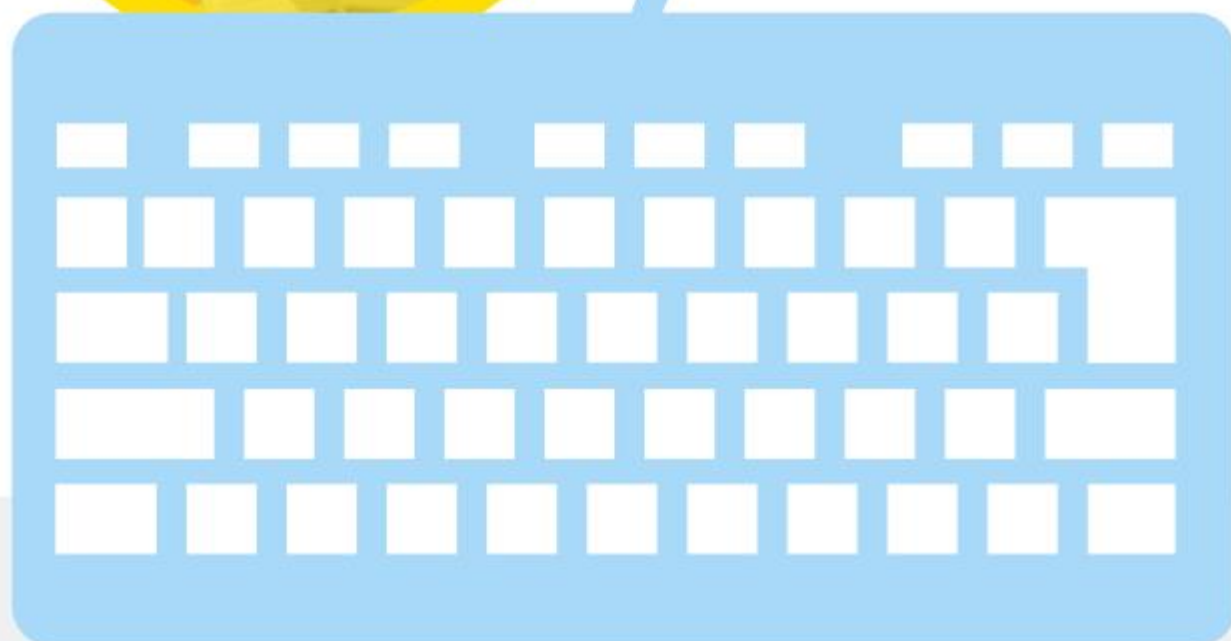


Barriers to **DIGITAL EQUITY** in Canada



Introduction

Internet is an essential service. As technology increasingly shapes our world, it is important that Canadians can keep up with the rapid changes, latest skills and emerging industries. Unfortunately, not every resident of Canada is able to access these opportunities to unlock a potentially brighter future.

AIC and ACORN partnered to undertake research with low and moderate income Canadians, in order to uncover the barriers to digital equity that exist in Canada today and shine a light on the urgent need to tackle these barriers to ensure equal access to digital opportunities.

What is AIC?

ACORN Institute Canada (AIC) is a charitable organization that uses research and training to address problems that exist in low-income communities. Participants in our leadership development program have taken on many pressing issues, from housing to internet access, while building skills and forging strong bonds with their neighbours.

AIC's main partner on the project was ACORN Canada (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), an independent national organization of low- and moderate-income families. ACORN has over 130,000 members organized into twenty-four neighbourhood chapters in nine cities across Canada. It is ACORN's belief that social and economic justice can best be achieved with a national active membership who are invested in their organization and focused on building power for change.

ACORN's Internet for All campaign

ACORN has been working with low and moderate income Canadians to win affordable internet and close the digital divide.

In 2016, the Canadian Radio-television and

Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) historically declared that broadband internet access was a basic service. ACORN members played a key role in this ruling. Members delivered 400 testimonials to the hearing, detailing how vital home internet access is, yet how unaffordable internet services are. Despite welcoming the CRTC's decision, ACORN members were disappointed that they did not go a step further and commit to a subsidy to help low-income people access affordable internet, instead looking to the Ministry of Innovation to create a solution.

Fast forward almost three years, there has been some progress. The federal government launched their Connecting Families program in 2018, targeting National Child Benefit recipients to provide 10mbps internet with 100gb usage for \$10 per month. Around 220,000 households - up to 600,000 people - are expected to benefit from the program.

However, there are many who will miss out. Low-income seniors, single occupant households, and many more will not qualify. The Connecting Families program is voluntary, and not all telecommunications companies have opted to take part.

In the 2019 budget, the Canadian government committed to a multi-year plan that will provide access to high-speed internet for all Canadians, by 2030. Yet there is no clear plan for how the government will tackle internet affordability. Almost half of households with an annual income of \$30,000 or less do not have high-speed internet access. [1]

There are many barriers contributing to Canada's digital divide. In this report, we seek to identify the main barriers and provide recommendations that will help achieve digital equity for low and moderate income Canadians.

Methodology

The aim of this project was to amplify the voices of low-income Canadians in the affordable internet debate, by identifying the main barriers to digital equity and sharing these barriers with a wider audience. In the process, we engaged thousands of low and moderate income community members across the country in conversations about internet access.

