
VULNERABILITY VIA DIGITAL ACCESS— THE CASE FOR FREE UNIVERSAL HIGH-SPEED INTERNET

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Students across Canada are now back at school full-time, and while most students are learning in person, many are still accessing the curriculum online. This type of flexibility is important for reducing the spread of COVID-19, while also meeting the educational needs of students. However, access to online learning is far from equitable as far too many Canadian families [lack access to reliable](#), high-speed digital technologies. This results in a significant barrier to participation in educational and service-related activities such as online learning, educational material, therapies, and recreational supports. For example, in Manitoba, the Winnipeg School District reported that last year, 40% of students did not have a computer at home. In British Columbia, school districts reported that up to 30% of families had no access to internet-enabled devices at the start of the pandemic. Typically, this notable obstacle to learning is one borne disproportionately by families who were already vulnerable prior to COVID-19. Common Sense Media just released their [report](#) on digital learning in the USA during the pandemic. Their findings are very similar to those reported in Canada. There is a notable divide among K to 12 learners, driven by inadequate connectivity to the Internet and access to devices— students who are racialized and those living in rural regions were disproportionately disadvantaged. Of the 50 million American students who had to learn remotely from home during the pandemic, 15-16 million could not do so effectively because of barriers to access.

In Canada, some governments and school boards have tried to level the playing field by loaning internet-enabled digital devices to families without access. Most schools in the Northwest Territories delivered digital and paper materials to families, while some installed hotspots on school grounds for students who could spend time close to the school. Although laudable, these efforts have not addressed the needs of all learners.

To address this educational inequity, a first step is to make broadband internet a universal, free service. This has been recognized by the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunication Commission, who state that broadband internet is a vital basic service for Canadians. However, before the pandemic, only 12.6% of Canadian households had broadband internet and those with services, frequently experienced inequities in internet reliability and speed. Moreover, even when available, the cost of high-speed and

unlimited internet is often too much for those already vulnerable prior to COVID-19, as households in the lowest income quartile are significantly less likely to have home internet or multiple internet-enabled devices than those in the highest quartile.

Federal, provincial, and territorial programs have been put in place to support some low-income families in accessing high-speed internet, but in most rural areas of Canada, residents still live in an internet dead zone. There are also many areas in the country where internet access is incredibly costly or unreliable, including Indigenous communities and those in Northern regions. Over 50% of Nunavut households with internet have download speeds of less than 5 Mbps, which is insufficient to adequately sustain the requirements of virtual meeting platforms and other web resources. The 'digital divide' between urban and rural communities is one way in which inequities have been, and continue to be, sustained through the pandemic.

The pandemic has revealed the needs and inequities related to technology access and this shortcoming does not only impact education. It also limits the abilities of children and their families to successfully navigate services including vaccine appointment websites, health care, employment, learning, remediation or rehabilitation interventions, and social networks. Finally, because so many children and youth are without internet access, Canada is currently not compliant with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that all children have a right to free education. One way to remedy this is for the Government of Canada to provide free access to reliable, high-speed internet to all Canadians. Such action is not unprecedented as Switzerland has provided its citizens access to universal broadband service since 2008. Canada's [Connectivity Strategy](#) and the [Universal Broadband Fund](#) reflect an understanding of the major issues preventing equitable access to Canadian children and youth. But again, too many are still left waiting.

Education is a human right but currently schools across the nation cannot provide equitable, high quality learning opportunities to all students, in part because access to high-speed internet is only afforded to a privileged few. We must do better to ensure that information, knowledge, and education is accessible to everyone in the country, regardless of their location, socioeconomic status, or systematic barriers.

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