

Language Matters: Exploring how Disability Definitions Shape Access to Government Disability Income Support Programs for Children, Youth and Families

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Executive Summary

Topic and Purpose: This report examines the degree of alignment/misalignment between Canadian provincial and territorial disability income support programs' definitions and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). While Canada has ratified the UNCRPD, it lacks a unified definition of disability, leading to inconsistent access to essential supports for youth aged 0–25 with disabilities. The research aims to identify policy gaps and provide a foundation for a common, human-rights-oriented definition of disability across the Government of Canada.

Methods: The project utilized critical discourse analysis, an approach to research interested in how language choices influence and shape social practices. A comparative review of 23 disability income support programs across all provinces and territories was conducted. Data collection involved a pan-Canadian scan of programs providing monthly financial benefits for children and youth with disabilities or their families. The analysis mapped these definitions against key UNCRPD articles to evaluate how language shapes eligibility, access, and public notions of and individual's "deservingness" of supports.

Key Findings:

- **Predominance of the medical model of disability:** 22 out of the 23 programs included, rely on narrow, impairment-focused definitions that emphasize medical diagnosis, severity, and deficit/longevity rather than environmental barriers.
- **Stigma and barriers to participation:** Many definitions (43%) explicitly link disability to an inability to earn income, framing individuals as societal burdens and prioritizing gatekeeping over inclusive support.
- **Lack of UNCRPD alignment:** Only one program (Manitoba Supports for Persons with Disabilities) has adopted a human-rights-based definition that recognizes disability as an interaction between impairments and contextual barriers.
- **Influence of a restrictive federal comparator:** It is a concern that jurisdictions tended to adopt the Federal Disability Tax Credit (DTC) definition, which is considered to be restrictive and misaligned with UNCRPD commitments.

Recommendations: The report recommends harmonizing the definition of disability across all Canadian jurisdictions using a broad, inclusive human rights lens. This process must incorporate the lived experience of children and youth with disabilities and caregivers as well as provide mandatory training for program administrators on the UNCRPD, society's influence on shaping perception of disability, a human rights orientation of disability and the harms of deficit-focused stigma.

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Contextualizing the issue – How definitions influence access to government disability income supports

Rima's Story

We invite you to imagine Rima. Rima is 10 years old. She loves playing with her sister, joking with classmates, and is fiercely determined. Rima has cerebral palsy, and for years, her family has relied on Ontario's disability income support, Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities (ACSD), to help cover the real, ongoing costs related to her disability.

In Canada, disability income supports such as Ontario's Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities (ACSD), are largely governed at the provincial and territorial level, using varying, but frequently impairment-focused, definitions of disability to frame eligibility criteria for these programs. Equitable access to disability programs for youth with disabilities remains a significant gap across all Canadian provinces and territories.

To eligible for ACSD, a physician made the determination that Rima has a severe disability, which the program defines as "a mental, developmental or physical condition that severely limits the child's development and/or functional capacity to perform tasks and activities necessary in their daily life" [1]. This definition, grounded in language closely tied to the medical model of disability, emphasizes impairment, limitations and deficits within the child, tying eligibility to severity thresholds and therefore suggesting that support may decrease with any progress made.

For Rima, this could mean that gaining independence in her ability to transfer from her wheelchair or in using her communication device to speak with her family results in changes to the financial benefits she is eligible for.

Rima is no longer described as "severely limited"—her impairment is described as **less severe**. With those shifts in language can come shifts in access to disability income supports, including the possibility of reduced financial benefits.

Despite making developmental progress, the supports that Rima needs to participate fully in her life have not changed. She still requires assistance from others and technology to navigate her world, and her family still faces significant, ongoing disability-related costs. But because the words used to define her disability have changed, there is the potential for her access to government disability income supports to change too.

Like many families, to access supports like government disability income supports, Rima and her family depend on how disability is *defined*, not how it is lived. This report provides an opportunity to examine the implications of how definitions of disability influence access to essential government disability supports for children and youth with disabilities aged 0-25 and their families.

Identifying the policy gap

Across Canadian provincial and territorial disability income support programs for children, youth, and families, disability is usually defined by impairment severity, duration, and/or an inability to work rather than through the interaction between individual experiences of impairment and environmental,

social, and institutional barriers. This framing of disability risks reinforcing stigma, narrowing eligibility, and undermining Canada's human-rights commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

A human rights-oriented definition of disability, one that acknowledges the impact of barriers and context, would align with Canada's ambitions of having a barrier free country by 2040 as outlined in the Canada Accessibility Act [2]. In 2010, Canada ratified the UNCRPD, legally binding the country to uphold the fundamental principles of the Convention [3]. The UNCRPD defines people with disabilities as individuals "who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" [3]. Currently, Canada does not have a unified definition of disability, however a pillar of Canada's Disability Inclusion Action Plan is to adopt a modern approach to disability across the Government of Canada [4]. An action item under this pillar is to "work across government and with the disability community on how a **common definition of disability** could be used across the Government of Canada" [4].