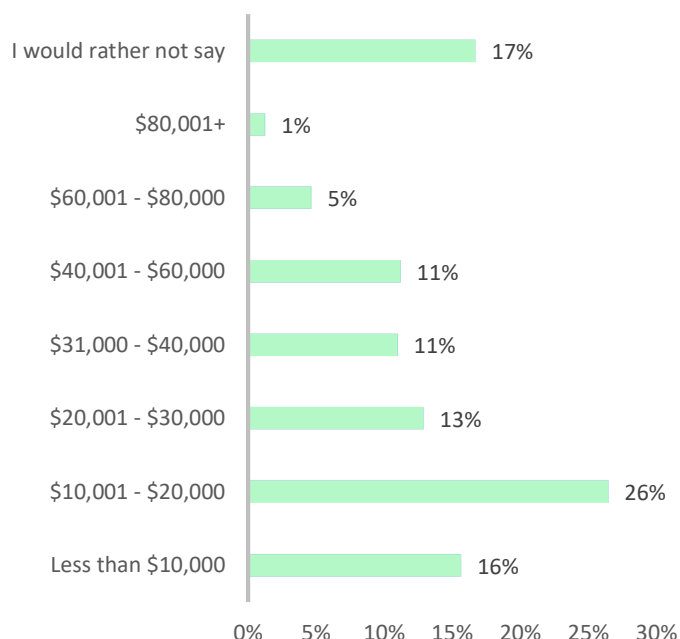
ACORN members developed a survey that we distributed through face to face, phone and digital outreach. 472 survey responses were collected by ACORN organizers and members, mainly by door-knocking in low-income neighbourhoods. This method was adopted to help overcome barriers to participation experienced by people who cannot afford phone or internet services, however we also provided the opportunity for surveys to be completed online and via phone.

We also held a number of community meetings for engaged ACORN leaders to discuss internet issues, as well as facilitate discussion about the research design, analysis and report.

Demographics of survey respondents

Responses were received from 21 cities across five provinces (Alberta, British Columbia, Nova

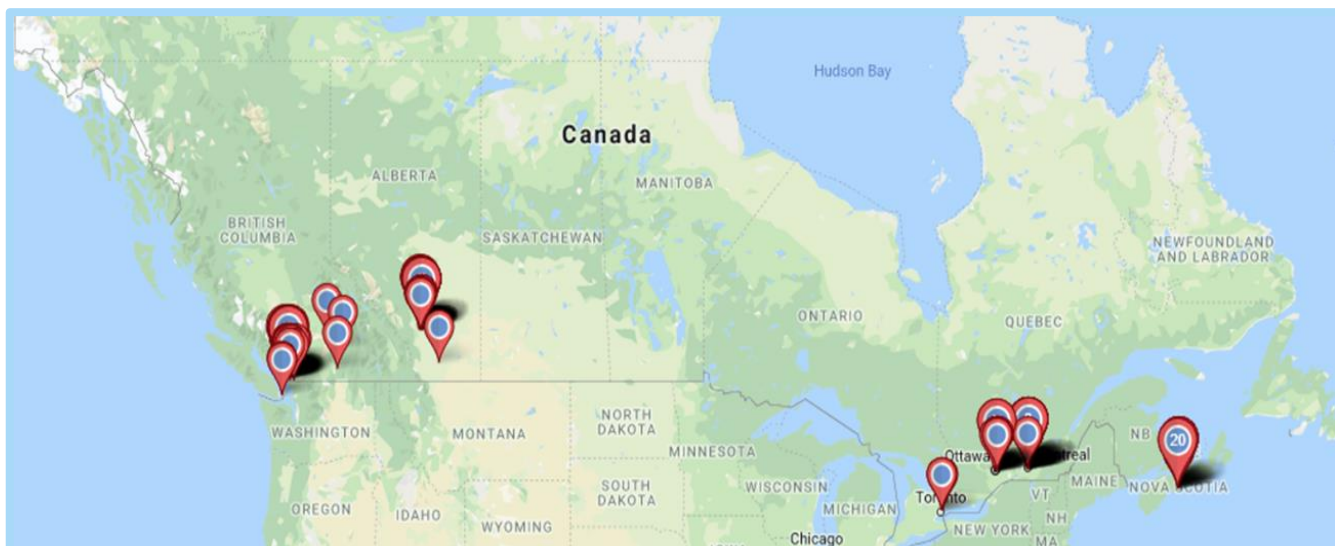
WHAT IS YOUR HOUSEHOLD INCOME?



Scotia, Ontario and Quebec). Thirty-nine different languages were identified as the first language of respondents. The top languages spoken were English (65%), French (14%), Arabic (4%), Bengali (3%) and Spanish (3%).

A majority of respondents were low-income. The 2015 low-income measure for the average Canadian household (2.47 people) is \$34,785 [2]; 55% of survey respondents earned \$30,000 or less, while 16% earned less than \$10,000.

Map of Survey Respondent Locations



What we heard

Internet Access

Internet access is an essential part of everyday life. Vital services are increasingly digitized and access to the internet is necessary to apply for jobs, complete schoolwork, access government forms, connect with friends and family, and much more. More than 99.96% of respondents have used the internet.

