Executive summary

Background

The Accessible Canada Directorate at Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) is in charge of implementing the *Accessible Canada Act*. This includes keeping track of progress on removing barriers to accessibility.

In 2022, the Directorate commissioned a study of Canadians' awareness and experiences with accessibility and disability. This was a follow-up to a similar study done in 2019.

Analysis of the results of the two studies will provide the Accessible Canada Directorate with high-level information about what some Canadians know about the Accessible Canada Act and its impact on persons with disabilities. It will also help to inform future policies on accessibility.

Like the 2019 study, the new study involved persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities. The study included a survey in which people from both groups from different parts of Canada were asked a series of questions. There were also more detailed interviews and focus groups with persons with disabilities.

Please note that persons with disabilities involved in the study were not selected at random. Keep in mind that, for this reason, the results of that part of the study do not represent the views of all persons with disabilities. They apply only to those individuals who were part of the study.

What the survey involved

For persons without disabilities:

- A total of 1,205 telephone interviews with individuals 18 years of age and older.
- People could complete the survey in English or French.
- The survey involved calling both landline telephone numbers and cellphone-only households.
- The margin of error of this sample size is plus or minus 2.8%, 19 times out of 20.
- The information collected was adjusted to account for differences in region, gender, and age. This ensures the results reflect the views of all Canadians without a disability.

For persons with disabilities:

- A total of 872 persons with disabilities completed surveys. All were at least 18 years old.
- 503 completed the survey by telephone and 369 did the survey online.

- Almost all of the surveys done over the phone were landline or cellphone-only households. A few were with people who called a toll-free number to schedule an interview. (The study website included a toll-free number participants could call to arrange for someone to call back and collect their answers.)
- All online surveys were completed by people contacted through ESDC stakeholder networks.
    - These respondents could complete the survey in English or French, and in a variety of formats:
        - telephone,
        - online,
        - downloadable accessible PDF and MSWord versions,
        - Braille or digital Braille (available upon request),
        - VRS (available upon request),
        - ASL/LSQ (available upon request), and
        - hardcopy.
    - Other than the three people who called the toll-free number to schedule a phone interview, none of the respondents asked to use one of the alternative formats.
- Respondents for this part of the study were not selected at random, so it is not possible to state a margin of error. Information collected for this group was also not adjusted for regional, gender or age differences.

For both groups of participants:

- Surveys and interviews were conducted between March 2 and May 2, 2022.
- All respondents were told the study was being carried out on behalf of ESDC/the Government of Canada.
- Survey respondents were not paid.
- On average, it took respondents about 15 minutes to complete the survey.

Overview of the results of the survey

Persons without disabilities

- One in five (21%) said they have seen, read, or heard about the *Accessible Canada Act*. The survey asked these people what they remember about the Act. Responses included:
    - 18% said it was to support or assist persons with disabilities
    - 10% said it was to increase accessibility
    - 9% said it was to make buildings accessible

    - 9% said it was to make government services accessible

- Persons without disabilities were asked how they like to access the services or programs from federal sector organizations (The federal sector includes the federal government itself as well as other organizations and businesses subject to the Canada Labour Code.):
    - more than half (53%) said they preferred online
    - 21% said they preferred in-person
    - 13% said by telephone
- Respondents were asked how often they saw or heard of someone with a disability needing a federal sector organization to make materials available in accessible formats:
    - 21% (about one in five) said they saw or heard of this “always” or “often”
    - 22% (also about one in five) said they saw or heard of this “sometimes”
- The most common types of accessible formats these respondents saw or heard of someone with a disability needing were:
    - large print (39%)
    - plain language (33%)
    - text to speech compatible (26%)
    - audio versions (26%)
    - closed captioning (25%).
- Nearly all respondents (97%) said they have access to the Internet at home. Among the few who do not, the main reasons were a lack of need or interest (51%) followed by cost (21%).
- The survey asked respondents if, in the past two years, they had seen or heard of someone with a disability experiencing an accessibility issue with different technologies.

