

Canada's Digital Divide



A Spotlight on the Differences in Online Connection, Activity and Benefits



More and more, our interactions with government and public services, workplaces, financial institutions and businesses are online. But differences in income, age, education and immigration status, and whether we live in an urban or rural community, mean differences in our online access.¹ The resulting digital divide has three interrelated layers: differences in how people connect to the Internet; differences in what kind of online activities they engage in; and differences in how they benefit from their interactions with services, resources and networks that are only available online. More activities and interactions of newcomers are online than before.



The Online Connection Divide

The cost of Internet service, cell phone data plans or owning the right device, combined with other factors, means that a surprising number of Canadians do not have a household Internet connection.²

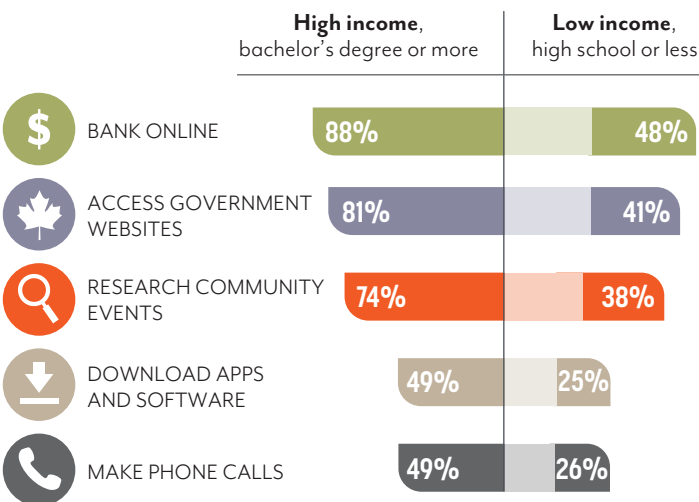
19%  
of Canadian households **don't have an Internet connection at home.**

86%  
of Canadians with low incomes **don't use the Internet at work.**

15% use it as a student from school and **12%** in public libraries.

The Online Activity Divide

Differences in why, when and how people access and use online resources are shaped by income and education. In 2012³, Canadians with lower incomes and education **used the following fundamental services at half the rate** of those with higher incomes and education.

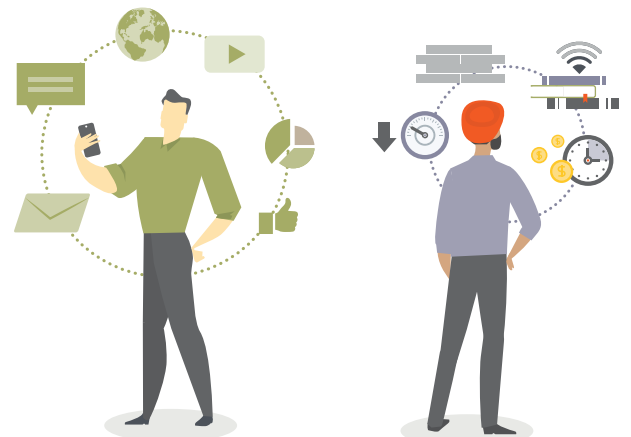


Canadians with lower incomes and education are also less likely to search for medical or health-related information or to use the Internet for education or training.



The Online Benefits Divide

Society grows more polarized when not all people are digitally included. Those who are excluded or have limited access do not have the digital means to take part in increasingly online-only interactions. They are unable to fully engage with technology and benefit from this access. As a result, our public services, workplaces and businesses operate with an incomplete understanding of Canadian residents, employees and customers. Because some cannot participate, survey and usage data may not be representative.⁴ So the benefits divide hurts not just those with lower incomes and education — taxpayer-supported public services are less effective and businesses have lower returns.



A Day in the Life with Seamless Access



8:00 a.m.

Eva uses a smartphone to check and respond to emails while on the bus to work. Her employer covers the cost for an unlimited text-and-talk plan with 5GB of data. Afterward, she reads travel reviews in preparation for booking a vacation.

9:30 a.m.



At work, Eva spends most of her time on a computer. The company recently upgraded the software and hardware she uses and paid for her to take a weeklong training session. She also has access to IT support if any issues arise with the new system.

11:00 a.m.



Eva's teenage son is going on a school trip and she needs to sign a permission form. In a few minutes while she is at work, she downloads, prints, signs, scans and emails the form. Then she texts her son to tell him it's done. She also texts her daughter to remind her of a dentist appointment after school.

12:45 p.m.



On her lunch break, Eva checks the status of her citizen application online. While on the government website, she also downloads the official *Discover Canada* study guide to prepare for her citizenship test.

2:30 p.m.