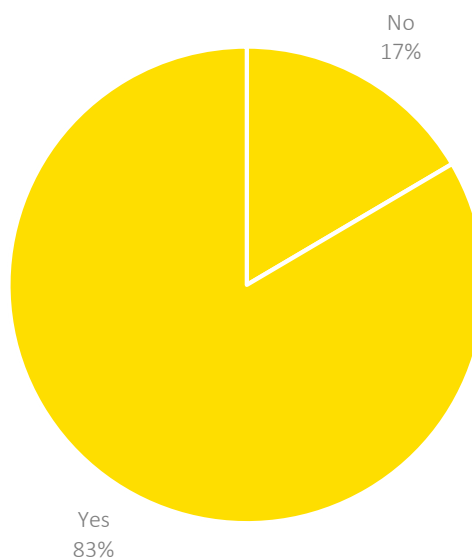
A majority of respondents (83%) have home internet services, and “home” was identified as the place that respondents most frequently access the internet.

However, a digital divide exists. Low-income respondents with household incomes of \$30,000 or lower were less likely to have home internet access than those with incomes over \$60,000 (80% vs. 96%). Further, only 76% of respondents with household incomes below \$10,000 have home internet access

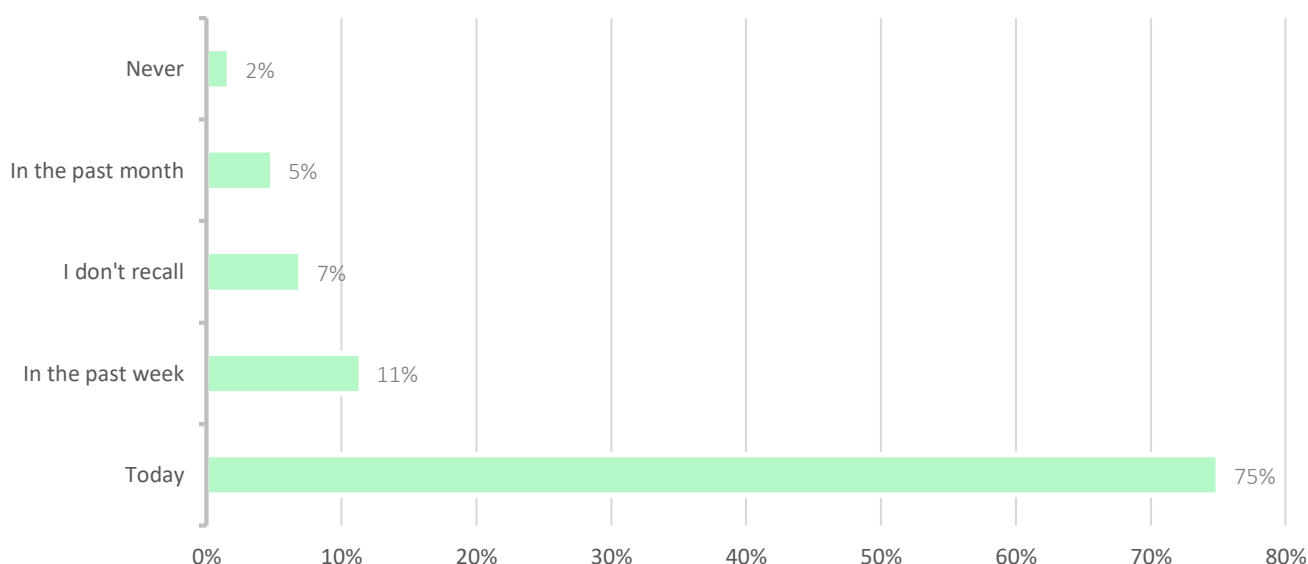
Lack of home internet access has implications for low-income communities. Research from France indicates that broadband internet can provide a range of benefits, including raising income levels and reducing inequality. [3]

Despite the high number of respondents who reported having used the internet, more than one third told us that a lack of home internet access has been a barrier to completing tasks online.

DO YOU HAVE AN INTERNET CONNECTION IN YOUR HOME?



WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU CONNECTED TO THE INTERNET?