  The percentage of those who said “always” or “often” for each type of technology was:

    - using a website (10%),
    - using self-service technology in a public place (8%),
    - using a cellphone or accessing a wireless service (7%),
    - watching a video on the internet, for example on YouTube, Facebook, other social media or websites (7%),
    - watching a show on a streaming service (such as Netflix, AppleTV, Crave, etc.) (6%),
    - watching cable TV (4%).

Persons with disabilities

- Respondents to this part of the survey qualified as persons with a disability based on a series of screening questions developed for this study. 65% of these respondents self-identified as a person with a disability.
- Respondents were asked if they had any of the following types of disabilities:

  - **Seeing** - also known as visual impairment. It affects a person's ability to see - even when wearing glasses or contact lenses.
  - **Hearing** - also known as deaf or hard of hearing. It affects a person's ability to hear - even when choosing to use devices like hearing aids or cochlear implants.
  - **Mobility** - a type of physical disability, it affects a person's ability to move.
  - **Flexibility** - also known as a physical disability, it affects a person's ability to move their joints.
  - **Dexterity** - also known as a physical disability. It affects a person's ability to do tasks, especially with their hands.
  - **Pain** - also known as chronic pain syndrome or disability, it affects a person's ability to function due to pain. This is the type of pain that continues over a long period of time and disrupts your life.
  - **Learning** - also known as learning disabilities. It affects the way a person receives, understands, and uses information. Learning disabilities can include dyslexia, aphasia, hyperactivity, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, etc.
  - **Developmental** - also known as intellectual disabilities. It affects a person's ability to learn and to adapt their behaviour to different situations. More specifically, has a doctor, psychologist or other health care professional ever said that you had a developmental disability? This may include Down syndrome, autism, Asperger syndrome, etc.
  - **Memory** - also known as a memory disability, it affects a person's ability to remember information. In other words, do you have a disability that regularly affects how you remember things?
  - **Mental health-related** – also known as mental illness, it affects a person's psychology or their behavior. In other words, it affects their ability to think, their emotions, and their behaviour.
  - A **communications disability** – this affects a person's ability to receive, understand, and respond to communication from others. This includes people not knowing how to communicate with you and people not understanding what you are saying. It does not refer to a situation where you cannot speak a particular language.
  - A **speech disability** - this affects the way a person speaks.
  - **Language** - also known as a language-based disability. It affects a person's ability to understand and use spoken, signed, and written language.

The disabilities reported most often by respondents related to:

- pain (53%)
- mobility (50%)
- flexibility (45%)
- mental health (36%)

- seeing (33%)
- dexterity (31%)