On short breaks, Eva looks for an app that will help her daughter practise for her written driver's test. She finds a few highly rated apps and downloads them to their family sharing account for her daughter.

5:30 p.m.



As she leaves the office, Eva checks the transit app on her phone and sees that her bus is running late. Once on the bus, she checks her Facebook account and notes an upcoming event she'd like to attend. She then reads the news using apps for two different newspapers she subscribes to.

8:45 p.m.



Eva streams a couple of episodes of a TV series she likes. She prefers to use her tablet in her downtime, whether she's streaming a movie, reading an e-book borrowed from the public library or browsing photography blogs.



A Day in the Life with Limited Access

8:00 a.m.



Sandra's son needs a permission form signed for a school trip. His high school recently went paperless and uses Facebook and email to communicate with parents. Since she doesn't own a printer or have a household Internet account, Sandra will have to go elsewhere to complete the task.

9:00 a.m.



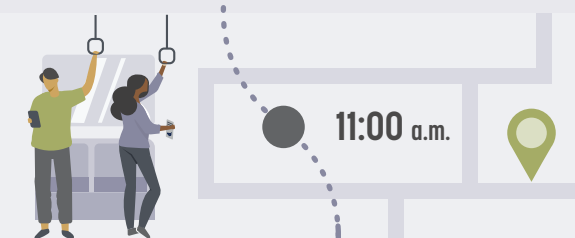
Once her son has gone to school, Sandra takes the bus to the library. Luckily, it's her day off. She signs up for a 60-minute time slot on a public computer. She quickly logs into her email account to print off and sign the permission form but discovers the library doesn't have a scanner. She will have to go to a local office supply store.

9:30 a.m.



Sandra uses her remaining computer time to search for exercise videos on YouTube. She needs to alleviate a recent flare-up of lower back pain. She'd prefer to follow along with the videos at home, but her smartphone's limited data is too precious.

11:00 a.m.



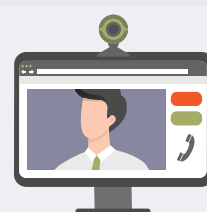
After another bus ride, Sandra waits 15 minutes for an available computer at the office supply store. She scans the signed form but has difficulty locating the file on the unfamiliar computer. She could ask for help, but the staff are busy and she's aware of the time charges accumulating. She finds the file, attaches it to an email and logs off. The task costs her \$6, which will have to come out of the grocery budget.

2:30 p.m.



Sandra needs to contact the government about her citizenship application. When she called the 1-800 number yesterday, the wait time was estimated at 10 minutes. She hung up, worried about wasting minutes on her pay-as-you-go plan. She could use the public phone by the subway, but it's too noisy and she won't be able to take notes.

2:45 p.m.



Sandra decides to return to the library to make the call online. She walks to the bus stop and heads to the library for the second time today. She's nervous about calling online as she has done it only once before. After the library, Sandra plans to go grocery shopping and then prepare meals her son can have while she works evenings the next few days.

8:15 p.m.



After dinner, Sandra leaves her son at home and visits a nearby coffee shop that offers free Wi-Fi. She checks her Facebook account for updates on her son's school trip and downloads a new word-game app to her phone that she can play offline.

Everyday seamless access means people:



have **more devices** and the resources to pay for them



are **nearly four times as likely** to use the Internet for personal use from work

spend **5-20 HOURS** per week online⁵

can be **responsive and efficient**, no matter where they are, leading to personal, social and economic benefits



Everyday limited access means people:



are **more dependent on public access** in libraries and public spaces

spend **< 5 HOURS** per week online⁵

often use **pay-as-you-go** cell phone plans that are cheaper to purchase but more costly per minute



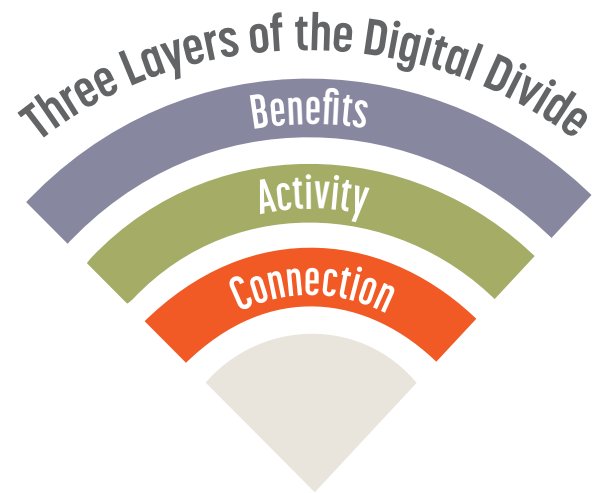
spend a higher percentage of their budget on communications and **sacrifice other basic needs**⁷ to pay for them, particularly if they have school-age children⁸



