

Waiting to Wait: Understanding Access Trajectories of Childhood Disability Programs Across Canada

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Overview

This project examines barriers to accessing publicly funded disability services for children and youth (0–18) across Canada, focusing on wait times and access trajectories across jurisdictions. National reports and caregiver-reported data suggest delays occur at multiple stages of the service pathway - diagnosis, eligibility, funding approval, and service access - and may be cumulative rather than isolated, with particularly pronounced impacts in rural, remote, and under-resourced communities.

The intended impact is to improve understanding of how system design shapes access to services and contributes to variation in wait times. This work is relevant to policymakers, service providers, health professionals, and organizations involved in disability service planning and delivery - as well as to the children, youth, caregivers, and families navigating these systems. Wait times are embedded across the structure of childhood disability service systems rather than caused by a single bottleneck.

Key findings

System-level indicators point to substantial pressure across jurisdictions. Some illustrative examples across jurisdictions include:

73%

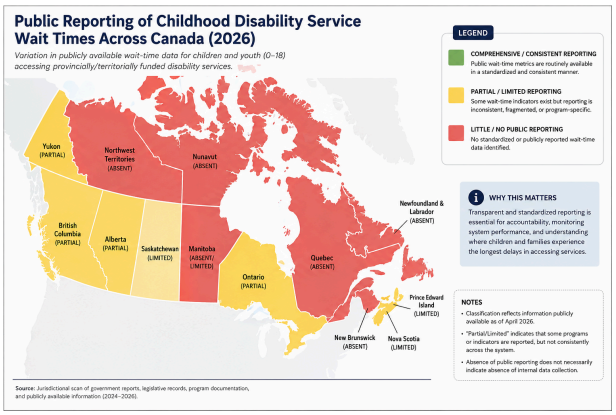
of Ontario caregivers identified long waitlists as a major barrier to accessing services. (Ontario Autism Survey, 2018 & What We Heard Report, 2025)

55k-83k

children and youth in B.C. may not be receiving required supports (BCACDI, 2025).

292

peak caseload per worker in the Northwest Territories (Health & Social Services, 2025).





What this adds

- The findings highlight how system design shapes access and contributes to uneven wait times, underscoring the need for more coordinated, equitable approaches to service delivery.
- The report compiles evidence from across Canada's provinces and territories to examine wait times throughout the childhood disability service pathway, from diagnosis and eligibility to funding and service access.
- The analysis shows how different system designs shape where delays accumulate, highlighting interactions between diagnostic requirements, administrative processes, workforce capacity, and service availability.

What's next?

- Examine how differences in system design across jurisdictions shape access pathways and contribute to wait-time variation.
- Explore opportunities to reduce fragmentation and administrative burden across service pathways, including more coordinated care models.
- Investigate how workforce capacity influences access to services, particularly in rural, remote, and under-resourced communities.
- Assess alternative approaches to diagnosis, eligibility, and funding to understand how more streamlined or parallel models could reduce cumulative delays.
- Identify characteristics of high-performing jurisdictions to better understand what supports more timely and equitable access.
- Explore caregiver experiences and navigation challenges to better understand how families move through systems and where barriers persist.