

The Digital Divide for Persons with Disabilities: Institutional Internet, Communication and Technology Access

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- × Residential institutions for persons with disabilities **are not required** to have wireless internet access available for residents.
- × Low rates of social assistance for persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities in Canada are **prohibitive** to accessing technology and wireless internet access.¹
- × Access to the internet for persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities can **help** with augmented and alternative communication, social development, labour force participation, and education opportunities.
- × There are multiple Government of Canada initiatives seeking to build a barrier-free Canada and increase access to internet, communications, and technology. These initiatives should be **mobilized with partners** to fund the development and maintenance of institutional internet access, technology grants, and resources to **improve digital literacy and citizenship for persons with disabilities**.

STATEMENT OF ISSUE

The Canadian Radio-Television Commission (CRTC) declared broadband internet access a basic service across Canada. However, institutional settings for persons with disabilities do not provide access to wireless internet for residents, creating a digital divide for persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Because people with intellectual or developmental disabilities are at an increased likelihood of living in institutional settings, they face substantial barriers to accessing the internet compared to populations less likely to be institutionalized.

BACKGROUND

In 2016, the United Nations declared wireless internet access a basic human right.² The CRTC has sought to increase the number of Canadian households with access to high-speed internet in pursuit of closing the digital divide between low-income and rural households. Statistics Canada's Internet Use Survey found that more than 36% of Canadians in the lowest quartile of household income do not have access to wireless internet.³ However, this survey excludes people who live in institutional settings, a population experiencing significant digital divide.

The digital divide refers to the divide between those with internet and technology access and its associated benefits, and those without said access.⁴ As work, recreation and community participation shifted to virtual means during the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital divide between Canadians was exacerbated and worsened. This was particularly significant for people with disabilities, as months-long lockdowns without access to the internet or any visitors within institutional settings prohibited their ability to contact family or meaningfully engage with their communities, resulting in severe social isolation.

Because institutions are not required to provide internet access for residents, people who live in institutional settings are required to purchase individual wireless plans in order to access this basic need. Individuals who live in residential institutions and who fall below the low-income line receive monthly allowances, sometimes called personal needs allowances or comfort allowances to cover the costs of clothing, over-the-counter medication, internet, transit and recreation. Current allowance rates, demonstrated in [Table 1](#), are persistently abysmal, making it impossible for people with disabilities to afford the cost of a personal internet plan without sacrificing other basic needs. Internet makes up a significant proportion of the provincial monthly allowances, detailed in [Table 2](#). In several provinces, the institutional allowance rates are so low that they are prohibitive to accessing the internet because monthly internet costs are higher than the monthly allowances ([Figure 1](#)). These high costs create a barrier to the inclusion, financial stability and employment of persons with disabilities, and therefore are in contravention to the goals of the *Accessible Act*.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Access to the internet is necessary for the realization of human rights, such as access to education, freedom of expression, and freedom of association. However, people who live in institutional settings are prevented from accessing this essential service. Human rights violations and violence are more likely to occur when there is limited access to meaningful social bonds.^{5,6}

Participation in political and public life is protected grounds for persons with disabilities through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability. In addition, stakeholder and citizen engagement has become an important part of the evidence-based policy development process. However, current engagement strategies, such as those for the National Disability Inclusion Action Plan, are limited to internet-based engagements. Similar limitations exist for crowdsourced data, as through the Statistics Canada 2020 survey on the “Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians: Living with Long-term Conditions and Disabilities”.⁷ These exclusions make it difficult to understand the needs and experiences of persons with disabilities living in residential institutions.

Along with participation in political and public life, internet access allows for autonomy in decision making and access to information. For instance, group homes and institutional settings might host “movie nights” but the movie is pre-selected by a staff person and someone might not want to watch that movie. Internet access would allow residents to have the **right to choose** what they want to watch, and how they spend their time. Further, consent in decision-making relies on the information provided. People with disabilities have the right to understand their options relating to health care provision, medication, sexual health services and residential provisions.

