



# Internet for All

Internet Use and Accessibility for Low-Income Canadians

A Report Prepared by ACORN Canada  
January 2016

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ISBN: 978-0-9950315-0-0

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## ACORN Canada

ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) Canada is an independent national organization of low- and moderate-income families with 70,000+ members in 20 neighbourhood chapters across nine cities. ACORN believes that social and economic justice can best be achieved with a national active membership who are invested in their organization and focused on building community power for change.

ACORN Canada members feel strongly that access to home internet is essential and a right. Through a process of community consultation and active member participation, in 2012 ACORN Canada members identified the high cost of home internet as a major barrier to low-income earners' participation and success in the new digital economy. In 2013 ACORN members launched a campaign to address this deficiency. ACORN Canada is fighting for affordable home access to high-speed home *internet for all* residents of Canada, targeting both the major telecommunications companies and the CRTC to create affordable access.

Specifically, members are asking for:

- \$10/month product for high speed (15 megabits/second or equivalent to high speed in area);
- Families and individuals below the Low Income Measure as eligible to qualify;
- Subsidized computers for qualifying families and individuals.

## Executive Summary

This survey was conducted in response to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission's review of basic telecommunications services, and as a part of ACORN Canada's *Internet for All* campaign for affordable internet prices. The objective of the survey was to identify the experiences of low-income ACORN Canada members with regard to internet use and accessibility.

The survey was distributed to low- and moderate-income ACORN members and families across Canada in order to measure the extent of the problem of a lack of high-speed home internet access (known as the "digital divide"), and to collect specific examples of the impact of a lack of affordable internet access on the lives of low- and moderate-income families.

The results of the survey reveal that the internet plays an important role in the everyday lives of low-income earners; however, the high costs of obtaining high-speed home internet connections can lead to unnecessary hardship. Respondents who struggle to afford home internet access detailed the detrimental effect this has on: job searching and job retention; school work (at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels) and related academic achievement benchmarks; access to information on healthcare and nutrition; access to and understanding of government forms and processes; and civic and social participation.

83.5% of survey respondents view the price of home internet as "extremely high," while 58.9% of respondents reveal that, because they need home access to internet for everyday activities, they are forced to take money out of other budget items in order to afford it. The principal budget items that were affected were food, recreation, and rent.

This survey serves as a useful examination of low-income earners' experiences and perspectives with regard to home high-speed home internet use and accessibility. This survey and report point to several recommended actions that would lessen the hardship experienced by low-income families and individuals, including the necessity for government and business to develop affordable high-speed home internet options for persons living below the low income measure, as well as a program to provide subsidized computers to qualifying families and individuals in order to further facilitate participation in the digital economy. In order to encourage and/or enforce the development of such services, it is necessary that the CRTC categorize broadband high-speed internet as a basic telecommunications service in Canada.

## Introduction

In April 2015 the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission began a major proceeding to review Canada's basic telecommunications services. The review seeks to "address a range of related topics, including upload/download speeds necessary in the digital age, the roles of economic and regulatory players in the public and private sectors, possible funding mechanisms to support telecommunications services and a range of related topics."<sup>1</sup> ACORN Canada's *Internet for All* survey was conducted in response to this review, with the purpose of collecting information and testimonials which were submitted to the CRTC in July 2015. As a part of the review process, ACORN Canada has requested that 10 ACORN Canada members be selected to present on an individual basis at CRTC's public hearing on this review in April 2016.

In their 2012 Canadian Internet Use Survey, Statistics Canada reported that only 58% of Canadian households in the lowest quartile of \$30,000 or less have access to home Internet access.<sup>2</sup> In 2015 the CRTC published a report showing that 59% of Canada's lowest income households have home internet access, compared to 98% of Canada's highest income households.<sup>3</sup> Both of these reports suggest that there are a substantial number of low-income households in Canada today that do not have a home internet connection.

The "digital divide" between those who have home internet versus those that do not puts many individuals in the latter group at a disadvantage when it comes to participating in the digital sphere and succeeding in the digital economy. Individuals and families without a home internet connection are excluded from equal opportunities to education, employment and government services access, and modern civic participation. In fact, there is a growing consensus that this digital gap is linked to socio-economic exclusion and poverty. The United Nations now considers access to internet to be a human right, comparable with freedom of speech.<sup>4</sup>

The objective of ACORN Canada's *Internet for All* survey was to identify whether there is an urgent need for addressing the digital divide that affects low-income Canadians. The survey targeted lower-income respondents, and asked them to answer four principal questions regarding their internet use and accessibility. These questions focused what main uses the internet provides for them, why online access is important to them, how they perceive the current pricing of high-speed internet, and how their life might change if they could afford access to high-speed home internet.