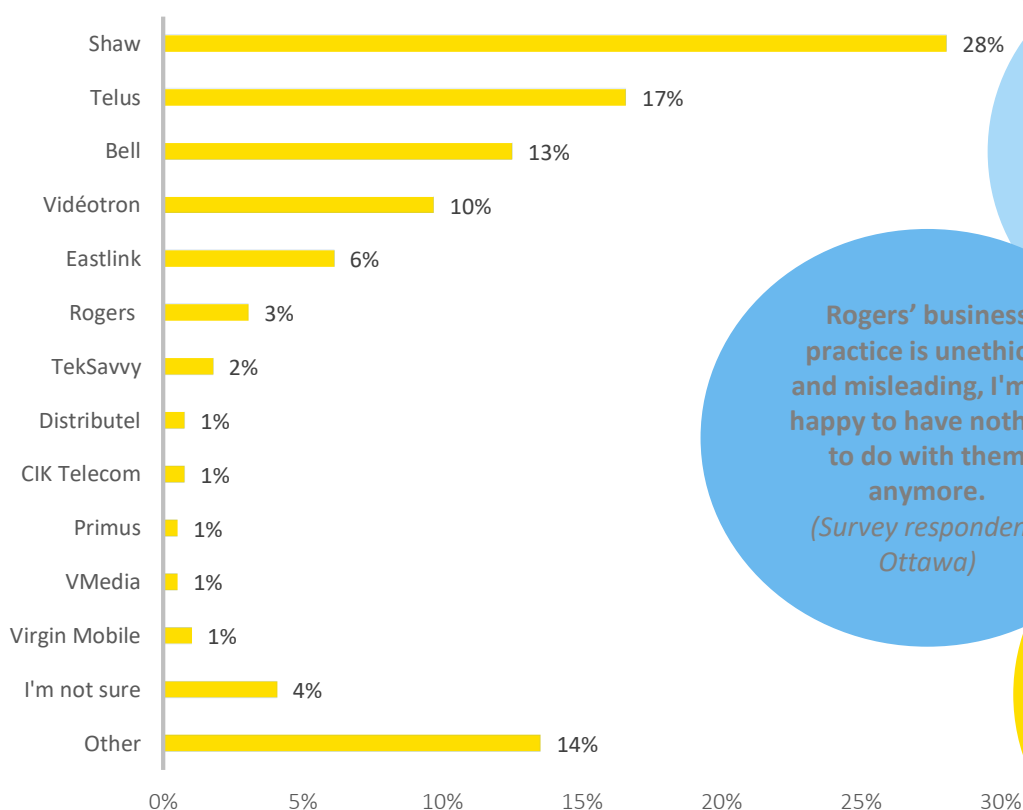
Devices

Most survey respondents (60%) told us that they access the internet at home using a cell phone. More than half use a laptop, and around 40% use a desktop computer. Over 65% of respondents use multiple devices to access the internet. Respondents told us that the high cost of devices such as computers were a barrier to access.

Providers

Respondents are customers of a range of Internet Service Providers. The three main providers used by the survey respondents are Shaw (28%), TELUS (17%) and Bell (13%). Respondents shared their experiences of issues with their internet providers, including rising costs, connection problems, customer service issues and more.

WHAT COMPANY PROVIDES YOUR INTERNET CONNECTION?



I never use the internet... one of the big reasons I don't have internet is I cannot afford the cost of a computer... If it was cheaper to have devices and internet I would probably get on it.
(Survey respondent, Calgary)

With Bell, more and more, prices are rising. In 2016 I was paying \$94.47, in 2017, \$125.48 and in 2018, \$140.15 for the TV and the Internet. I have the same thing as in 2014 and 2015 however. Really too expensive!
(Survey respondent, Montreal)

TELUS has multiple times disconnected us accidentally, and left us without internet for a few days.
(Survey respondent, Coquitlam)

Rogers' business practice is unethical and misleading, I'm so happy to have nothing to do with them anymore.
(Survey respondent, Ottawa)

I have the slowest Shaw internet available, daily I cannot connect. \$65 a month!
(Survey respondent, Maple Ridge)

Speed

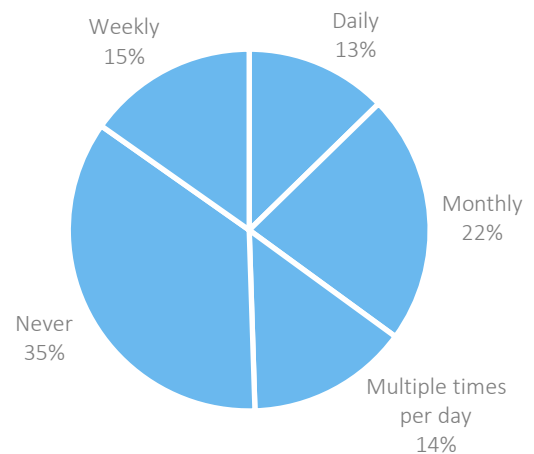
Almost 2 in 3 respondents reported that they have issues with their internet speeds, as frequently as multiple times per day. Slow speeds can make it difficult to stream video content, load webpages, or download software, and can be frustrating for the user. The CRTC has set a target to achieve speeds of 50 Mbps for downloads and 10 Mbps for uploads for 90% of Canadians by 2021, and reports that 82% of Canadians had access to the target speeds in 2016. [4]

Respondents told us that cost was a barrier to adequate internet speeds.

The Wi-Fi connection to the internet on my phone is no good. It's too slow. We just moved houses so there is no internet here. In our previous home our internet was bad as well. My child found it hard to do her homework.

(Survey respondent, Calgary)

HOW OFTEN DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOUR INTERNET CONNECTION IS TOO SLOW?



I would like to have faster and more stable services but I cannot afford it.

(Survey respondent, Montreal)

Cost

From the survey responses, we identified cost as a major barrier to digital equity. Lower-income households with incomes of \$30,000 or below were less likely to have home internet access, and slightly more likely to support the opinion that internet is too expensive, when compared with households that have incomes above \$30,000 (89.19% vs. 87.9%).