In Canada, government disability supports and services, such as monthly financial benefits and income supports (referred to as disability income supports here forward), for children and youth (age 0 to 25) are largely governed at the provincial and territorial level. The definitions of disability used by these programs vary, however a uniting characteristic is their reliance on diagnosis and disability severity to frame eligibility criteria. Equitable access to provincial and territorial disability programs (referring to all services, supports, and benefits provided by provincial and territorial governments) for children and youth with disabilities remains a significant gap across all Canadian provincial and territorial [5]. Access to these programs remains inconsistent across different life stages and regions, with only 25% of those eligible accessing programs in some cases [6-9]. Challenges accessing essential provincial and territorial disability programs have serious negative implications for academic, social, health, financial, and occupational trajectories [6, 9-13] and quality of life [10, 14-16], impacting the overall wellbeing of children and youth with disabilities and their families. Families have identified limitations related to the current diagnosis-driven and severity-dependent eligibility criteria present in provincial and territorial disability programs as they overlook the reality that children and youth with the same diagnosis may have vastly different functional abilities and support needs [11, 18, 19]. Although definitions alone do not determine access to government disability income supports, they provide a platform to inform the development of eligibility criteria and applications processes for government disability supports. Therefore, exploration is warranted examining the potential implications for how the language and variety of definitions used by government disability income support programs influence benefit access.

Within the UNCRPD framework, disability is understood to arise from the interaction of impairments experienced by an individual with attitudinal, structural, informational, and environmental barriers [3]. To comply with the UNCRPD, definitions of government disability programs need to align with a human rights model of disability whereby the needs and preferences of rights-holders (children and youth with disabilities and their families) are considered alongside a commitment to eliminating environmental barriers prohibiting their full participation in society [20]. Recognizing and eliminating environmental barriers is a central tenant to a human rights model of disability, which foregrounds the impact of the environment on an individual's experience of disability, decentralizing the focus on impairment or diagnosis [21]. A human rights model of disability accounts for the interaction between impairment,

individual abilities, preferences and environmental factors [20,22], providing a holistic conceptualization of disability.

Given Canada's commitment to a barrier-free society and to the upholding the UNCRPD, there is a critical need to understand if the definitions of disability operationalized in provincial and territorial disability income supports align with the definition of disability described in the Convention. Prior to the work reported here, there has been no comparison completed examining how disability is defined across provincial and territorial disability income support programs, how current definitions align with the UNCRPD definition of disability or the implications of these definitions on access to these programs.

How was the policy gap addressed?

Research approach

To address the current gap in comparing definitions of disability across provincial and territorial disability incomes support programs we used critical discourse analysis to conduct a comparative review of disability definitions used by legislation regulating disability income support programs across all Canadian provinces and territories providing monthly financial benefits to children and youth ages 0 to 25 with disabilities. Critical discourse analysis is a research approach that incorporates data, theory, literature and lived perspectives to examine how words and phrases shape meaning, power, and decision-making [23]. Critical discourse analysis explores language beyond the literal meaning of words to instead focus on the deeper meaning that language can have in different social contexts (i.e., definitions of disability in government supports) [23]. Rather than asking only *what* policies say, it asks *how* language defines problems, limits or enables solutions and reinforces established social practices [23]. Further, critical discourse analysis encourages challenging the status quo and what has come to be accepted as normal (e.g., impairment-focused definitions of disability) to consider alternate possibilities and ways forward [23]. In this research, critical discourse analysis was used to compare the definitions of disability used by provincial and territorial disability income support programs, considering the degree of alignment with the UNCRPD. Further, definitions of disability were examined to analyze their potential to quietly structure eligibility, access, and notions of support deservingness, demonstrating that policy language is not neutral, but a powerful driver of real-world outcomes.

How the data was collected?

Data was collected by completing a pan-Canadian scan for provincial and territorial disability income support programs offering monthly financial benefits to children and youth aged 0-25 or their families. Programs were included if:

- they are a provincial and territorial government administered income support program specifically for disabled individuals (or their families) OR are a blended income support program that has a disability specific stream,
- they provide financial support on at least monthly intervals for disabled individuals (or their families) between the ages of 0-25,
- they provide income supports meant to be used at the discretion of the recipient to aid with costs of living generally.

Programs were excluded if:

- they are a provincial and territorial government administered monthly financial benefit or income program that both non-disabled and disabled individuals can apply to but DID NOT have a disability specific stream.
- the program provides funds designated for a specific purpose (e.g., funding received specifically for rehabilitation services)

An initial list of provincial and territorial disability income support programs was compiled using 2025 Kids Brain Health Network report [6] outlining Canadian provincial and territorial disability income supports, which was updated by the 2025-2026 ADVANCE Fellows in Fall 2025. To ensure completeness, this list was validated by the ADVANCE Parent Advisory Council, the CHILD-BRIGHT National Youth Advisory Council and a Maytree working group completing a project focused on definitions of disability used by income support programs across Canada. The websites, administration manuals and/or regulations for each program were reviewed to confirm alignment with the criteria to be included and to extract information as available about each program including: the definition of disability used in the program's regulation, the year the regulation was instated, the program mandate and eligibility criteria, the department responsible for regulating the program and a determination of whether the program is meant specifically for people with disabilities or has a disability-specific stream but can also be accessed by non-disabled individuals.

How was the data analyzed and synthesized?

Data was analyzed to map each provincial and territorial disability income support program definitions to key UNCRPD articles to better understand the similarities and differences between the definitions and their alignment with the UNCRPD. Canada has committed to upholding the tenants of the UNCRPD, including the conceptualization of disability. Therefore, aligned with the UNCRPD's human-rights framing of disability, data analysis focused on examining whether each provincial and territorial definition recognized disability as arising from interaction between an individual's unique experience with impairment and environmental barriers. This level of analysis provided the foundation for interpreting how definitions of disability have implications on access to provincial and territorial disability income support programs.

