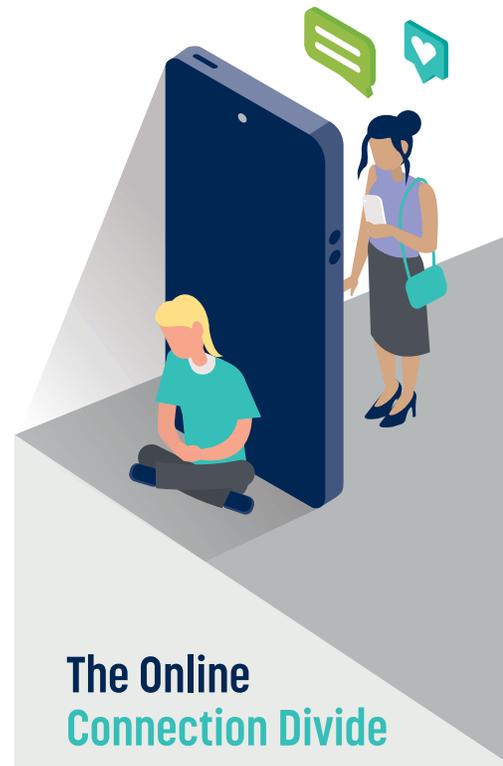


# Ontario's Digital Divide

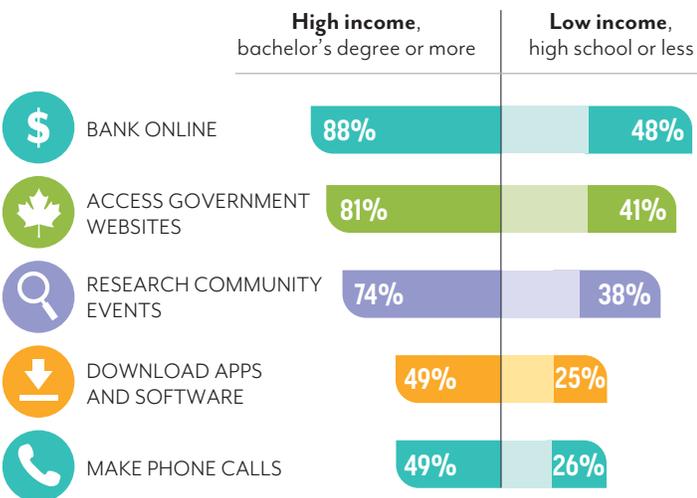
## A Spotlight on the Differences in Online Connection, Activity and Benefits

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.



### The Online Activity Divide

Differences in why, when and how people access and use online resources are shaped by income and education. In 2012, 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 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 Ontarians do not have a household Internet connection.<sup>2</sup>

**16%**

of Ontario's adults don't have an Internet connection at home — that's **1.76 million people!**<sup>3</sup>

**39%**

of Ontarians with low incomes don't have an Internet connection at home, compared to 1% of those with high incomes.

### The Online Benefits Divide

Society grows more polarized when not all citizens 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 Ontario citizens, employees and customers. Because some cannot participate, survey and usage data may not be representative.<sup>4</sup> 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 of an Ontarian 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 5 GB 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 renews her licence plate online. While on the Service Ontario site, she also downloads the official *Driver's Handbook* for her daughter, who just turned 16.



2:30 p.m.

On short breaks, Eva looks for an app that will help her daughter practise for her written G1 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.