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- 1 "Communications Monitoring Report 2015: Canada's Communications System: An Overview for Citizens, Consumers, and Creators," last modified October 22, 2015.
  - 2 "Canadian Internet use survey, household access to the Internet at home, by household income quartile, Canada and provinces occasional (percent)," last modified, November 26, 2013.
  - 3 "CRTC initiates review of basic telecommunications services for all Canadians," last modified April 9, 2015.
  - 4 "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression," last modified May 16, 2011.

## Methodology

ACORN Canada's *Internet for All* survey was conducted between June 1 and July 15, 2015. 394 surveys were completed: 295 online and 99 handwritten. The majority of respondents were ACORN members. The four principal questions asked in the survey were:

1. What online services, activities, or communications do you use?
2. Why is online access important to you?
3. How do you feel about the current pricing of high-speed internet?
4. Please share how your life would change if you could easily afford home high-speed internet?

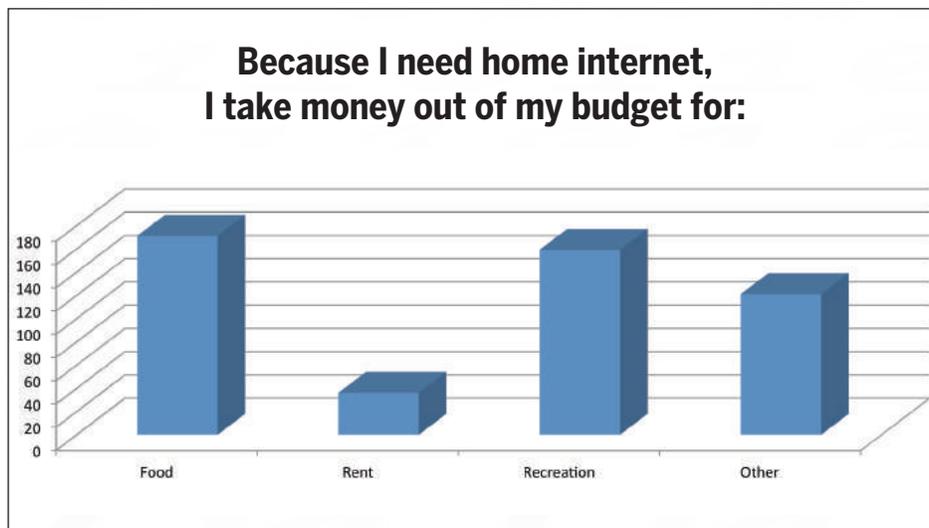
The targeted demographic for respondents were low- and moderate-income members of ACORN Canada. The survey was sent out electronically through our membership lists of low-income earners; administered in person by an ACORN staff member while door knocking in low-income neighbourhoods; or in ACORN Canada offices in British Columbia, Ontario, and Nova Scotia during free tax clinics for individuals who make an annual income of less than \$35,000. Surveys were also included in welcome packets at ACORN Canada's National Convention, with completed surveys being submitted to ACORN staff before July 15.

An important limitation of this survey that needs to be addressed is that the majority of respondents (74.8%) filled out the survey online. This may suggest that a large number of respondents to this survey have a home internet connection, therefore making the available answer to question 3 "*So expensive that I cannot afford it*" (regarding the pricing of high-speed internet) inapplicable. The 8% of respondents who answered "*So expensive that I cannot afford it*" in this particular survey is likely grossly unrepresentative of the actual number of individuals who find high-speed home internet service unaffordable and out of reach. In addition, the fact that many of the online respondents may have access to high-speed home internet may effectively put them at higher income levels than the lowest-income quartile of Canadians, further skewing results for this question.

