 3 outlines the index methodology and Section 4 presents results from our index of risk of social exclusion.