Data was synthesized with the aims of:

- Describing the similarities and differences of the definitions of disability used by provincial and territorial disability income support programs.
- Comparing provincial and territorial definitions and UNCRDP articles to identify gaps in alignment between these sources.
- Narratively describing the emergent discourse(s) from provincial and territorial disability definitions with analytic interpretation of how current discourse(s) may influence access to disability income support programs for children and youth with disabilities and their families.

Perspectives engaged in this work

The primary project team consisted of a pan-Canadian ADVANCE Network members who brought diverse perspectives to the work including lived experience expertise, policy research expertise, qualitative research expertise and disability advocacy expertise. This team shaped the project by

finalizing the research questions, validating completeness of data collection, collaboratively completing data analysis and developing knowledge sharing outputs. In addition to the project team, input from the ADVANCE co-directors, fellows, research coordinator and chair of both the parent and youth advisory committees shaped the scope of the project, validated the completeness of the data set and contributed the development of knowledge sharing outputs.

Key findings and implications for program access

Twenty-three programs met inclusion criteria with representation from all Canadian provinces and territories. Fifteen of the programs were geared specifically toward people with disabilities, while the remaining 8 programs provide support to individuals with and without disability, but had a specific stream of support for individuals with disabilities. Eight provinces and territories had more than one program included. Please refer to Appendix A for a detailed summary of the programs included and their definitions of disability.

Disability is defined differently across jurisdictions and programs, with variations in language, eligibility criteria, and administrative responsibility. These differences can create unnecessary barriers when attempting to access benefits. Aligning disability definitions across federal programs would support Canada's commitment under the Accessible Canada Act to identify, remove, and prevent barriers, while also addressing the 2025 UNCRPD recommendation for federal leadership to simplify access to disability entitlements and ensure disability policies are disability-inclusive [24].

Current definitions are predominately impairment-focused and fail to reflect the lived reality of disability

Twenty-two of the twenty-three included programs relied on narrow, impairment-focused definitions. Aligned with the medical model of disability, these definitions use language such as “incapable”, “infirm” and “impaired” to describe individuals with disabilities with a strong emphasis on deficit severity and longevity as a mechanism to adjudicate whether an individual meets their criteria to be considered disabled. For example, to be eligible for British Columbia’s Disability Assistance an applicant must receive a Person With a Disability (PWD) designation which:

"requires a severe mental or physical impairment that: (1) is likely to continue ≥ 2 years (medical/nurse practitioner opinion); (2) directly and significantly restricts daily living activities (periodically for extended periods or continuously) (prescribed professional opinion); and (3) requires an assistive device, significant help/supervision of another person, or an assistance animal to perform daily living activities."

At this time, the language of most definitions of disability used by Canadian provincial and territorial disability income support programs place emphasis on individual-level impairment without consideration for contextual factors (e.g., fluctuations in function, caregiving support needs, equipment to facilitate participation). This positions disability as a static, individual problem, which does not reflect the lived reality that disability changes with time (e.g., episodic disability), across environments, and with availability of supports. Current definitions fail to reflect the fluctuations in disability resulting from the dynamic interaction between how a person experiences impairment over their lifespan and the barriers they encounter while engaging with their surrounding physical, social, attitudinal and institutional environments.

Further, the current restrictive, deficit-focused definitions perpetuate stigma and underlying assumptions about how individuals with disabilities are or are not able to contribute to the general wellbeing of society. In their definitions of disability, 43% (n = 10/23) of the included programs explicitly describe an inability to earn income or function in a workplace as a criterion of being disabled. Phrases in the included definitions such as “capacity for employment is limited”, “incapable of pursuing regularly any substantially gainful employment” and “the person’s ability...to function in the workplace” are laden with assumptions about societal expectations of having paid work. This link between income support and paid employment is perpetuated further by the current imbalance of government disability income support programs providing funds to those over the age of 18 (working age) (n = 18/23, 78%) with a lack of programs providing monthly income support geared toward child and youth with disabilities and their families (n=5/23, 22%).

This accepted norm frames individuals with disabilities or those in caregiving positions who are unable to obtain and/or maintain paid employment as burdens who rely on financial assistance from others because they are unable to engage in the socially-expected role of income earner. This perception of people with disabilities and their caregivers being reliant and beholden to the state for support has implications for how society treats the ‘deservingness’ of benefits by individuals with disabilities. If society views people with disabilities primarily as individuals who they are obligated to support financially, this dissuades any shift toward using inclusive definitions of disability to guide eligibility for income supports and perpetuates the use of the current restrictive definitions driven by severity-thresholds to gatekeep who obtains access as a means of limiting costs to government. Further, through mechanisms capping the amount of income that can be earned above monthly supports, the benefits to which these definitions are assigned also restrict people from meaningfully participating in the labour force, thereby perpetuating cycles of disability poverty, while continuing to reify the association between disability and economic participation.