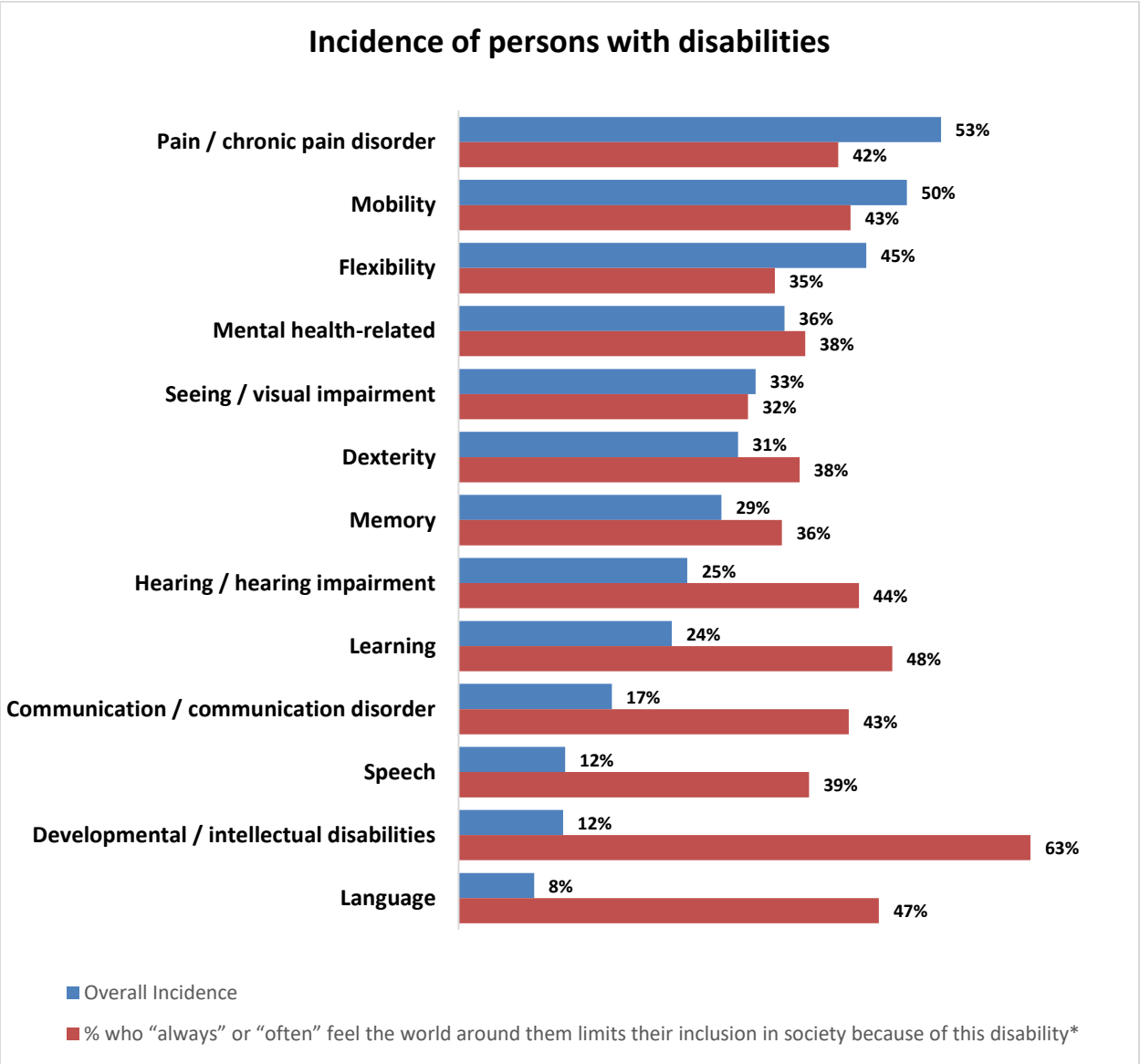
All other disabilities had an overall incidence of less than 30%.

Respondents who said they had a specific disability were asked how often they believe their inclusion in society was limited because of this disability. This would include barriers related to physical spaces, technology, or people's attitudes towards them.

Respondents most likely to feel that the world around them "always" or "often" limits their inclusion in society because of their disability were those with:

- developmental/intellectual disabilities (63% feel this way)
- a learning disability (48%)
- a language disability (47%).

Figure 1 Incidence of persons with disabilities



*for respondents who reported having the given disability

- About one-third of respondents (34%) said have seen, read, or heard about the *Accessible Canada Act*. These respondents were asked what they remember about the Act:
    - 15% said it will generally support or assist persons with disabilities
    - 13% said it will increase accessibility

- When asked how they like to access services or programs from federal sector organizations, 42% said they preferred online. 24% said in person, and 19% said by telephone.
- Persons with disabilities were asked how often in the past two years they needed certain kinds of accommodations when accessing services or programs from federal sector organizations. 13% said they "always" or "often" needed certain accommodations. Another 12% said they needed them "sometimes."

  The most common types of accommodations needed were:

    - an accessible website (27%) (This was described to respondents as "a website which is easy to use and designed so that everyone, including persons with disabilities, can use it.")
    - more time to complete a form or an application (26%)
    - documents in plain language (21%)
    - the use of an assistive device (21%)
- Just over one in ten respondents (12%) said they "always" or "often" need federal sector organizations to make materials available in accessible formats. Another 18% said they need them "sometimes".