Almost half of survey respondents indicated that they pay over \$70/month for internet services; the percentage is the same for respondents with household incomes below

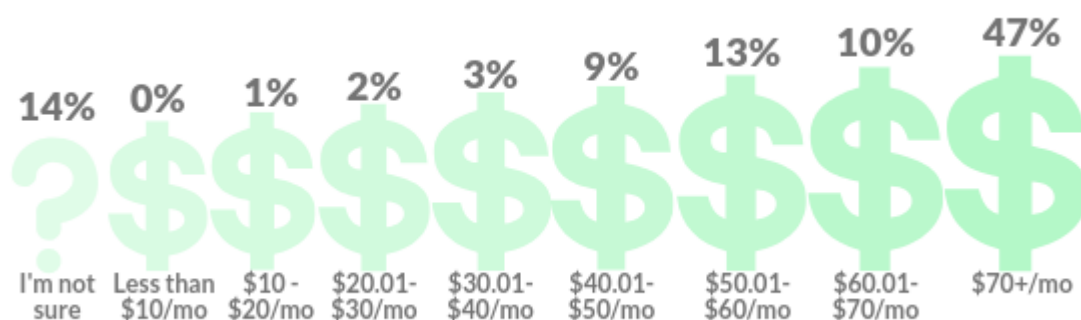
\$30,000.

In addition to the high monthly cost of internet, we also heard from Canadians who were charged extra fees for exceeding their data allowance. Almost one third of survey respondents had experienced additional usage fees.

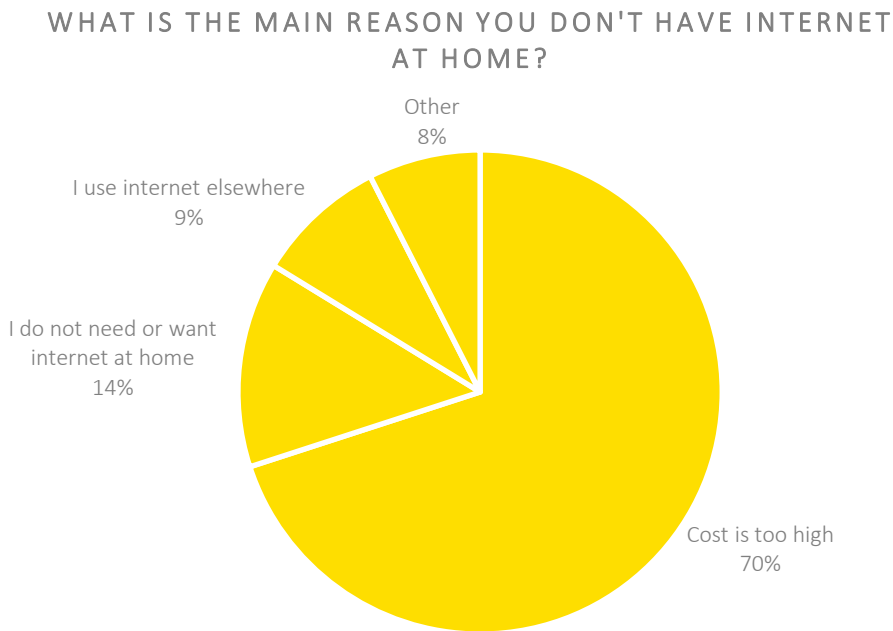
Sometimes the company charges you extra fees without telling you and for no reason.

(Survey respondent, Calgary)

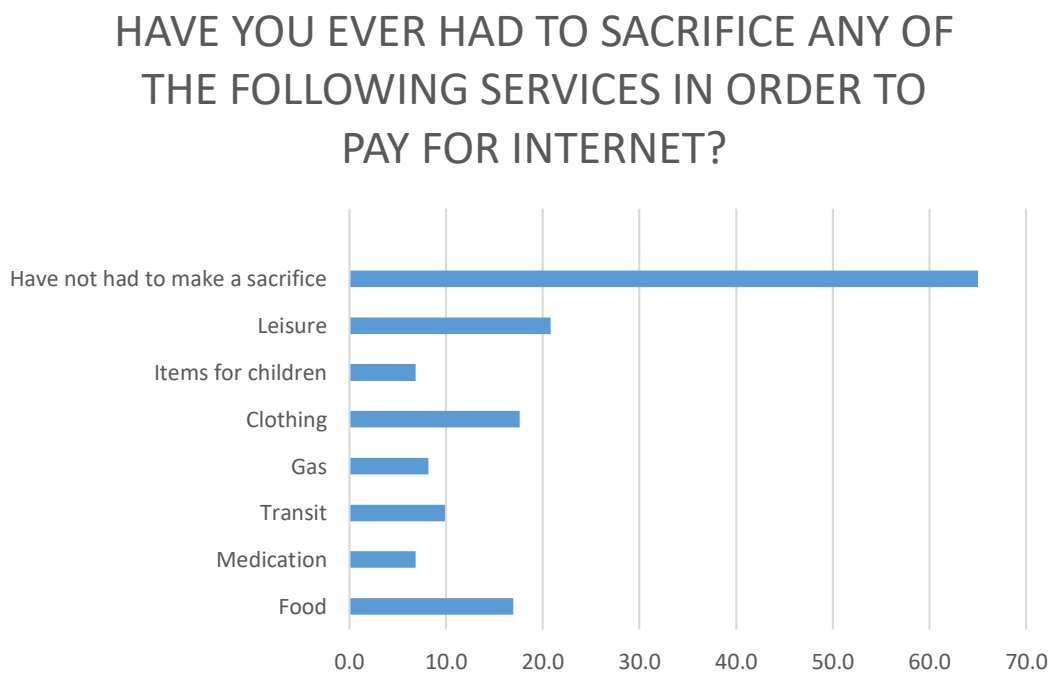
HOW MUCH DO YOU PAY FOR YOUR INTERNET CONNECTION?



