Tianca Crocker | Research Statement

My applied research focuses on information and communication technology (ICT) related public policies as interventions to support the financial stability and mobility of communities faced with disproportionately high rates of enduring poverty. These communities include racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and female-led households in the United States. The policies I focus on span from anti-poverty (e.g. Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) to regulatory (e.g. net neutrality or the Universal Service Fund) in nature, and include the federal, state, and municipal levels of government. My work is a branch of research in the emergent field of digital inclusion, which refers to efforts to ensure that everyone has the ability to access, use, and create with ICTs.

ICTs play an increasingly significant role in shaping social and economic interactions in the United States, yet as we progress into what has been associatively dubbed the ‘Information Age’, digital inequities are commonly found in communities already faced with negative well-being outcomes. ICTs are conduits for resources, information, and communication that can be leveraged for good. The study of digital inclusion in the field of social work is needed to infuse a people-centered perspective into ICT policies where the narrow interests of business leaders and technologists too often influence decisions. I believe social work is poised at the forefront of thought leadership for understanding how ICTs contribute to exacerbating or alleviating social problems, particularly poverty. We can use our understanding of human relationships and ecological systems to develop interventions that ease the negative, intended and unintended, consequences of a society increasingly steeped in internet-based products and services.

I have long held an interest in anti-poverty interventions for marginalized communities. As a practitioner I observed the direct relationship between financial instability and the placement of children in foster care, and the prevalence of health disparities in low-income communities. Today, approximately sixty million people live in or near poverty in the United States, a figure that has held firm in this post-Great Recession environment. I tailor my research to policymakers and administrators seeking evidence-based opportunities through ICTs to improve the economic positioning of its citizenry as we move beyond the infancy of the Information Age.

In the second year of the PhD program, my interest in ICT policy was sealed. I leveraged an assignment in a Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Policies course to explore the municipal policymaking process for the Community Connections program launched by the City of Austin and Google Fiber. The program will connect 100 service-oriented organizations with 10 years of a free gigabit internet access. I documented the process through a series of policy briefs that linked digital inequity to black and Hispanic communities in Austin, Texas, earning high honors in the course and a long-standing relationship with the City of Austin’s Digital Inclusion team. My early digital inclusion work was supplemented by research in the area of liquid asset ownership among low-income mothers and disproportionality in human service settings.

My current dissertation research is focused on public-private policy strategies to improve the financial stability and economic positioning of low-income individuals through digital inclusion. The three article dissertation expands on my early research by first examining the network relationship of organizations selected for the above-mentioned Community Connections program. Using data (n=104) obtained from the City of Austin, and network and geospatial
analyses, I examine organizational predictors of leadership in digital inclusion for economic opportunity. I predict which organizations will emerge as leaders and creators in the program. I then discuss how other organizations should leverage the network of providers to improve client economic outcomes, and how policymakers should evaluate the program over time. The second article draws on survey data (n=232) I collected as a Research Investigator for the Unlocking the Connection project team. I use descriptive and inferential statistics to explore online banking practices among a sample of public housing residents to conceptualize a digital literacy training approach for subsidized housing residents. The final article utilizes data from the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Study, a panel study of 5,000 children born in more than a dozen large U.S. cities. I analyze two waves of the study using multilevel modeling to determine if computer use and ownership from a techno-subsystem perspective is a predictor of positive academic outcomes for children.

Shortly, these research articles will be submitted to peer reviewed journals for publication. In my findings, I will offer timely insight on emergent anti-poverty strategies, and the ICT behavior of understudied low-income populations. In the near term, I will build upon this work by evaluating the long-term effectiveness of digital inclusion policies that support equitable access and poverty alleviation. Additionally, as ICTs evolve, my work will necessitate more robust studies of digital inclusion strategies that focus on ICT usage patterns and relationships. My long-term research goals are to develop randomized control trials of digital inclusion interventions to better isolate effects, and to use ‘big data’ in studies of digital inclusion to reduce limitations introduced by self-reported ICT behavior. I intend to seek funding from the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, Ford Foundation, Mozilla Foundation, as well as from ICTs groups vested in the promotion of digital inclusion. In closing, I believe the diffusion of ICTs does not in and of itself alleviate poverty, rather it provides a conduit for economic opportunity and greater inclusion that matches the present dominance of ICTs in our society. This conduit is most effective when paired with evidenced-based digital inclusion strategies that increase digital literacy, relevancy, and capacity. I envision implementing a nimble research agenda that is responsive to the inevitable shifts in ICT trends and reflective of the problems faced by social workers.