## Everyday seamless access means people:



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



are more than **twice as likely** to use the Internet for personal use from work

spend  
**5-20 HOURS**  
per week  
online<sup>5</sup>

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



# A Day in the Life of an Ontarian 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 older, cheaper smartphone is slow and her 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 Ontario College Application Service (OCAS) regarding a problem with her transcripts. 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 email to see if the form she needs from OCAS has come in. Then 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 limited access means people:

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

spend **< 5 HOURS** per week online<sup>6</sup>

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

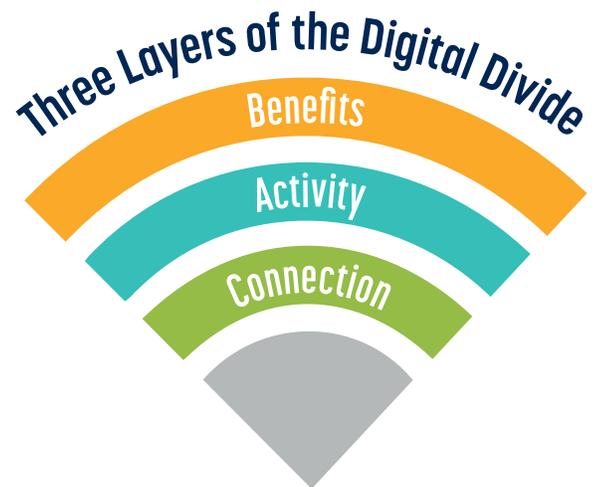
spend a higher percentage of their budget on communications and **sacrifice other basic needs**<sup>7</sup> to pay for them, particularly if they have school-age children<sup>8</sup>



# Addressing the Digital Divide

The three layers of the digital divide—connection, activities and benefits—need to be addressed if the Ontario government is to achieve its goal of making this an “inclusive, equitable and accessible digitally enabled province.”<sup>9</sup> We need sustained, substantial and coordinated efforts that recognize the right to affordable, universal Internet access and to digital learning opportunities for all.

Provincial and federal governments have a role to play in helping people respond to rapidly changing and expanding digital demands, particularly when governments add to that demand by moving more essential services online. Digital learning and access opportunities provided by Ontario’s libraries and by adult learning programs can make a difference, but they are uncoordinated and inconsistently supported.



## Supporting Digital Access and Learning Opportunities for Adults

Ontario’s Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program works directly with adults who are digitally excluded and have limited access. Nearly 45,000 participants engage in some form of digital learning each year in 274 locations and through five online learning portals.<sup>10</sup>

The program is well-situated to support digital inclusion efforts with some select policy adjustments aimed at expanding participation for adults over 65, supporting professional development opportunities focused on digital learning and relieving programs of some of their time-consuming and repetitive reporting demands.<sup>11</sup>



**42%** of LBS participants receive some form of income assistance, mostly from Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program—nearly seven times the rate of the overall population. Others are in low-wage and precarious jobs or are living in low-income families.<sup>12</sup>



**Close to half of participants are 25-44 years of age.** About one-quarter are under 24 and one-quarter are 45-64. Only 4% of participants are over 65.



AlphaPlus, an LBS support agency, is focused on raising awareness of the digital divide, mobilizing digital learning knowledge, curating resources for educators and, importantly, providing direct support to Ontario’s LBS programs through its technology coaching services. Content developed by Christine Pinsent-Johnson and Matthias Sturm. Also available are a literature review and webinar to examine the digital divide in Canada and Ontario.

**Report:** <https://alphaplus.ca/download/digital-opportunities-review/>

**Webinar:** <https://alphaplus.ca/event/digital-opportunities-barriers-ontarios-disconnected-adults/>

**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](https://acorncanada.org/sites/default/files/Internet%20for%20All%20report_0.pdf) (9) Government of Ontario, “Sparking a New Vision.” Accessed November 1, 2019, <https://www.ontario.ca/document/start-users-deliver-together/sparking-new-vision> (10) Government of Ontario, “Literacy and Basic Skills,” Employment Ontario. Accessed November 1, 2019, <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/programs/lbs.html> (11) Reporting demands were identified as an issue by Cathexis Consulting in “Executive Summary: Evaluation of Ontario’s LBS Programs,” (2016). Accessed November 1, 2019, [www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/publications/lbs-exec-summary-report-2016-en.pdf](http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/publications/lbs-exec-summary-report-2016-en.pdf) (12) LBS data from 2017-2018 annual aggregate data report. Available from authors.