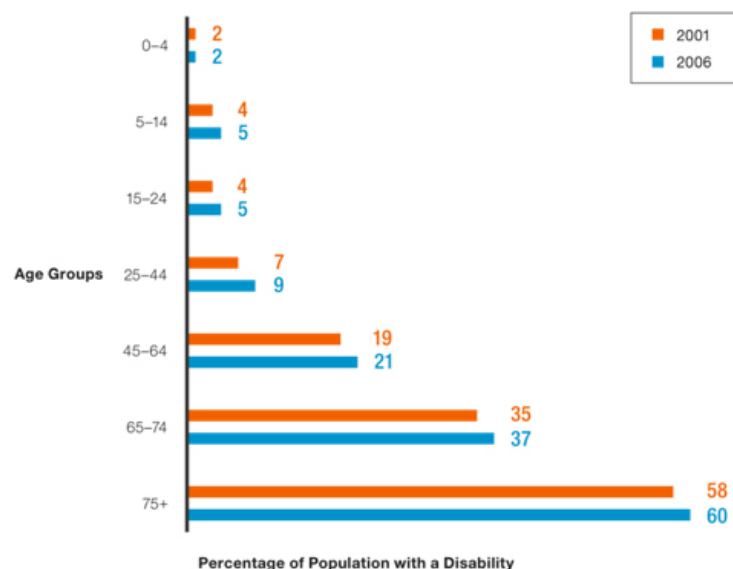


Releasing Constraints: The Impacts of Increased Accessibility on Ontario's Economy

In 2005, the Ontario Legislature passed the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act to improve accessibility across the province. The disability community saw the legislation as a milestone in the government's commitment to creating a level playing field for all Ontarians. But many businesses and municipalities across the province responded with skepticism, believing the act would result in increased costs and result in few benefits. However, a new study by the Martin Prosperity Institute, the Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity and the Adaptive Technology Resource Centre, titled [Releasing Constraints: Projecting the Economic Impacts of Increased Accessibility in Ontario](#), finds that improving inclusivity and accessibility in Ontario provides both economic opportunity and benefits. The report examines the potential economic impacts of increased accessibility at three scales: individuals, markets, and society.

The need to improve accessibility is becoming more pronounced in Ontario as the population ages and the labour force shrinks. Between 2001 and 2006, the percentage of Ontarians with a disability grew from 13.5% to 15.4%, and more than half of this increase is directly attributable to the aging population¹. Disability tends to increase with age, with the highest incidence occurring among individuals 45 and older. Exhibit 1 demonstrates the growth of disability by age in Ontario between 2001 and 2006. In addition to this growth in the number of individuals with a disability, Ontario also faces a shrinking labour force due to retirement, with a predicted shortage of over 1 million workers by the year 2030¹.

Exhibit 1: Disability Increases with Age (Ontario - 2001 and 2006)



Source: Statistics Canada, Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, 2001 and 2006

Estimating the potential economic impacts of increased accessibility in Ontario is difficult because statistical surveys produce conflicting rates of disability. While the general trend expressed in Exhibit 1 holds across different surveys, such as the Canadian Census, the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics and the Canadian Community Health Survey, the percentage of individuals who report having a disability varies significantly. The Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS) data used to produce Exhibit 1 suggests that in 2001 13.5% of individuals in Canada reported a disabilityⁱⁱ. However, the PALS estimate is conservative, with other surveys reporting higher rates of disability in Canada. For example, in 2001, the Canadian Census, the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics, and the Canadian Community Health Survey reported 19%, 21% and 31% of individuals in Canada reported a disabilityⁱⁱ. Recognizing that differences in estimates exist between surveys is important because it highlights the fact many people with a disability in Canada go unreported, and this has significant ramifications for understanding the importance of how many people are actually affected by improved accessibility.

There are two primary explanations for these conflicting results. First, these estimates may vary because each survey poses its questions differently or uses slightly different definitions for what it considers a person with a disability. Secondly, these surveys depend upon individuals to self report, and individuals may not self report their disability if they have disabilities that do not significantly limit their ability to perform various activities. This may be because they do not recognize nor consider any limitation they have to be a disability. As a result, the recently completed study uses several scenarios to estimate a range of potential outcomes that could result from increased accessibility in Ontario.

As Ontario's economy comes out of the demand for educated and skilled workers will increase. The looming labour shortage from retirements in Ontario is adding additional pressure to ensure that skilled workers will be available to meet this demand. Improving the accessibility of education for individuals with a disability, and improving their skills to meet the demands of the emerging knowledge economy, can help to overcome part of this labour shortage. Currently, persons with disabilities tend to have lower labour force participation rates than persons without a disability. In addition, the average employment income for persons 15 years of age and older with disabilities is lower than persons without disabilities and has declined between 2001 and 2006ⁱ. The report finds that the participation rate of individuals with a disability could increase anywhere from between 2% to 15%, thanks to improvements in accessibilityⁱ. The report also finds that the increased productivity could increase the province's per capita GDP anywhere from \$49 to \$653 as a result of these changesⁱ. In fact, increasing employment among individuals with a disability could result in a total increase in employment income of up to \$4.8 billion per yearⁱ.

In order to benefit from the potential opportunities of increased accessibility, Ontario will need to demonstrate a commitment to AODA. Improved accessibility makes sense in Ontario, as the potential exists to realize both social and economic gains. The number of individuals with a disability is much larger than what is reported in the statistics, meaning that a large hidden market exists in Ontario for improved accessibility that is not currently being served. The longer it takes to demonstrate a commitment to AODA, everyday people who want to learn cannot, people who want to work do not and businesses that could serve these markets fail to act, Ontario is missing out on economic opportunities to become a leading jurisdiction, valuable contributions from its citizens and economic growth.

Sources:

- i. [Releasing Constraints: Projecting the Economic Impacts of Increased Accessibility in Ontario](#) 2010
- ii. Rietschlin, J. and MacKenzie, A. 2004 Variation in Disability Rates in Statistics Canada National Surveys: Building Policy on a Slippery Foundation. Statistics Canada. No. 11-522-XIE.

The Martin Prosperity Institute (martinprosperity.org) at the [University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management](#) is the world's leading think-tank on the role of sub-national factors – location, place and city-regions – in global economic prosperity. Led by Director [Richard Florida](#), we take an integrated view of prosperity, looking beyond economic measures to include the importance of quality of place and the development of people's creative potential.