Table 1: Monthly institutional allowances

| Province | Allowance Rate | Name of Program |
|----------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------------|
| British Columbia | \$220* | Comforts Allowance |
| Alberta | \$340 | Modified Living Allowance |
| Saskatchewan | \$265 | Personal Living Benefit |
| Manitoba | \$370 | Disposable Income for Personal Expenses |
| Ontario | \$149 | Personal Needs and Comfort Allowance |
| New Brunswick | \$135 | Comfort & Clothing Allowance |
| Newfoundland | \$150 | Personal Care Allowance |
| Prince Edward Island | \$123 | Personal Need Allowance |
| Nova Scotia | \$300 | Comfort Care Allowance |

Source: Provincial Ministries of Health and Long Term Care (see [Appendix A](#) for detailed source information)

* Residents are also eligible for the Transit Supplement, which is provided to Persons with Disabilities as \$52 in cash or as an in-kind bus pass.

Table 2: Average basic phone, internet, mobile, and cable rates across Canada in 2018

| Province | Internet, basic cable & mobile rates |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| British Columbia | \$177.80 |
| Alberta | \$176.38 |
| Saskatchewan | \$187.73 |
| Manitoba | \$186.36 |
| Ontario | \$173.38 |
| New Brunswick | \$190.13 |
| Newfoundland | \$198.13 |
| Prince Edward Island | \$212.65 |
| Nova Scotia | \$211.79 |

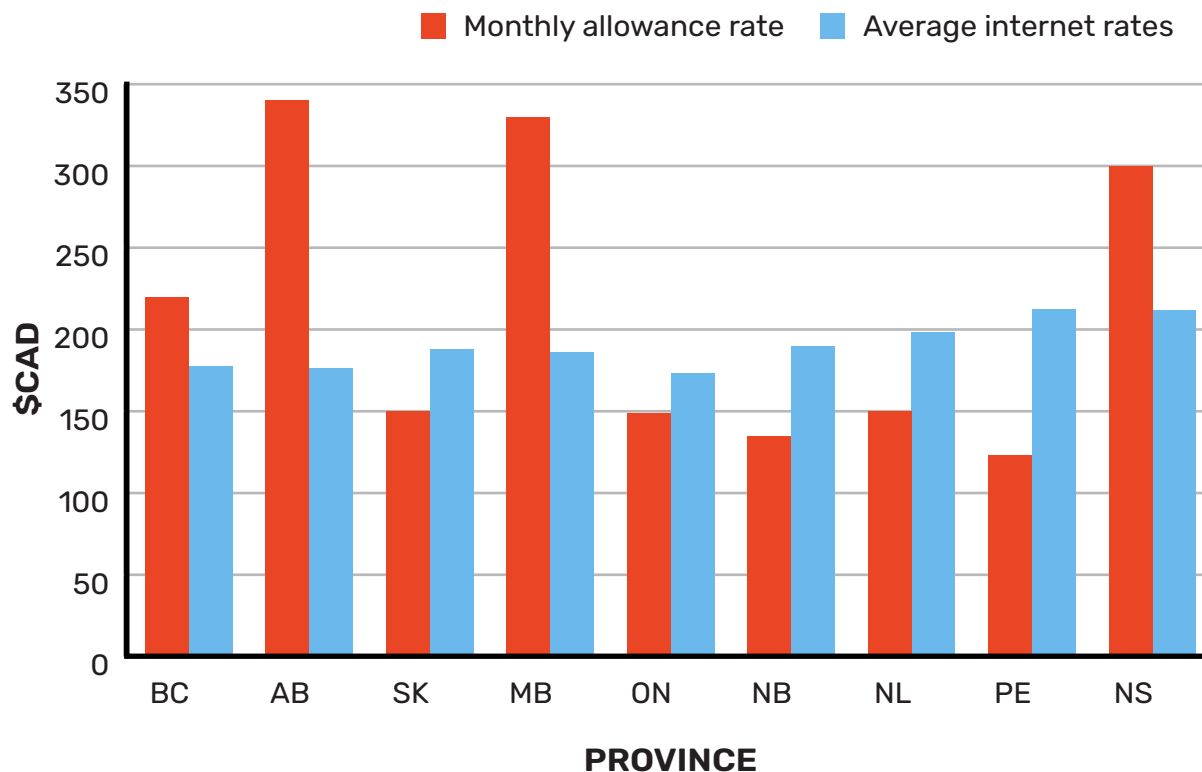
Source: Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. (2020). *Communications Monitoring Report 2019*. <https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/publications/reports/policymonitoring/2019/cmr2.htm>

