

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

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Overview

This project examines how disability is defined in Canadian government income support programs - and how those definitions shape equitable access for children and youth (0–25) and their families. Through a critical discourse analysis of 23 provincial and territorial programs, it explores whether policy language reflects a static, deficit-based view of disability or a more dynamic, human rights–based approach.

The goal is to shift toward a harmonized definition aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) - one that recognizes disability as an evolving interaction between individuals and their environments, and affirms people with disabilities as rights-holders. This work is relevant to policymakers, program administrators, advocates, researchers, and the families navigating these systems.

Key findings

A pan-Canadian scan of 23 disability income support programs revealed how deeply restrictive definitions are embedded:

22 of 23

programs rely on restrictive, impairment-focused definitions tying eligibility to deficit severity and duration.

43%

of program definitions explicitly link disability to an inability to work.

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program adopts a human rights–based definition of disability aligned with the UNCRPD.

Definitions across jurisdictions remain largely medicalized, static, and disconnected from social and environmental realities, resulting in fragmented access; in some cases, only 25% of eligible individuals receive support. Reforming definitions is not just technical; it is a key lever to reduce stigma and advance equity.

What's next?

- Build policymakers' awareness of the misalignment between current definitions and human-rights standards.
- Advocate for adoption of a harmonized, inclusive definition of disability across jurisdictions.
- Support administrators in adopting criteria that account for environmental barriers and dynamic needs, with lived experience embedded in design and review.
- Track system-level outcomes — more consistent access rates across jurisdictions — and continue knowledge mobilization through symposia and community webinars in Canada and internationally.

Voices from the Working Group

- "It has been amazing to see the diverse ideas and perspectives brought forward from the working group. This helped us keep the potential impact on the lives of disabled people and their families at the forefront of our minds while moving through data collection, analysis, and knowledge sharing."

- "As a parent of multiple children with various disabilities, it has been both encouraging and frustrating — encouraging to be part of something that could change how things are done, and frustrating to realize once again that access to support depends so much on deficit-based thinking and one's postal code. This work encouraged me to advocate more for equitable benefits, and I am hopeful for a future where children and youth with disabilities and their families are supported in a way that enables living, learning, and growing."

- "As a trainee in disability policy research, working alongside members with such diverse and extensive experience was an invaluable learning opportunity. By keeping the 'so what' and 'what's next' at the forefront, we aimed to frame actionable recommendations with the potential to shift the disability policy landscape in Canada."

- "As Co-Director of the ADVANCE Network and a person with lived experience, this project was both professionally and personally meaningful. Four years as a member and Co-Chair of the CRA's Disability Advisory Committee showed me firsthand how definitions determine whether families can access the benefits they need. Our collaboration reinforced my belief that research is strongest when lived experience is valued as expertise."