

Why Do Some Older Adults Have Less Access to Information and Community Technology? Causes and Policy Recommendations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Canada, only 68% of older adults have access to information and communication technology (ICT) (Davidson & Schimmele, 2019). To understand why some older adults have challenges accessing ICT, Simon Fraser University and 411 Seniors Centre conducted a study in British Columbia, interviewing service providers of community-based seniors service agencies (Wong et al., 2021). The findings suggested three reasons: 1. obstacles to access to the Internet; 2. barriers to access to equipment; 3. limited knowledge of using ICT. Based on the findings, this brief suggests three policy recommendations for the government's consideration: 1. subsidize access to the Internet and equipment for low-income older adults; 2. provide continuous funding to support the Tech Buddy programs; 3. include additional funding for interpretation and translation to enable older adults from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to learn technology.

MR. LIAO'S STORY*

Mr. Liao is 75 years old. He moved from China to Canada to live with his daughter and her family in Vancouver 15 years ago. He used to visit his son, who lives in China, every year. However, because of COVID-19, he could not fly to China. He wants to connect with his son and sees his face. His daughter brought him a smartphone so that he could do video calls with his son. However, she is too busy with work and family obligations to teach him how to use the smartphone.

MRS. KAUR'S STORY*

Mrs. Kaur is 81 years old. She used to go to the community senior service centre twice a week to socialize with other members at the centre for the last 15 years. However, because of COVID-19, the centre was closed. The service worker at the centre invited her to join their online social group by Zoom. Mrs. Kaur wants to join but cannot afford to pay for Wi-Fi.

MR. HUTCHINSON'S STORY*

Mr. Hutchinson is 78 years old. He needs to see his endocrinologist every three months for his thyroid. However, due to his declining mobility and COVID-19, he does not feel comfortable going to the clinic. The clinic offers the option of meeting his specialist remotely. The specialist needs to see him via video for a thorough check. However, Mr. Hutchinson does not have a smartphone, tablet, or computer.

*The stories are based on real stories. Names are changed to pseudonyms for consideration of confidentiality.

INTRODUCTION

These three stories give some impressions of how many older adults in British Columbia experienced difficulties during the pandemic. In Canada, access to information and communication technology (ICT, such as smartphones, tablets, and computers) of older adults (people aged 65 or above) was only 68% prior to the pandemic (Davidson & Schimmele, 2019). This is concerning because more information, services, and resources have moved online. COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the pace of the change. Simon Fraser University and 411 Seniors Centre conducted a study in British Columbia from 2019 to 2021 to understand why some older adults have less access to ICT (Wong et al., 2021). This brief examines the causes and suggests possible remedies.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The study's researchers interviewed 28 service providers of community-based senior service agencies across British Columbia to learn why some older adults have less access to ICT. Community-based senior service agencies refer to "a variety of municipal and not-for-profit organizations and agencies including seniors' centers, community centers, associations, community coalitions, ethnocultural organizations, multi-service non-profit societies, intermediary organizations, funders, and government bodies" (United Way of British Columbia, 2021, p. 5). The interviews were conducted by phone or Zoom. Three key themes explained why some older adults have less access to ICT.

1. OBSTACLES TO ACCESS TO THE INTERNET

In 2021, the British Columbian Government (2021b) announced spending \$3.07 million to expand the Internet infrastructure to remote areas of the province. The government suggested that this could improve access to the Internet for older adults in remote areas. However, participants argued that this could only partly resolve the problem: Even with the infrastructure, older adults with low socioeconomic status could not afford to pay for the Internet. The cost of 1GB of Internet ranges from \$60 to \$90 per month in British Columbia (Government of Canada, 2018). Seniors' poverty rate (i.e., having an annual income below \$15,000) in British Columbia is 8.8% (United Way, 2018). 40% of seniors in British Columbia have an annual income slightly above the poverty rate (i.e., an annual income between \$15,000 and \$25,000) (Ivanova, 2017). Participants suggested that older adults who could not afford the Internet alone resolve the problem by sharing the Internet with neighbours or roommates. Sharing negatively affects connectivity. One participant gave the example of an older man who could not afford the Internet cost alone and thus shared the Internet with two neighbours. He wanted to join an online program organized by the community senior centre. However, since he was sharing the Internet, the pace was very slow with many interruptions. He eventually gave up on joining the program.

2. BARRIERS TO ACCESS TO EQUIPMENT

Some older adults cannot afford the costs of equipment. The British Columbian Government does not have programs which provide or subsidize technological equipment for older adults. However, charities in the communities, such as the British Columbia Technology for Learning Society (2022), have programs which collect donated equipment and distribute it to low-income households which cannot afford the equipment. Yet, participants suggested most of these programs aim to support children from low-income households rather than low-income older adults.

3. LIMITED KNOWLEDGE OF USING ICT

Finally, some older adults have limited knowledge of using ICT. 71% of older adults in Canada ask for support from children or grandchildren if they need to learn how to use ICT (Age Well, 2020). However, some older adults do not have family members to support them and have to turn to other sources of support. The British Columbian Government (2021a) has funding which enables community-based senior service agencies to organize Tech Buddy programs matching older adults who want to learn how to use ICT with volunteers who can teach them. Participants argued that the problem with the funding is that it is not continuous: agencies need to apply and compete with other agencies every year. Interruptions in funding interrupt learning for older adults. Also, language barriers prevent some immigrant older adults whose primary language is not English from joining the program. There are not enough volunteers who can speak their languages. 28% of the older population in British Columbia are immigrants (Seniors First BC, 2022). The agencies would need more resources, such as finding an interpreter and translating teaching materials, but the Tech Buddy program funding does not provide additional funding for these resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our study suggested that some older adults have challenges accessing ICT for three reasons: 1. obstacles to access to the Internet, 2. barriers to access to equipment, and 3. limited knowledge of using ICT.

Based on the findings of the study, we suggest three recommendations for the government's consideration:

1. Considering that some low-income older adults cannot afford the Internet and related equipment like computers, we urge the government to provide subsidies for those receiving Guaranteed Income Supplement for Internet and equipment access.
2. We urge the government to extend the length of the funding for the Tech Buddy programs from one year to three years to ensure more stable funding and prevent disruptions in learning for older adults.
3. As some older adults whose primary language is not English have obstacles participating in the Tech Buddy programs, we suggest the government includes additional funding for interpretation and translation.

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