The high cost of internet in Canada is a well-documented problem that disproportionately impacts low and moderate income households. A UK study on the internet costs of over 50 countries ranks Canada in the bottom 25. [5] For some survey respondents, cost is so prohibitive that they forgo internet services at home. Of the 78 respondents without home internet, 72% identified cost as the main reason.



Others are forced to make sacrifices to afford internet connection. Over 35 percent of respondents told us they have made sacrifices to afford internet access.
(Note: respondents were able to select multiple options, so the total is greater than 100%)



Internet is very expensive and should be affordable for everyone regardless of their age and family size.

(Survey respondent, Ottawa)

Many low-income Canadians, find themselves in the difficult position of deciding whether to pay for home internet (and the opportunities it provides) or pay for basic necessities such as food, clothing or transit.

Overwhelmingly, respondents told us that they think internet services are too expensive. This opinion was higher in households with no children (91%) compared to households with one or more children (84%).

Often, affordable internet programs such as Connecting Families and TELUS Internet for Good only target low-income parents, so many singles and seniors who are struggling do not qualify for low-cost internet.

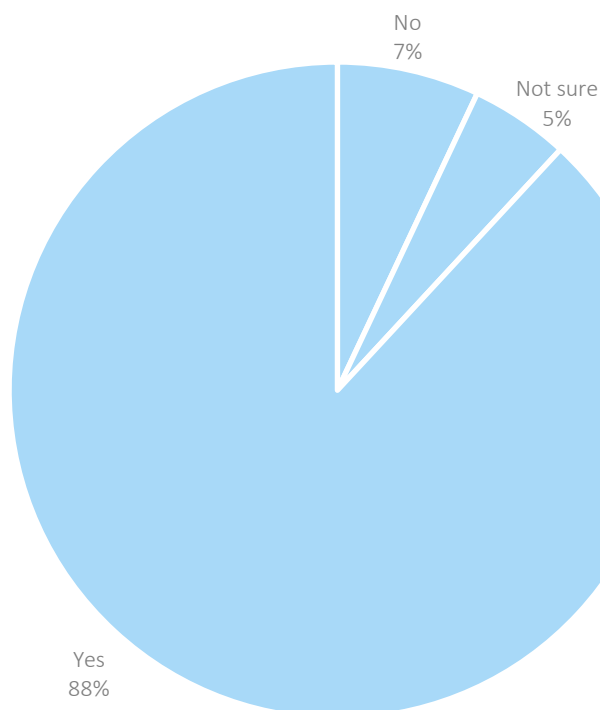
If the internet was more accessible (i.e. \$10 a month or less) I would get it, but because of the cost it is not worth having at home because I need to pay for things that are more urgent, like food.

(Survey respondent, Burnaby)

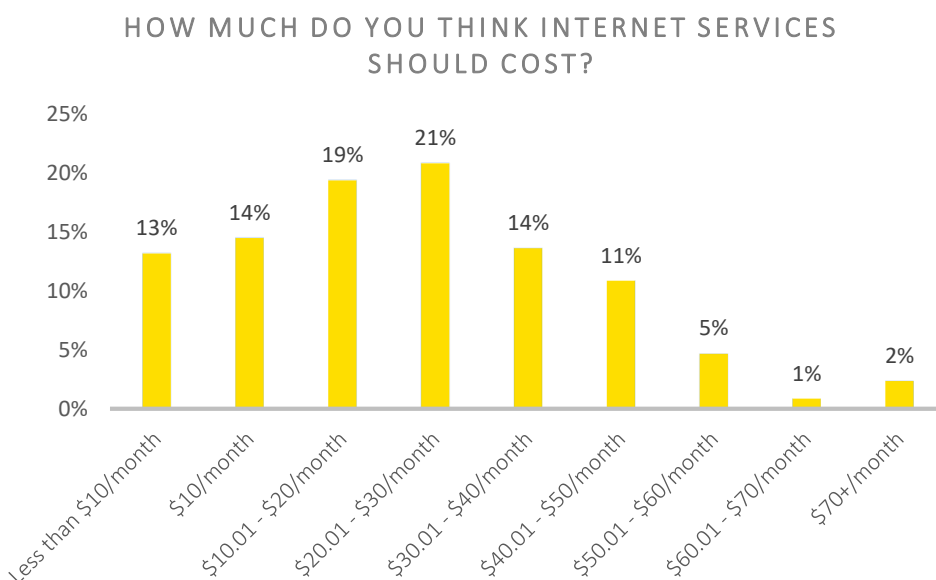
The reason I had no access to home internet for a while was because it was too expensive.

(Survey respondent, Calgary)

DO YOU THINK INTERNET SERVICES ARE TOO EXPENSIVE?



We asked participants how much they thought internet services should cost. Only 2% said the cost should be over \$70 per month; the majority (68%) told us that internet should cost below \$30 per month. In comparison, only 3% of respondents told us they currently pay \$30 or less for their home internet.



