



Canada's connectivity gap leaving rural, remote and Indigenous communities further behind: New report

News Release

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Many people in rural and remote regions of Canada are still unable to access essential services online and struggle to thrive in an increasingly connected economy, according to a new expert panel report from the Council of Canadian Academies (CCA). Incremental policy approaches have failed to close the connectivity gap, and the barriers to achieving equitable connectivity will not be overcome with technology alone.

Waiting to Connect examines the non-technical issues that led to the connectivity gap, the barriers that persist, and the practices and principles that can guide the journey to equitable connectivity.

The problem is especially acute in Indigenous communities, where current approaches have left them at a disproportionate disadvantage. Better access would help to support self-determination and Indigenous economic reconciliation by elevating Indigenous participation, innovation, and leadership in the economy.

“Broadband connectivity is not simply used to navigate the internet; it is integral to communications and commerce, as well as the delivery of education, healthcare, and other essential services,” said Karen Barnes, EdD, Chair of the Expert Panel. “Connectivity underservice to rural and remote regions has been a problem for decades, and the harms of the connectivity gap are growing more severe as more and more aspects of day-to-day life move online.”

Canada has set a goal of providing all Canadian households with broadband speeds of 50 Mbps (download) and 10 Mbps (upload) by 2030. In 2019, nearly all urban households had access to those speeds, while just 46% of rural households did. Only 35% of households on First Nations reserves and no households in the territories met the 50/10 threshold. According to the Expert Panel, even those target speeds are insufficient for some existing applications and are unlikely to meet the needs of rural and remote Canada today and beyond 2030. Bridging the connectivity gap means providing broadband in rural and remote communities comparable to that in urban centres in terms of speed, quality, and cost, while recognizing that introducing new technologies can also unintentionally exacerbate disparities.

COVID-19 exposed the serious impact of the connectivity gap, cutting many people in rural and remote communities off from essential health, education, business, and professional services as they pivoted online to reduce the spread of the virus.



“*Waiting to Connect* considers the benefits of high-speed broadband connectivity, the challenges in achieving these benefits, and the barriers that have limited the rollout of broadband in rural and remote regions,” said Eric M. Meslin, PhD, FRSC, FCAHS, President and CEO of the CCA. “The report also includes examples of place-based promising practices and certain guiding principles that can help achieve equitable connectivity.”

The National Research Council of Canada (NRC) asked the CCA to undertake an assessment on the legal, regulatory, ethical, social, and economic policy (LESP) challenges associated with the deployment and use of high throughput secure networks for rural, remote, and Indigenous communities in Canada. The NRC’s High-throughput and Secure Networks Challenge program is working on developing next generation innovative technologies that can enable ultra-fast communication networks in these communities. A better understanding of the LESP implications for deploying and using high throughput and secure networks in these communities across Canada will enhance the NRC’s ability to anticipate potential challenges and successfully facilitate the development and commercialization of these supporting technologies.

Waiting to Connect examines the systemic issues that have resulted in a persistent connectivity gap, and the promising practices and guiding principles that can help achieve universal and equitable connectivity.

Visit www.cca-reports.ca to download the report.

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About the Council of Canadian Academies

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