The relationship between intergovernmental benefits is made more complex without unified definitions of disability, particularly when an individual’s eligibility for a federal benefit such as the Disability Tax Credit (DTC), is used as criteria for provincial disability benefits. Provincial and territorial use of the federal DTC definition of disability to guide their program policies is evidence of the trend toward the continued use of restrictive definitions of disability to adjudicate eligibility for government supports. The DTC gatekeeps access to seventeen federal, provincial and territorial government disability supports [25] including the Canada Disability Benefit and defines disability as:

"(a) an individual has one or more severe and prolonged impairments in physical or mental functions, (a.1) the effects of the impairment or impairments are such that the individual’s ability to perform more than one basic activity of daily living is significantly restricted where the cumulative effect of those restrictions is equivalent to having a marked restriction in the ability to perform a basic activity of daily living or are such that the individual’s ability to perform a basic activity of daily living is markedly restricted or would be markedly restricted but for therapy that: (i) is essential to sustain a vital function of the individual, (ii) is required to be administered at least two times each week for a total duration averaging not less than 14 hours a week, and (iii) cannot reasonably be expected to be of significant benefit to persons who are not so impaired".

Two of the programs included in this project did not have their own definition of disability, instead they either adopted the DTC definition outright (Newfoundland and Labrador Disability Benefit) or accepted

DTC eligibility status to determine eligibility for the provincial program (British Columbia Child and Youth Disability Supplement). The trend toward adopting DTC definition language to determine access provincial and territorial support is problematic as the DTC is underutilized, employs a restrictive impairment-focused definition of disability and is misaligned with Canada's commitments under the UNCRPD. It is estimated that only 14.6% of people with disabilities claim the DTC, with restrictive definitions and eligibility criteria being identified as a barrier to uptake [26]. Further, the 90% rule, whereby the DTC application indicates that an individual should be unable to complete basic activities "all or substantially all of the time" (90 % of the time), demonstrates how the impairment-focused definition of disability used by the DTC, influences how disability is conceptualized in the application process [27, 28]. This criterion is particularly problematic for individual experiencing episodic, fluctuating, developmental or mental-health conditions, as the current DTC framework does not adequately capture this type of experience with disability [28].

Current definitions lack alignment with the UNCRPD articles and conceptualization of disability

Overall, alignment between the current definitions of disability used by provincial and territorial disability income support programs was weak with only one program in Manitoba (Manitoba Supports for Persons with Disabilities) adopting a human rights-based definition. The definition used by this program, is found in Manitoba's Disability Support Act and reads:

"WHEREAS Manitobans living with severe and prolonged disabilities face multiple and connected barriers to full community participation and social and economic inclusion; AND WHEREAS persons living with severe and prolonged disabilities have distinct financial, service and accommodation needs; AND WHEREAS income and income security are key determinants of social and economic inclusion; AND WHEREAS there is a societal responsibility to eliminate barriers faced by persons living with severe and prolonged disabilities and to accommodate their needs."

In contrast to the predominately impairment-focused definitions used by most provincial and territorial income support programs, the definition for the Manitoba Supports for Persons with Disabilities program emphasizes participation, inclusion and the unique needs of each person with a disability. This definition aligns more closely with how disability is conceptualized in the UNCRPD, whereby disability is understood to occur at the intersection between how an individual experiences impairments and the disabling barriers they encounter in their surrounding context [3]. This shifts thinking from disability being a static, individual-level problem to instead conceptualizing disability as dynamic, changing and influenced by environmental factors beyond the person. This definition of disability is more reflective of the lived realities of individuals with disabilities and strengthens Canada's alignment with the rights-based UNCRPD conceptualization of disability.

At this time, no definitions of disability used by provincial and territorial disability income support programs explicitly discuss the UNCRPD generally nor specific articles of the Convention that may align with program aims. It can be inferred that, given that provincial and territorial disability income support programs are broadly mandated to provide financial assistance toward basic living needs, an implicit connection between the programs' aims and UNCRPD Article 28 – Adequate Standard of Living and Social Protection [3]. Further, the programs designed to provide financial support specifically to children with disabilities and their families is a step towards upholding UNCRPD Article 7 – Children with Disabilities, which commits signatories to ensuring that children with disabilities enjoy the same human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis to other children [3].

There exists a fundamental disconnect between the current impairment-focused definitions utilized by 22 of the 23 Canadian provincial and territorial disability income support programs included in this project and the human-rights oriented UNCRPD. Because these structures operate from fundamentally different viewpoints, there is limited opportunity for authentic and explicit representation of relevant UNCRPD Articles within how disability is currently defined by the provincial and territorial disability income support programs. For example, UNCRPD Article 19 – Living Independently and Being Included in the Community, ensures the right of individuals with disabilities to be fully included in the community and have choice over where they live [3]. UNCRPD Article 19 is one of many Convention Articles that are not represented in the current definitions used by provincial and territorial disability income support programs that hinge eligibility on restrictive definitions focused on impairment severity thresholds not on what supports are essential to enhancing the independence and inclusion of individuals with disabilities. Given the current language of definitions, access to provincial and territorial disability income support programs is structurally tied to impairment severity and duration. The use of disjointed definitions of disability across provincial and territorial disability income support programs, silos programs and risks contributing to inequitable access to important financial supports for children and youth with disabilities. This established structure may make it difficult for disability support programs to move away from using a medical conceptualization of disability to instead embracing a UNCRPD aligned human-rights orientation of disability. A human-rights conceptualization of disability emphasizes the importance of the real-world context, needs and choices of individuals of disabilities, creating space to understand and learn from the lived experiences of how children, youth and families navigate these systems.