For the little that I use it, the price is way too high. Seniors (and on minimum income) should have a lower rate than working people or businesses, just like the subsidized Compass Card for transit. I want to see a change. I really need internet to stay in contact with family overseas and also get local information, like Translink info on Bus schedules, etc.
(Survey respondent, Surrey)

I accessed a \$10 internet package unlimited usage through a subsidy with Rogers specifically through and for subsidy housing. I believe all low-income communities should have this opportunity. It has helped me keep my job and educate my kids.
(Survey respondent, Ottawa)

My cost went up to \$90 a month and I have to cancel it completely as I cannot afford it, but I need it to know if I have any work. My computer died and I cannot afford to fix or replace it. My daughter uses my phone for homework. Everything is online and I have to work at the library all the time. I hate exposing my personal information for all to see at the library but I have no other choice.
(Survey respondent, Coquitlam)

Tasks and Skills

For those who can afford the high costs attached to home internet access, the digital economy opens up limitless opportunities, including a range of social, health and economic benefits.

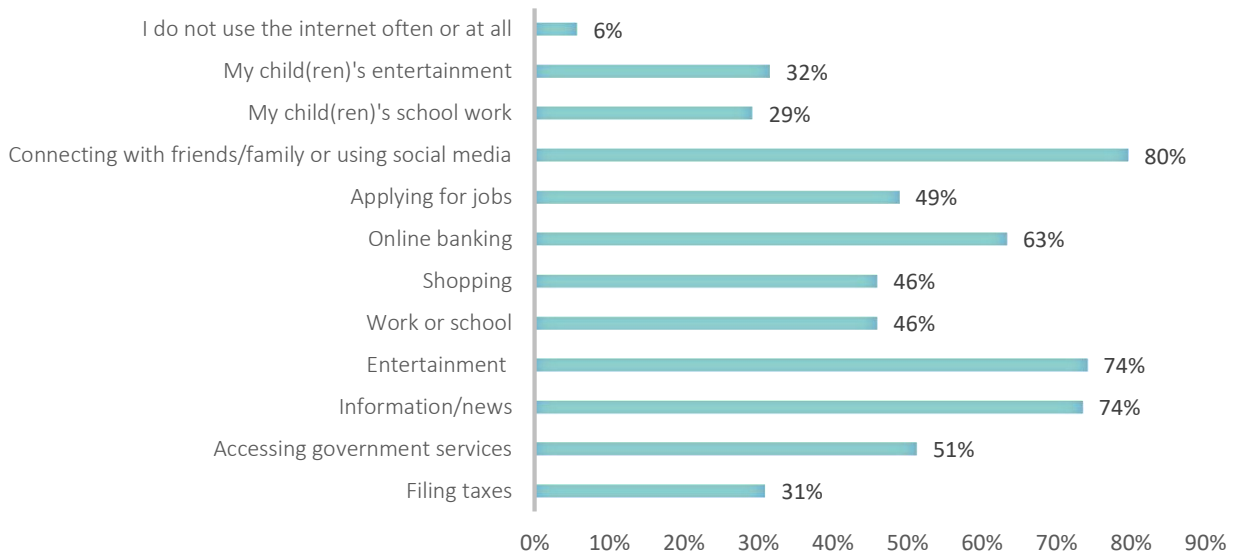
We heard that the most common activity that survey respondents use the internet for is to connect with friends and family or use social media. Almost 80% of respondents use the internet for this purpose.

The ability to connect with others is important.

Loneliness is increasingly being considered a public health problem; for people who reside alone, seniors who live far from their relatives, newcomers, and others, being able to maintain contact with friends and family is crucial.

Almost three-quarters of respondents told us they use the for entertainment purposes or access information and news, while around half use the internet to access government services and apply for jobs.

WHAT TASKS DO YOU USE THE INTERNET TO COMPLETE?



A 2018 ACORN report on digital equity and health found that low and moderate income individuals use the internet to access a range of health information, including in place of professional medical services, such as physiotherapy; to supplement professional medical advice; or to support recovery from illness at home; or to book medical appointments online. [6]

Despite the range of activities that respondents use the internet to complete, we heard that a skill gap exists, preventing some respondents from completing tasks online. According to a 2018 report from the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA), even when people have digital access, it doesn't mean they will use it or it will benefit them: "Providing better access is one thing; giving people the tools and resources they need to become digitally literate (and safe online) is another issue altogether." [7]

The Government of Canada defines digital literacy as "the ability to understand, use, and navigate computer and internet resources". [8] Our survey revealed that many low and moderate income respondents lack the necessary skills to use the internet effectively. Over 28 percent of survey respondents indicated that they had been unable to complete a task online because they didn't have the skills. More than half of respondents reported having difficulty completing tasks

