

Adults with disabilities face barriers accessing food, leading to food insecurity, study finds

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Narrow aisles in stores are one of many barriers to access researchers observed.
Credit: Naomi Schwartz

During an ice storm, a person with a disability living in Canada's largest city didn't know where she would get her next meal. If she didn't have the money on hand to get food delivered, her plan was to drink a glass of water and wait to eat the next day.

This is just one of the revealing stories that Naomi Schwartz heard while researching food accessibility for people with disabilities living in Toronto.

Schwartz, a Ph.D. graduate of U of T's Geography program, along with professors Ron Buliung and Kathi Wilson from UTM's Department of Geography, Geomatics and Environment, co-authored the study *Experiences of food access among disabled adults in Toronto, Canada* recently published in the journal *Disability & Society*.

The study found that people with disabilities were at considerably greater risk of food insecurity than others—an outcome partially explained by often interconnected physical and economic barriers.

Schwartz conducted interviews with 23 participants, including 18 mobile interviews, and accompanied participants from across Toronto who used mobility aids on trips to access food.

During these outings, she was surprised by how many small barriers accumulated throughout the trip—such as garbage cans blocking pathways, inadequate curb cuts, and narrow aisles within stores.

"As a non-disabled researcher, it was so important for me to understand the small-level barriers that we don't necessarily think of," Schwartz says.

Buliung adds that the study also provided a unique insight into the barriers within people's homes.

"We really wanted to dig into what's happening in the home," says Buliung. "When we think about food access we often think about accessibility in the city. We're often looking outward at destinations ... but it seemed a bit rare to look at what's happening at the home site."

Within the home, some participants on a limited income or living in subsidized housing lived in spaces that were too small to allow them to move comfortably with their mobility device. In addition, many had inaccessible kitchens, and those in apartments or condos faced potential mechanical breakdowns of important services such as elevators and exterior points of entry.

For those who used Wheel-Trans, Toronto's paratransit service, people with [disabilities](#) sometimes waited for the bus in poor weather conditions. The affordability of the transit service also caused financial barriers.

Schwartz says she was able to access one [food bank](#) with a participant during mobile interviews, but that another participant had indicated some food banks were inaccessible.



Produce bags hang out of reach for some. Credit: Naomi Schwartz

"There's a lot of food banks that might not have a lot of funding themselves, so they're not running necessarily accessible operations," Schwartz says.

Schwartz adds that there can be some solutions to the issues outlined in the study—including providing financial support through programs like the Assistive Devices Program, which could allow people to make accessibility adaptations within their residence as needed. She also says there should be greater enforcement and improvements to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (the province's accessibility legislation that aims to have a fully accessible Ontario by 2025), and designing the built environment—including within and around a person's residence—with disability in mind in the first place.

"Disability needs to be considered further up in the [design process](#), as part of how things are designed from the beginning," she says. "We need accessible spaces, and not consider disability as an afterthought."

Buliung says that while AODA is supposed to help produce greater accessibility in new builds, processes and access to resources to support retrofit are messy and unclear.

"There is a long way to go before the 'accessible' Ontario vision becomes a reality," he says. "What I really see happening by 2025 is a sort of accessible Ontario, in some places, for some people, some of the time. The presence of AODA does not mean that someone is going to come into your residence and make it suddenly work for you—many of the

barriers identified in Dr. Schwartz's work are not simply going to magically disappear in the coming years."

Schwartz adds that offering a basic income supplement or increasing payments through the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) could also be part of the solution.

"Higher income levels would support so many things in terms of adequate food, but also housing. Or when there's an emergency, to be able to afford an alternative, like a taxi," she says. "Flexible income is needed, and right now the levels of income and things like the ODSP are just not adequate to allow that leeway at all. The basic income supplement is hugely important as well. It would just allow so much more flexibility in people's incomes."

Ultimately, she hopes that their study can make an impact on people's lives.

"I hope it can be used to advocate for increases to disability incomes and act as evidence as a need for a basic income program," she says, adding that she hopes the team's research can also be used by the food industry to improve accessibility within their services.

Buliung, whose daughter Asha was born with spinal muscular atrophy type 2 and uses a wheelchair, says the issue is deeply personal to him.

"I want a future for my daughter where she doesn't have to struggle with the issues that we have described in this paper," he says. "I don't want her to have to experience food insecurity."

The researchers have also co-authored two other studies that focus on food insecurity across Canada including "Disability and food access and insecurity: A scoping review of the literature" and "Mobility

impairments and geographic variation in vulnerability to household [food](#) insecurity."

More information: Naomi Schwartz et al, Experiences of food access among disabled adults in Toronto, Canada, *Disability & Society* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2021.1949265](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2021.1949265)

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