

Internet Access in Institutions

This is a plain language document of a research paper. The research paper is called **The Digital Divide for Persons with Disabilities: Institutional Internet, Communication and Technology Access.**

Prepared by Megan Linton and Kendal David for *Invisible Institutions* and the *Inclusion Canada/ People First of Canada Joint Task Force on Deinstitutionalization*. Design and Layout by Kit Chokly.

SUMMARY

This paper is about people labelled with intellectual or developmental disabilities who live in institutions. It is about their access to the internet. This information is about the situation in Canada.

THE ISSUE

Access to the internet became a basic service across Canada in 2016. This means that all people in the country should have access to the internet no matter where they live. This is a barrier for people with intellectual or developmental disabilities. They are more likely to be living in an institution. They face major barriers to access the internet in these places.

BACKGROUND – INTERNET ACCESS RIGHTS IN INSTITUTIONS

In 2016, the United Nations stated that access to wireless internet is a basic human right. The Canadian Radio-Television Commission has tried to increase the number of homes with high speed internet. The Commission wants to remove the differences in access for low-income households and people who live in rural areas. A Statistics Canada survey showed a lack of access for people in very low income households. More than 36% did not have access to wireless internet. But this survey did not include people who live in institutional settings. They have extremely limited access to the internet.

During the Covid pandemic, many events like work and recreation were held online. This made it worse for people without internet because they could not take part. This affected people with disabilities a lot. It especially affected people with disabilities who were in institutions. Many were in lockdowns for months. They did not have access to the internet or visitors. They were not able to contact their family or communities online. This resulted in severe social isolation.

Institutions are not required to provide internet access for residents. People who live in institutions have to buy their own internet plans if they want access. People who live in institutions often have a very low income. Some get monthly allowances. This allowance is supposed to cover the cost of personal items. This included clothes or internet or transportation or recreation. But the allowance rates are very low. Most allowance rates are not enough to cover the cost of an internet plan without giving up other needs. [Table 1](#) shows the difference in allowances and the cost of internet in the provinces. In several provinces, the cost of internet is higher than the monthly allowance. The high cost of internet is a barrier in many ways. It is a barrier to the inclusion and employment of people with disabilities. This goes against the goals of the *Accessible Canada Act*.

Table 1 shows the difference between allowance funding and the cost of internet, cell phones and cable.

Province	Allowance Rate	Program Name	Average rates for internet, basic cable and cell phone
British Columbia	\$220*	Comforts Allowance	\$177.80
Alberta	\$340	Modified Living Allowance	\$176.38
Saskatchewan	\$265	Personal Living Benefit	\$187.73
Manitoba	\$370	Disposable Income for Personal Expenses	\$186.36
Ontario	\$149	Personal Needs and Comfort Allowance	\$173.38
New Brunswick	\$135	Comfort & Clothing Allowance	\$190.13
Newfoundland	\$150	Personal Care Allowance	\$198.13
Prince Edward Island	\$123	Personal Need Allowance	\$212.65
Nova Scotia	\$300	Comfort Care Allowance	\$211.79

KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER

The internet is important for people's human rights. Access to the internet provides people with access to information and education. Yet people who live in institutions are prevented from accessing the internet. People are more likely to be mistreated and abused when they are isolated and don't have social bonds with other people.

People also have the right to take part in political and public life. This can include taking part in surveys and focus groups about issues that affect them. But most of these opportunities to take part happen through the internet. People with disabilities who live in institutions without internet are left out. They cannot take part. Their information is not included. This makes it hard to understand their experiences and needs.

The internet allows people to find information and make decisions on their own. Internet access allows people in institutions to have the right to choose what they want to watch or how they spend their time. It gives them access to information that can help them understand their choices as it relates to health care or medication or sexual health or other housing options.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

There are three government programs that can help this issue. These programs can increase access to the internet for people living in institutional settings in the following ways.

- The Canadian Radio-Television Commission has a fund to support internet providers to expand their services. It is called the Broadband Fund. This fund is meant to help people in low income households and rural areas have access to the internet. This program should be expanded to include health care and institutional settings.
- The Enabling Access Fund must include unrestricted access to the internet, communications and technology.
- The Disability Inclusion Action Plan must include unrestricted access to the internet, communications and technology.