Addressing the Digital Divide

Despite declaring Internet access a basic right⁷ in 2016, Canada does not have universal, affordable Internet access. In a United Nations ranking of digital access, use and skills, Canada is losing ground. It is now ranked 29th, dropping from its highest ranking of 21st in 2010.⁹ The conclusion reached in a recent comprehensive review of digital literacy is that “Canada appears to lag behind significantly in promoting it”.¹⁰

Federal and provincial governments have a role to play in helping people respond to rapidly changing and expanding digital demands, particularly when more essential services are moved online. Digital learning and access opportunities provided by Canada’s Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) Program can make a difference.



Supporting Digital Access and Learning Opportunities for Newcomers

Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) is a free Canadian government settlement language education programme regulated by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).¹¹ About 375 Service Provider Organizations with 4,000 teachers offer full-time and part-time English and French language classes to 100,000 adult permanent residents annually.

New Language Solutions is well-situated to support digital inclusion efforts. The project provides professional development (LearnIT2teach) and learner courseware (EduLINC and Avenue). Our blended and online learning approaches are scalable program delivery solutions, responsive to the needs of LINC programs.

750 COURSES

are actively used to train adult newcomers.¹² **72% of learners like learning online with the support of a teacher.**¹³ The LearnIT2teach project of New Language Solutions provides five stages of teacher and coordinator training to professionals in the LINC Sector.



Avenue

Avenue is the new online settlement language training solution for adult newcomers and teaching professionals. Avenue is a New Language Solutions project funded by Immigration, Refugees, Citizenship Canada (IRCC).



New Language Solutions is a charitable organization that creates technology-based solutions to assist newcomers and adult learners in achieving their language learning goals. The organization achieves this through both the development of Canadian-centric resources that combine traditional face-to-face classroom methods with computer-mediated activities, and by training language educators to engage clients using open-source technologies.

New Language Solutions: www.newlanguage.ca • LearnIT2teach: www.learnit2teach.ca • EduLINC: www.edulinc.org • Avenue: www.avenue.ca

Content developed by Matthias Sturm and Christine Pinsent-Johnson.

ENDNOTES: (1) Michael Haight, Anabel Quan-Haase, and Bradley Corbett, “Revisiting the Digital Divide in Canada: The Impact of Demographic Factors on Access to the Internet, Level of Online Activity, and Social Networking Site Usage,” *Information, Communication & Society* 17, no. 4 (2014): 503–519. (2) The majority (61%) of Canadians without an Internet connection stated they have no use or interest and 20% stated cost was a factor. Statistics Canada, “The Daily: Canadian Internet Use Survey (CIUS), 2012” <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/131126/dq131126d-eng.htm> (3) Unless noted, data describing Internet connections and online activity are from an analysis of 2012 CIUS data in Tables 22-10-0007-01 and 27-10-0016-01. Although data from the 2018 CIUS is available, we have chosen to refer to the 2012 data due to a change in methodology. For the 2012 survey, people could participate by phone. However, the 2018 survey was online. Results may not be representative of those with no or limited access. Also see note 4. Statistics Canada, “Canadian Internet Use Survey (CIUS), 2018” <http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=4432> (4) The 2018 CIUS is an example of the benefits divide. Canadians with limited or no access are far less likely to participate, and our understanding of the digital divide is incomplete. (5) Ipsos Public Affairs, “Public Perspectives: Participation in the Digital Economy 1.0,” (2015). Accessed November 1, 2019, <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/publication/2015-12/7086-ppt.pdf> (6) Ibid. (7) Matthew Kupfer, “CRTC declares broadband internet access a basic service,” *CBC News*, December 22, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/crtc-internet-essential-service-1.3906664> (8) ACORN, “Internet for All: Internet Use and Accessibility for Low-income Canadians,” (2016). Accessed November 1, 2019 https://acorncanada.org/sites/default/files/Internet%20for%20All%20report_0.pdf (9) International Telecommunication Union (ITU), “The United Nations’ global ICT development index,” (2017). <https://www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/idi/2017/index.html> (10) Eszter Hargittai and Yuli Patrick Hsieh, “Digital inequality”. *The Oxford handbook of Internet studies*, (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199589074.013.0007> (11) Language classes funded by the Government of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/new-immigrants/new-life-canada/improve-english-french/classes.html> (12) EduLINC courseware statistics as of May 2020. (13) LearnIT2teach preliminary results from a small study with learners as of May 2020.

Graphics and presentation developed by Idea Nest.

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