Recommended steps for actionable change

Findings indicate that definitions act as a starting point for policy, shaping who qualifies for support and whether policies prioritize gatekeeping or enhance inclusion. Therefore, the following recommendations have been developed to prompt action at the level of definition development and operationalization to enhance equitable access to Canada's provincial and territorial disability income support programs.

Through federal-provincial-territorial collaboration the Canadian government is called to:

1. Develop a harmonized rights-based definition of disability led through federal-provincial-territorial collaboration and grounded in the UNCRPD, while allowing jurisdictions to adapt implementation to their program context.

Aligned with Canada's commitment to the UNCRPD and goals for a barrier free country by 2040 outlined in the Canada Accessibility Act [2], it is imperative to harmonize the definition of disability across Canada. This would include all jurisdictions and sectors in collaboration with diverse interest-holders and be driven by lived experience expertise.

2. Avoid harmonizing downward. A common definition of disability should not create a new restrictive threshold or reduce eligibility in jurisdictions with broader access.

The harmonized definition should be broad and inclusive, aligned with a human rights lens that acknowledges the interaction between individual experiences with impairments and disabling contextual barriers. Further, the definition should highlight the dynamic nature of disability, which warrants ongoing re-evaluation of the definition. Continuously re-evaluating the definition with people with lived

experience will help it to remain relevant and to accurately represents disability in program policy and administration.

3. Co-design the definition of disability with disabled children and youth, caregivers, Indigenous rights holders, and diverse disability communities. This should include accessible engagement of those with diverse intersectional identities, compensation for participation, plain-language materials, and specific mechanisms for child and youth voice.

Aligned with Article 7.13.e (Children with disabilities) and Article 21 (Freedom of expression) of the UNCRPD [3], as rights holders the perspectives of disabled individuals including children and youth and their caregivers must be incorporated into the process of developing a harmonized definition of disability in Canada. Definitions that shape access to support must be informed by those who live their consequences every day.

4. Train those in positions of developing, regulating and/or administering government disability income support programs about a human-rights orientation of disability.

Aligned with UNCRPD Article 8 (awareness raising) [3] those in positions of developing, regulating and/or administering government disability income support programs should receive training about the interactive and contextual aspects of disability, the implications of disabling barriers that interact with individual impairment, the UNCRPD, and harms of perpetuating stigma associated with deficit-focused definitions of disability. Program administrators should then use their knowledge of a human-rights orientation to disability to ensure consistent operationalization of this framework into program policies, administration and adjudication practices.

5. Monitor access and equity impacts. Governments should track application rates, approvals, denials, appeals, processing times, and demographic patterns to assess whether revised definitions improve equitable access.

Aligned with UNCRPD Article 4(2) (general obligations) [3], the government should monitor the impact of a harmonized rights-based definition of disability on outcomes related to access and equity as a means of demonstrating Canada's commitment through ratification of the Convention to progressive realization of the rights outlined in the UNCRPD.

Significance of the work

This research represents the first comprehensive comparison of how disability is defined across Canadian provincial and territorial disability income support programs and how these definitions measure up to international human rights obligations. By employing critical discourse analysis, the work demonstrates that policy language is not neutral; rather, it acts as a powerful structural driver that dictates who is "deserving" of support and who is excluded. The findings highlight a fundamental disconnect, while Canada aspires to be barrier-free by 2040 [2], its current income support structures remain anchored in a static, medicalized view of disability that ignores the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments. Uncovering this gap is essential for moving toward a system that prioritizes equitable access, independence, and community inclusion rather than impairment-based gatekeeping.

Limitations of the work

Although this project was completed rigorously with guidance from a project team with diverse expertise, limitations to the work exist. First, this research focuses on a sub-set of government disability supports, so does not describe the full landscape of disability definitions used by Canadian programs. Further, although we consulted with multiple advisory groups regarding the completeness of the programs included, it is possible that the list is not comprehensive of all provincial and territorial disability income support programs. Finally, we acknowledge that definitions of disability are only one contributor to experiences of support access and that while this scan captures the formal language of how disability is defined, it does not discuss how adjudicators apply it in practice.

Knowledge gaps and the human rights definition

A major knowledge gap remains regarding the practical implementation of a harmonized, human-rights-oriented definition across diverse sectors and jurisdictions. While this report identifies the need for change, the specific language of a unified definition that can be operationalized without losing the nuance of individual needs or pragmatic considerations for resource management is still evolving.

A human rights-oriented definition of disability for Canada must transition from viewing disability as an individual "problem" to seeing it as a relational and dynamic experience. Findings suggest that such a definition would:

- **Foreground environmental interaction:** Define disability as the result of interactions between physical or mental impairments and attitudinal, structural, or environmental barriers that hinder full participation.
- **Prioritize rights and preferences:** Consider the needs and choices of rights-holders (individuals with disabilities and families) alongside a societal commitment to eliminating barriers.
- **Recognize fluidity:** Acknowledge that disability is not static but fluctuates across time, life stages, and different social contexts.
- **Focus on inclusion, not incapacity:** Shift the focus away from "inability" (e.g., inability to work) and toward the supports necessary to ensure an adequate standard of living, social protection, independence and inclusion as guaranteed by the UNCRPD.

Bridging this gap requires meaningful collaboration with the disability community, ministries and income support program administrators to ensure that new definitions do not simply create new forms of gatekeeping and reinforce harmful stigma but instead facilitate the full and effective participation of all Canadians.