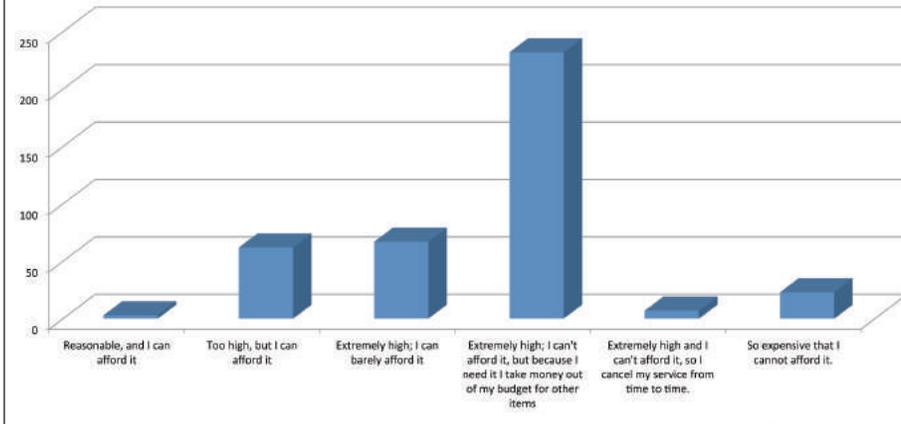
## Results

The results of the survey reveal that the four principal uses of home internet are personal (i.e. email, social media, communication, games, shopping), access to services (i.e. government forms, medical, tax or taxes, bill or bills, banking); education (i.e. education, homework, research, and school), and employment related (i.e. employment, work, resume, jobs).

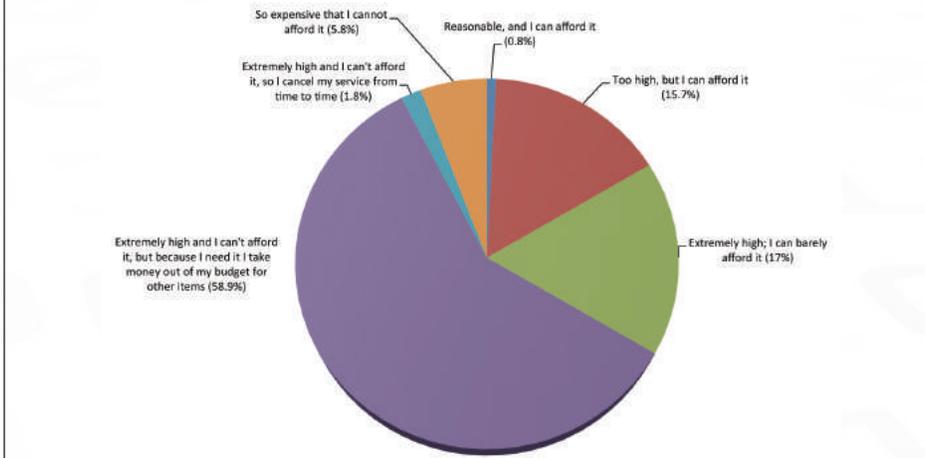
An overwhelming majority of respondents (83.5%) described the price of home internet as “extremely high.” 232 respondents, or 58.9%, stated that the pricing of high-speed internet is “extremely high; I can’t afford it, but because I need it I take money out of my budget for other items.” Respondents chose all budget items that applied to their particular situation. The budget items that were most chosen are food (71%) followed by recreation (64%), other (50%), and rent (13%).



### The price of internet is...



### The price of internet is...



## Results – Sample Comments

Below are sample comments provided by respondents about why online access is important to them, and how their lives would change if they could easily afford high-speed internet at home:

“As a single mother to a young child, it can be very difficult to be bringing my daughter to government offices to receive internet access to search for work, or when I am in school to be able to research information or study online.” – *Christina, Surrey, BC*

“It would save me a significant amount of time and energy and allow me to be a competitive player in the process of applying for employment. The time and energy I would save not having to go to the library would allow me to prepare healthy meals and eat at home which helps me to maintain my blood sugars, save money, eat healthier and feel better.” – *Kim, Coquitlam, BC*

“As someone with a disability, the internet is essential in accessing disability supports. The internet is often the only contact point for companies and venues and I need that information to determine if they are accessible and/or can accommodate me. Also, things like paratransit bookings are often only done online.” – *Sarah, Toronto, ON*

“Most jobs require online applications, most services for medical or school are also online. It would be hard to find good jobs or services available without it.” – *Karinne, Ottawa, ON*