  The most common types of accessible formats needed were:

    - plain language (48%)
    - large print (37%)
    - audio version (18%)
    - e-books (18%)
    - text to speech compatible (15%)
    - closed captioning (15%)
- For the built environment, respondents who said that, over the past two years, they "always" or "often" experienced barriers that limited their ability to move in and around the following types of places:
    - public spaces, such as sidewalks and parks (20%)
    - small and independent local stores or shops (20%)
    - friends or other people's houses they visited (18%)

    - large retail stores and chain stores (17%)
    - shopping centres (17%)
    - medical offices including walk-in clinics, hospitals, etc. (17%)
    - restaurants (17%)
    - public buildings, such as libraries, community buildings, city hall, etc. (13%)
    - movie theatres (13%)
    - government buildings, such as Service Canada centres, etc. (12%)
    - place of work (8%)
- Nearly all respondents indicated they have access to the Internet at home (93%). Among the few who do not, the main reasons are a lack of need or interest (42%), followed by cost (22%).
- Respondents who said that, over the past two years, they "always" or "often" ran into barriers when using the following technologies:
    - using a website (16%)
    - using a self-service technology in a public place (16%)
    - using a cellphone or accessing a wireless service (13%)
    - watching a video on the internet (for example on YouTube, Facebook, other social media or websites) (13%)
    - watching a show on a streaming service (such as Netflix, AppleTV, Crave, Amazon Prime) (10%)
    - watching cable TV (10%)

Method for the focus groups and in-depth interviews

- Sessions were completed between March 16 and April 14, 2022
- A total of 64 persons with disabilities were involved in this part of the study. 15 of these people were interviewed in-depth. 49 of them participated through a series of 10 online focus groups.
- The same research material was used for the focus groups and the interviews. Focus groups each lasted 90 minutes. The in-depth interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes each.
- Each participant received an $80 honorarium.
- Participants were from different parts of Canada and had different types of disabilities. Some sessions were with persons with mild disabilities. Others involved persons with moderate to severe disabilities.

- Participants in this part of the study were selected in several ways:
    - chosen at random by telephone from the general public
    - invited through a privately owned opt-in database
    - selected from the respondents to the survey part of the study
    - ESDC outreach to its accessibility and disability stakeholder groups
- All participants were told the study was being conducted on behalf of ESDC/the Government of Canada.

Overview of results from the focus groups and depth interviews

General discussion about accessibility

Participants were asked what comes to mind when they think of "disability," "accessible," and "a barrier to accessibility."

- In general, a "disability" was seen as something that limits a person's ability to do something the same way as someone who does not have the disability. Many stressed that this can just as easily be something physical (and usually visible) as something invisible (like mental health).
- Participants generally considered something to be "accessible" if everyone can do it, whether they have a disability or not.
- A "barrier to accessibility" was often seen as something that gets in the way of a person trying to do something. A barrier might make it more difficult to do something, or it might make it completely impossible.

Participants were asked what they believe could be done to reduce accessibility barriers in Canada. The suggestions included:

- Consult, test and do research with persons with disabilities (PWDs)
- Involve PWDs in the decision-making or design process
- Adopt universal design principles
- Create and/or work with committees in the community that can be consulted about accessibility considerations
- Have people who design products and physical spaces spend a day "in the shoes of" someone with a disability. Many said these people need to experience the world the way PWDs do. For example, some participants suggested designers should spend a day in a wheelchair.

A focus on information and communication technologies

Very few participants with mild disabilities said that they run into barriers when accessing online content or using online features.

Persons with moderate to severe disabilities were more likely to report barriers in this area. This was especially true for those with visual or hand/arm-related physical disabilities. These individuals reported issues with:

- websites that are not adapted for screen readers
- websites that are not designed for easy navigation
- websites that require a lot of clicking navigate

Some said they avoid websites with streaming content because a lot of them don't provide sub-titles or closed captioning.

Participants suggested PWDs be involved more often at the testing stage when websites are being designed.

Very few participants believed they encounter barriers using specific types of devices. Some participants with physical impairments said they do avoid or limit their use of portable devices. Some said they use a stand or another gadget to prop up their device instead of holding it.

Participants could not think of many government websites on which they ran into a barrier in the past two years. Of the issues that were reported, most related to the Canada Revenue Agency website. Participants said it was dense and difficult to navigate. This was mostly because of the large amount of content and technical language. A few participants said they had problems using COVID vaccine-booking websites.