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Appendix A – Detailed Description of the Data

Province or Territory, Regulatory body, Age eligibility	Disability Income Support Program, Type (disability specific or blended with disability specific stream)	Definition of disability used in program regulation	Definition source	Model of disability aligned with definition (medical model or human-rights model)
Alberta, Assisted Living and Social Services, 18 and over	Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), Disability specific	"Severe handicap means an impairment of mental or physical functioning or both that, in a director's opinion after considering any relevant medical or psychological reports, causes substantial limitation in the person's ability to earn a livelihood and is likely to continue to affect that person permanently because no remedial therapy is available that would materially improve the person's ability to earn a livelihood."	Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Act (2007) Section 1 Definitions d) severely handicapped https://kings-printer.alberta.ca/1266.cfm?page=2007_091.cfm&leg_type=Regs&isbncln=9780779807796&display=html	Medical
Alberta, Community and Social Services, 18 or over	Barriers to Full Employment, Blended	"(1)A household unit may be designated as a barriers to full employment household unit if: (a) the household unit is not eligible to be designated as a learner household unit, and (b) each adult member of the household unit is designated as a barriers to full employment or at least one adult member has a severe handicap as defined in the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped Act. (2) An adult member of a household unit may be designated as barriers to full employment if the adult member has a long-term inability to participate in full employment due to: (a) the adult member having multiple barriers to full employment beyond the adult member's control, or (b) the adult member having a persistent and severe health problem of more than, or expected to be of more than, 6 months' duration."	Income Support, Training, and Health Benefits Regulation (2011): https://kings-printer.alberta.ca/1266.cfm?page=2011_122.cfm&leg_type=Regs&isbncln=9780779856114&display=html	Medical
British Columbia, Family and Social	Disability Assistance, Disability specific	"A person with a disability (PWD) designation requires a severe mental or physical impairment that: (1) is likely to continue ≥ 2 years (medical/nurse practitioner opinion); (2) directly and significantly restricts daily living activities (periodically for extended periods or continuously) (prescribed professional opinion); and (3) requires an assistive device, significant help/supervision of another person, or an assistance animal to perform daily living activities."	Employment and Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act, Section 2 (2002); https://www.bclaws.g	Medical

Supports, 18 and over			ov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/02041_01#section2 . (Source: Employment Assistance for Persons with Disabilities Act https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/02041_01)	
British Columbia, Ministry of Children and Family Development, 0 to 18	British Columbia Child and Youth Disability Supplement, Disability specific	Utilizes the Disability Tax Credit definition of disability: "(a) an individual has one or more severe and prolonged impairments in physical or mental functions,(a.1) the effects of the impairment or impairments are such that the individual's ability to perform more than one basic activity of daily living is significantly restricted where the cumulative effect of those restrictions is equivalent to having a marked restriction in the ability to perform a basic activity of daily living or are such that the individual's ability to perform a basic activity of daily living is markedly restricted or would be markedly restricted but for therapy that: (i) is essential to sustain a vital function of the individual,(ii) is required to be administered at least two times each week for a total duration averaging not less than 14 hours a week, and (iii) cannot reasonably be expected to be of significant benefit to persons who are not so impaired"	Government of Canada. Income Tax Act. Section 118.3(1). https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/l-3.3/section-118.3.html	Medical
Manitoba, Department of Families. 18 and over, Blended	Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) -Medical Barriers to Full Employment - Person with a Disability	"The term "disabled" refers to those persons who, by reason of a physical or mental illness, incapacity or disorder that is likely to continue for a period of more than one year, are unable to earn sufficient income to provide the basic necessities for themselves and their dependants."	EIA Administrative Manual. Section 7 - Persons with Disabilities https://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/eia_manual/7.html	Medical

Manitoba, Department of Families, 18 and over	Manitoba supports for persons with disabilities - Connected to Disability Support Act, Disability specific	"WHEREAS Manitobans living with severe and prolonged disabilities face multiple and connected barriers to full community participation and social and economic inclusion; AND WHEREAS persons living with severe and prolonged disabilities have distinct financial, service and accommodation needs; AND WHEREAS income and income security are key determinants of social and economic inclusion; AND WHEREAS there is a societal responsibility to eliminate barriers faced by persons living with severe and prolonged disabilities and to accommodate their needs."	The Disability Support Act, C.C.S.M. c. D76 (assented in 2021, in effect 2024) https://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/ccsm/d076.php?lang=en	Human-rights
New Brunswick, Social Development, Adults age unspecified	Social Assistance Program - Extended Benefits Program (EBP), Disability specific	"“disabled” means, with reference to a person, suffering from a major physiological, anatomical or psychological impairment, as verified by the Medical Advisory Board under subsection 4(13), that is likely to continue indefinitely without substantial improvement and that causes the person to be severely limited in activities pertaining to normal living; “blind” means, with reference to a person, having visual acuity in both eyes with proper refractive lenses of 20/200 (6/60) or less with Snellen Chart or its equivalent or having a field of vision in both eyes of less than twenty degrees in diameter, as verified by the Medical Advisory Board under subsection 4(13); “deaf” means, with reference to a person, (a) being assessed as having an average hearing threshold sensitivity for air conduction of 90 decibels or worse in the person’s better ear and a bone conduction hearing threshold of 60 decibels or worse in the person’s better ear after audiometry testing, in which hearing loss is calculated by averaging the person’s hearing at the sound frequencies of 500 hertz, 1000 hertz and 2000 hertz, or (b) being assessed as unable to repeat more than 40% of a list of standardized words spoken after word recognition testing"	Regulation 95-61 Under the Family Income Security Act (filed May 1995) (Source: Family Income Security Act Regulation https://www.canlii.org/en/nb/laws/regu/nb-reg-95-61/latest/nb-reg-95-61.html)	Medical