“Taking time out of my day to get to a place with either free internet or paying a small fee is incredibly disruptive especially when I don’t always have extra time to do that with kids. Also when my kids need to do research for projects or school homework it would make life simpler to be able to do that from the comfort of our home rather than a public setting.” – *Jennifer, Toronto, ON*

“As my child gets older (she’s 7 right now) more and more of her special education lessons will require the internet. Once she learns how to read and write by herself she will need access to further her learning, and I worry that she’ll fall behind because I can’t afford anyone’s rates.” – *Wilma, Scarborough, ON*

“I use many services online. I live in a rural area where accessing services in person is not always available to me. I do my banking online, some of my university learning online, shopping, research and for watching television and movies since I cannot afford cable TV.” – *Samantha, Perth, ON*

“I can’t afford to have high-speed internet at home, so I have to go daily to a public library or coffee shop to connect. If I could easily afford high-speed internet at home, I would save so much time - by eliminating the need to travel to get it. I could also conduct my research work from home at any time, instead of having to do it during the hours that those places are open.” – *Kelly, Ottawa, ON*

“I am a university student living in an unfamiliar city. The internet helps me stay in contact with friends and family and to help me find work within this new city, and apartments that I can afford.” – *Lenore, Halifax, NS*

“It is our second highest bill for household services second only to power. That is absolutely ridiculous.” – *Kathy, Halifax, NS*



## Recommendations

The results of ACORN Canada's *Internet for All* survey show that there is an urgent need for government and business to take an active role in addressing Canada's digital divide. An overwhelming majority of survey respondents find that the cost of internet is extremely prohibitive, and that, due to necessity, having to pay to have internet in the home can adversely affect important household budget items. Furthermore, many respondents describe the lack of home internet service as hindering their ability to succeed or be competitive in the fields of education and employment.

The significance of this survey is exhibited in the 83.5% of respondents who, regardless of their income quartile, find high-speed home internet extremely high and difficult to afford. Furthermore, through this survey respondents were able to clearly describe in their own words the detrimental effects of not being able to afford home internet service.

The results in this survey point to several recommendations that would ease the hardship experienced by low-income earners with respect to high-speed home internet access. First and foremost, affordable options for high-speed home internet are necessary full participation by low-income earners in the digital sphere. Affordable options would lessen the challenges experienced by families struggling to keep up with the demands associated with digital access to communications tools, education, employment, and services. ACORN Canada recommends that government and business develop a \$10 per month high-speed home internet product for families and individuals living below the low income measure. Further, to ensure equal access to digital opportunities, ACORN Canada recommends that the government make available a program for subsidized computers for qualifying families and individuals.

Further, this survey demonstrates the need for the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission to take low-income earners' perspective of internet costs into account in their review of basic telecommunications services. If the CRTC is committed to ensuring "that Canadians have access to world-class telecommunications services that enable them to participate actively in the digital economy,"<sup>5</sup> then it needs to be recognized that the prohibitive cost of home internet for low-income Canadians detrimentally impacts their ability to become active and successful participants in the digital sphere.

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5 "CRTC initiates review of basic telecommunications services for all Canadians."

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[http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.27\\_en.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.27_en.pdf)

# Appendix A



## Internet for All

### Dear CRTC:

1) What online services, activities, or communications do you use?

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2) Why is online access important to you?

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3) How do you feel about the current pricing of high speed internet? Please mark (X) on all that apply.

- Reasonable, and I can afford it.
- Too high, but I can afford it.
- Extremely high; I can barely afford it.
- Extremely high; I can't afford it, but because I need it I take money out of my:
  - Food budget
  - Recreation budget
  - Rent
  - Other budget item.

- Extremely high and I can't afford it, so I cancel my service from time to time.
- So expensive that I cannot afford it.

Other:

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[acorncanada.org](http://acorncanada.org)



# Internet for All

## Dear CRTC:

4) Please share how your life would change if you could easily afford home high-speed Internet.

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5) Please share anything else relevant.

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Name and City \_\_\_\_\_

[acorncanada.org](http://acorncanada.org)



[www.acorncanada.org](http://www.acorncanada.org)

To learn more about Acorn Canada's *Internet for All* campaign, please visit [www.internetforall.ca](http://www.internetforall.ca)