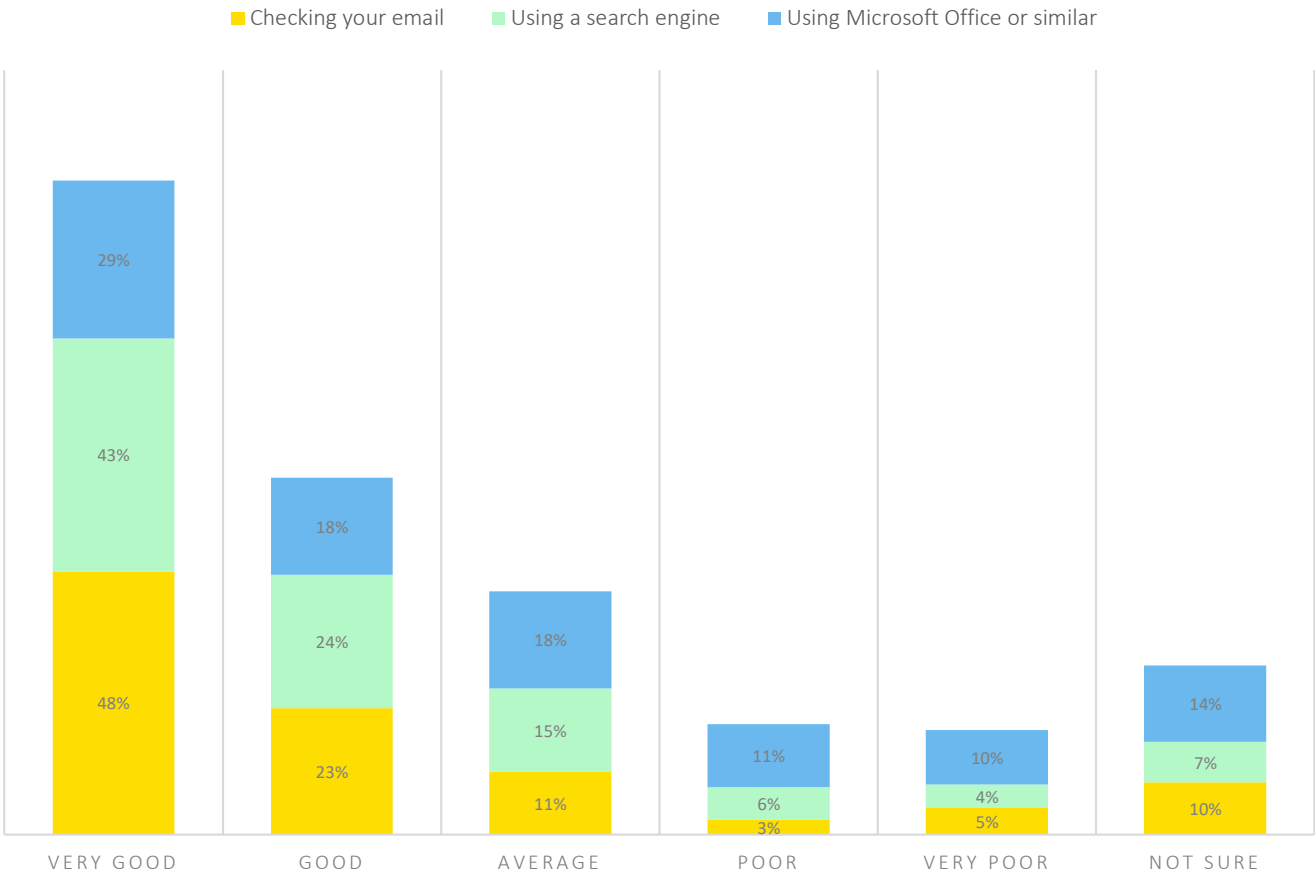
online. Around 1 in 5 had issues searching for health information online, with the same number reporting that they have had issues filing taxes online.

I recently got a virus on my phone and it's hard to deal with. I would like more information and firewalls and similar stuff. Also, I am planning on cutting my home internet soon as I am on unemployment and can't really afford it right now.
(Survey respondent, Calgary)

I found forms too complicated online due to their ambiguous wording - I'm not always sure what they're asking about.
(Survey respondent, Calgary)

We asked participants to rate their skills at completing tasks online. The majority of respondents rated themselves as average or better at checking email, using a search engine or using Microsoft Office or similar. However, 1 in 5 rated their skills at using Microsoft office as poor or very poor.

HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOUR SKILLS AT COMPLETING THE FOLLOWING TASKS?



Recommendations

Based on the survey results, it is evident that there is a digital divide which impacts low and moderate income Canadians.

The following recommendations are proposed to help tackle the barriers that prevent equitable access to the digital economy and lead to inequality within our communities:

- The Connecting Families program should be expanded to meet address the digital access needs of all low-income community members.

- All levels of government should support digital literacy education that meets the needs of low and moderate income community members, delivered by the community, for the community.
- Telecommunications providers must provide affordable, high-speed home broadband for low and moderate income Canadians to address the financial constraints that contribute to the digital divide.

Conclusion

As essential services become increasingly digitized, it is vital that low and moderate citizens are not left behind. A clear digital divide exists along income lines. Telecommunications companies and the government must take action to address the disparity in access that is significantly disadvantaging low-income Canadians, and other marginalized.

An approach that tackles the high cost of internet services and devices, addresses the skills gap, and provides fast, reliable internet access is long overdue.

It is worth mentioning here that the United Nations Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression of 2011, underscored the need for all member states to ensure universal access to the internet, by

making it widely available, accessible and affordable to all segments of population. It further emphasized the importance of digital literacy [9].

Affordable internet is needed - it should be made a human rights issue.

(Survey respondent, Calgary)

Sources

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