New Brunswick, Social Development, Adults - age unspecified	Social Assistance Program - Transitional Assistance Program, Blended	"“disabled” means, with reference to a person, suffering from a major physiological, anatomical or psychological impairment, as verified by the Medical Advisory Board under subsection 4(13), that is likely to continue indefinitely without substantial improvement and that causes the person to be severely limited in activities pertaining to normal living; “blind” means, with reference to a person, having visual acuity in both eyes with proper refractive lenses of 20/200 (6/60) or less with Snellen Chart or its equivalent or having a field of vision in both eyes of less than twenty degrees in diameter, as verified by the Medical Advisory Board under subsection 4(13); “deaf” means, with reference to a person, (a) being assessed as having an average hearing threshold sensitivity for air conduction of 90 decibels or worse in the person’s better ear and a bone conduction hearing threshold of 60 decibels or worse in the person’s better ear after audiometry testing, in which hearing loss is calculated by averaging the person’s hearing at the sound frequencies of 500 hertz, 1000 hertz and 2000 hertz, or (b) being assessed as unable to repeat more than 40% of a list of standardized words spoken after word recognition testing"	Regulation 95-61 Under the Family Income Security Act (filed May 1995)	Medical
Northwest Territories, Education, Culture and Employment, 19 to 59	Income assistance for Seniors and Persons with Disabilities (IASPD), Blended	"Disability means a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment that is permanent, persistent or prolonged and which significantly restricts the person’s ability to perform daily-living activities and meet their basic financial needs for a continuous period of 12 months or more"	Social Assistance Act - Income assistance for seniors and persons with disabilities regulations (2024), Section 1) (in force July 1, 2024) https://www.justice.gov.nt.ca/en/files/legislation/social-assistance/social-assistance.r5.pdf	Medical
Northwest Territories, Education, Culture and Employment, 19 and over	Income Assistance Program, Blended	"Disability means a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment that is prolonged, persistent or episodic and that is NOT expected to significantly restrict the person’s ability to perform daily-living activities on a continuous basis"	Income assistance policy manual section 2.01 and Social Assistance Action - Income assistance regulations (2024) (amended July 2025)	Medical

Nova Scotia, Community Services, 19 and over	Employment Support & Income Assistance (ESIA) - Income Assistance Disability Supplement, Blended	"Must have either of the following: a) a disability b) a chronic medical condition that prevents them, or will prevent them, from participating in employment for at least 1 year."	55A.2.2 Employment and Income Assistance Regulations under section 21 of the Employment Support and Income Assistance Act (2000) https://novascotia.ca/just/regulations/regs/esiaregs.htm#TOC3_55	Medical
Nova Scotia, Opportunities and Social Development, 19 and over	Disability Support Program (DSP) - Standard Household Rate, Disability specific	"To be eligible for DSP a person with a disability must meet the DSP eligibility criteria, and have a diagnosis that confirms one or more of the following disabilities: 1. Intellectual Disability: a disorder that includes an intellectual deficit which creates difficulties in functioning in two or more activities of daily living and/or instrumental activities of daily living within the range considered typical for a person of the same age and gender, which occurs prior to the age of 18 years. 2. Impairments in functioning within two or more aspects of activities of daily living or instrumental activities of daily living; for example, communication, social participation, functioning at school or at work, or personal independence at home or in community settings; and Onset before the age of 18 years; or Long Term Mental Illness: a diagnosis of chronic and persistent mental illness which affects a person's thinking, feeling or behaviour and creates significant difficulties in functioning in two or more aspects of activities of daily living or instrumental activities of daily living within the range considered typical for someone of the same age or gender. 3. Physical Disability: a long-term, chronic and persistent physical limitation that creates significant difficulties in functioning in two or more aspects of activities of daily living or instrumental activities of daily living within the range considered typical for someone of the same age or gender. The physical disability substantially limits functional independence and results in the person requiring ongoing support and skill development."	From Section 4.1.1 of DSP policy manual (2016). Under mandate of the Social Assistance Act	Medical
Nunavut, Family Services, 18 and over	Income Assistance Program, Blended	""disabled"" means having physical or mental impairments (a) that significantly restrict the ability to perform daily living activities, (i) permanently, or (ii) temporarily for at least six months, (b) that result in requiring assistance with daily living activities, and (c) that medical treatment would not heal; (handicapée)"	Income Assistance Act - Income Assistance Regulations (1990). Section 1 Interpretations (updated 2021) (Source: Income Assistance Regulations https://www.nunavutlegislation.ca/en/consolidated-law/income-assistance-regulations-consolidation)	Medical