RECOMMENDATION

The CRTC’s Broadband Fund seeks to “close the digital divide in Canada”⁸ by supporting service providers in their expansion of delivery of broadband services. In alignment with the aims of expanding access to underserved communities, this fund should provide opportunities to health care and residential care facilities to expand internet access to underserved institutional populations.

In alignment with the aims of the *Accessible Canada Act*, the Enabling Access Fund and the Disability Inclusion Action Plan, building a barrier-free Canada must include unrestricted access to internet, communications, and technology. These three Government of Canada initiatives should be mobilized with partners to fund the development and maintenance of institutional internet access, technology grants, and resources to improve digital literacy and citizenship.

Figure 1: Monthly institutional allowances and average basic phone, internet, mobile, and cable rates across Canada in 2018



Sources: Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. (2020). *Communications Monitoring Report 2019*. <https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/publications/reports/policymonitoring/2019/cmr2.htm>. Provincial Ministries of Health and Long Term Care (see [Appendix A](#) for detailed source information)

ENDNOTES

- 1 See also: Linton, M. Q. , David, K. & Chokly, K. (2021). Institutional Allowances and the Canadian Disability Benefit Act. *Invisible Institutions*. http://invisibleinstitutions.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/InvisibleInstitutions_PNABrief_FINAL.pdf
- 2 United Nations Human Rights Council, “The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet” (June 30, 2016). https://www.article19.org/data/files/Internet_Statement_Adopted.pdf
- 3 Statistics Canada, “Canadian Internet Use Survey 2020” (2020). https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3Instr.pl?Function=getInstrumentList&Item_Id=1289522&UL=1V&
- 4 Sciadas, G., “Unveiling the digital divide” (Statistics Canada, 2002). <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/56f0004m/56f0004m2002007-eng.pdf?st=Z8y6EqD4>
- 5 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. “Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System.” (Washington, DC, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.17226/25663>
- 6 National Institute for the Care of the Elderly, “Into the Light: National Survey on the Mistreatment of Older Canadians 2015” (2015). <https://cnpea.ca/images/canada-report-june-7-2016-pre-study-lynnmcdonald.pdf>
- 7 Statistics Canada, “Impacts of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities” (2020). <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200827/dq200827c-eng.htm>
- 8 Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunication Commission, “BROADBAND FUND: Closing the digital divide in Canada” (August 2021). <https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/internet/internet.htm>



APPENDIX A

| Provincial programs | Source: Institutional allowance rates |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| British Columbia Comforts Allowance | BCEA Policy & Procedure Manual-- Room and Board, Special Care Facility & Allowances Rate Table |
| Alberta Modified Living Allowance | Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Act, section 3(2); Schedule 1, section 3 Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped General Regulation, sections 1(2)(c) and 2(a) |
| Saskatchewan Personal Living Benefit | Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability Rates (SAID) 2019 PDF |
| Manitoba Disposable income for personal expenses | Personal Care Services: A Guide to Services and Charges in Manitoba |
| Ontario Personal Needs and Comfort Allowance | Ontario Disability Support Program Regulations Sections 1(1), 4(1)3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 5, 4.2 and 32 |
| New Brunswick Comfort & Clothing Allowance | Nursing Homes Act; Regulation 85-187 General |
| Newfoundland Personal Care Allowance | Direct Communications with the Office for Aging and Seniors, 2021, Department of Health and Community Services, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador |
| Prince Edward Island Personal Need Allowance | Social Assistance Act Regulations, PEI Reg EC396/03 |
| Nova Scotia Comfort Care Allowance | Department of Community Services Disability Support Program 8.16 |