Very few participants said they used any assistive devices to help them communicate, work, or access the Internet at home or at work. For those who did, many said they found the technology "affordable." This was either because it was built into the device or their insurance covered the costs. A few said the devices they needed were quite expensive.

A focus on communication other than ICT

Participants said they rarely ran into barriers when communicating with friends, family or local businesses and organizations. This was true no matter how the communication was happening. Those who said they did need more support relied on a companion to help, and this usually met their needs.

Direct communication with Government of Canada staff was rare among participants. When it did happen, the main challenge was the wait time to speak with someone. Otherwise, participants did not report any difficulty accessing federal programs or services because a department did not offer accessible formats or accessible forms of communication.

Some participants had heard of "plain language materials." Very few knew that they could get these materials from the federal government. Some said government materials should be in plain language by default because they are often not easy to understand. At a minimum, participants said the government should do more to advertise that plain language versions are available.

When it came to communicating emergencies to all Canadians, most participants were only aware of the alerts they receive on their mobile devices, radio or TV. This approach was widely appreciated and seen as adequate and effective. A few participants did have concerns with this approach, including:

- Concern for Canadians who do not have a mobile device
- Not being able to retrieve an alert. They might have heard the alarm but when they wanted to know more, the alert was gone and they could not find out more about it.
- A few felt the alarm was too loud and was anxiety-inducing

A focus on the built environment

Participants were asked about the stores they visit. Many said they encounter a lot of barriers when shopping. Many of the barriers relate to physical disabilities.

These findings could mean that stores are more likely to present barriers to persons with physical disabilities. They could also mean that persons with physical disabilities are more likely to talk about the barriers they encounter.

The most common barriers described included:

- Curbs that are too high for wheelchairs, mobility scooters and individuals who have difficulty with stairs or steps
- Stores that don't have handicap door openers, or door openers that don't work
- stores or malls that don't have ramps for persons who have difficulty with steps, or use a wheelchair or mobility scooter
- store entrances that are too narrow or on angles that make it difficult or impossible to enter with a mobility scooter or a wheelchair
- Not enough parking spots reserved for persons with disabilities
- Some participants expressed frustration with the eligibility requirements for an accessible parking permit
- Narrow aisles that limit the use of a wheelchair or mobility scooter
- Lack of seating in malls and stores
- Lack of motorized shopping carts
- Walkways, sidewalks and entrances not properly cleared of snow
- Shelving that is too high, and few staff to help with items that are too high or too heavy
- Stores with too many stimuli (bright/flashing lights, loud music, flashing display screens, loud public announcements, etc.)

Participants living in rural or remote areas felt that many of these barriers were more common in their region compared to larger cities.

A focus on the built environment and procurement of goods, services, and facilities

As mentioned above, participants reported running into a variety of barriers when shopping. Respondents had little to add when asked about how well equipment and spaces in other types of businesses and organizations met the needs of person with disabilities.

Responses to questions about workplaces were much more detailed.

Some participants said their workplace was very proactive on accessibility. This included managers checking with employees with a disability to see if their workspace could be better. Some participants

said their employer responded quickly to requests for special equipment. These workplaces were also ready to make changes to meet a particular need. Responses suggested that the best accessibility practices were often found in government workplaces.

Many other participants had very different experiences. Many said their employer's commitment to accessibility was limited to good intentions. They said it could be difficult or impossible to get certain accommodations. This was especially true if a request involved a large expense.

- Many participants said they have encountered employers who discriminate against persons with disabilities. This was especially common for persons with moderate to severe disabilities. Some reported employers who would not hire someone with a disability.
- Some described discrimination happening after a person was hired. For example, employers making a person with a disability feel unwanted or unliked, hoping the person would quit their job.
- A few participants said they did not tell their employer about their disability. They said they kept it secret because they were afraid of discrimination.

Some employers have a policy that covers purchasing goods, services and facilities that are accessible for persons with disabilities. Very few participants knew if their employer had such a policy. None of the participants said they had ever been involved directly in their employer's procurement process, other than being asked about their own workspace.