Newfoundland Labrador, Department of Social Support and Well-being, 18 to 64	Newfoundland and Labrador Disability Benefit (NLDB), Disability specific	Regulation: 2(1)(e) "DTC-eligible individual" has the same meaning assigned to it under section 146.4 of the federal Act; (f) "eligible individual" means an individual who (ii) is a DTC-eligible individual	Disability Benefit Regulation under the Income Tax Act https://www.assembly.nl.ca/legislation/sr/annualregs/2024/nr240102.htm)	Medical
Ontario, Home and Housing, 18 and over	Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), Disability specific	"4 (1) A person is a person with a disability for the purposes of this Part if, (a) the person has a substantial physical or mental impairment that is continuous or recurrent and expected to last one year or more; (b) the direct and cumulative effect of the impairment on the person's ability to attend to his or her personal care, function in the community and function in a workplace, results in a (c) the impairment and its likely duration and the restriction in the person's activities of daily living have been verified by a person with the prescribed qualifications. 1997, c. 25, Sched. B, s. 4 (1). "	Ontario Disability Support Program Act (1997) - Part 1, https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/97o25b#BK4	Medical
Ontario, Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 17 and under	Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities (ACSD), Disability Specific	"A severe disability is a mental, developmental or physical condition that severely limits the child's development and/or functional capacity to perform tasks and activities necessary in their daily life. Functional loss refers to a major loss of ability, delay in developmental milestones or the ability to engage in any age appropriate activity considered necessary to normal living; examples include, but are not limited to, mobility, communication, social interaction, self-feeding, dressing, hygiene and learning."	ACSD Application Form (updated 2024)	Medical
Prince Edward Island, Social Development and Seniors, 17 and under	Assured Income, Disability Specific	"A person with a substantial physical, intellectual, sensory, neurological, or mental impairment that is continuous or recurrent and is expected to last for at least one year and the direct and cumulative effect of the impairment on the person's ability to attend to his or her personal care, function in the community, or function in a workplace results in a substantial restriction in one or more of these activities of daily living."	Policy 3.1 AccessAbility Supports - Assured Income - Description (2019), Policy 1.1 AccessAbility Supports - Assured Income - Eligibility (2019) Supports for Persons with Disabilities Act - General Regulations https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/sites/default/files/p	Medical

			ublications/1.1_eligibili ty.pdf)	
Quebec, Ministry of Employment and Social Solidarity, Adults - age unspecified	Social Solidarity Program (SSP), Disability Specific	"An independent adult or a family is eligible under the program if the adult or an adult member of the family produces a medical report establishing that the adult's physical or mental condition is significantly and in all likelihood permanently or indefinitely deficient or impaired and that, for that reason and in view of the adult's socio-professional profile, the adult's capacity for employment is severely limited."	Individual and family assistance act (section 70) 2005, c. 15, s. 70. https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/fr/document/lc/A-13.1.1?langCont=en)	Medical
Quebec, Ministry of Employment and Social Solidarity, Adults - age unspecified	Basic Income Program (BIP), Disability specific	"An independent adult or a family is eligible under the program if the adult or an adult member of the family produces a medical report establishing that the adult's physical or mental condition is significantly and in all likelihood permanently or indefinitely deficient or impaired and that, for that reason and in view of the adult's socio-professional profile, the adult's capacity for employment is severely limited."	Individual and family assistance act (section 70) 2005, c. 15, s. 70.	Medical
Quebec, Family and support for people, 18 and under	Supplement for disabled children requiring exceptional care (SEHNSE), Disability specific	"The rules referred to in section 1029.8.61.19 of the Act for the purpose of determining whether a child has a disability or impairment of mental functions which significantly limits him or her in carrying out the daily habits of a child of his or her age for a foreseeable period of at least one year, that is to say whether he or she is handicapped within the meaning of this section, are those provided for in sections 1029.8.61.19R2 to 1029.8.61.19R6."	Tax Regulations (1981) (https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/fr/document/rc/l-3%2c%20r.%201?langCont=fr#se:1029_8_61_19r1)	Medical
Quebec, Family and support for people, 18 and under	Supplement for Disabled Child, Disability specific	"The rules referred to in section 1029.8.61.19 of the Act for the purpose of determining whether a child has a disability or impairment of mental functions which significantly limits him or her in carrying out the daily habits of a child of his or her age for a foreseeable period of at least one year, that is to say whether he or she is handicapped within the meaning of this section, are those provided for in sections 1029.8.61.19R2 to 1029.8.61.19R6."	Tax Regulations (1981) (https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/fr/document/rc/l-3%2c%20r.%201?langCont=fr#se:1029_8_61_19r1)	Medical

Saskatchewan , Social Services, 18 and older	Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability (SAID), Disability specific	"2(1)(t) "significant and enduring disability" means a disability that, in accordance with section 9: (i) is assessed to be permanent; and (ii) is assessed as, either periodically or continuously: (A) having a substantial impact on the individual's daily living activities; and (B) causing the individual to require support in the form of an assistive device, the assistance of another individual, a service animal, a modified environment or other accommodation"	The Saskatchewan Assistance Act - The Saskatchewan Assured Income for Disability Regulations, 2012; https://www.canlii.org/en/sk/laws/regu/rrs-c-s-8-reg-11/latest/rrs-c-s-8-reg-11.html ,	Medical
Yukon, Government of Yukon, 19 and older	Yukon Social Assistance - with Yukon Supplementar y Allowance (for disability and seniors), Blended - has a disability support supplement	"“Disabled person” means a person who, because of a physical or mental impairment, learning difficulty, a lack of preparation or as a result of technological change is incapable of pursuing regularly any substantially gainful occupation."	Definition for disability reported here was found in Rehabilitation Services Act (2002) RSY 2002, c 196. No definition found in Social Assistance Act or Social Assistance Regulation Legislation.	Medical