



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Prove Yourself! Barriers to accessing ID for low-income Manitobans

Government-issued identification (ID) is essential to gain access to a wide range of government entitlements, commercial services and financial systems. Lack of ID on the other hand, represents a critical barrier that prevents low-income Manitobans from accessing these services and benefits, and ultimately results in further marginalization and deepening poverty. A new study, *Access to Identification for Low-Income Manitobans* researches what can be done to address these challenges.

Those who struggle to access ID include low-income Manitobans; homeless and precariously housed individuals; those who are exiting prison; at-risk youth; and refugees. The cost of applying for ID is the most significant barrier. However, navigating complex forms; literacy and language barriers; lack of transportation; and lack of knowledge regarding familial lineage represent additional obstacles in obtaining ID.

Despite the universality of ID cards, the impact of these cards are not felt the same by everyone. Many of us live on the right side of what we can understand as the 'ID Divide'. That is to say, we carry at least one government-issued ID with us wherever we go. If we lose our ID, however, because of financial resources, knowledge of familial lineage, and the ability to fill in forms and navigate systems effectively, the loss of ID may be more or less just an inconvenience. But for those who exist on the other side of this divide and do not possess the social

and financial capital necessary to navigate these systems, their ability to fully participate in social, political, and economic life is severely compromised.

ID is required to access a myriad of services and benefits such as health care, income assistance, employment insurance, old age security as well as to file taxes or open a bank account. ID is also required to access social housing or to rent an apartment; to vote; as well as for employment. Parents wishing to open a Registered Education Savings Plan (RESP) in anticipation of accessing the Canada Learning Bond (CLB) must get ID for their children.

While many of us may consider the cost of applying for ID negligible, for those who live on a fixed income the cost can be significant. The cost of transportation to and from various locations to gather the documents or submit applications can pose additional barriers. Further, few agencies that process ID applications have staff supports to help those who struggle with literacy, lack of knowledge about familial lineages, or trauma that arises as a consequence of applying for ID.

While the demand to authenticate our identities has increased, supports to help those who face barriers in accessing ID have not kept pace. In Winnipeg, both SEED-Winnipeg and

there is an alternative.

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Citizen's Bridge support low-income Manitobans accessing ID. Insufficient formal support for individuals facing multiple barriers in accessing ID, however, has resulted in organizations like SEED and Citizen's Bridge being overwhelmed with the demand for intensive navigation supports and funds to cover the cost of ID.

By far, Indigenous community members are more deeply impacted by this issue than non-Indigenous. On average, 81 per cent of the ID applicants that SEED-Winnipeg supports identify as Indigenous. This can be understood as part of the on-going impacts of colonization. As a result of the Sixties-Eighties Scoop many children taken from their homes by the government face especially high barriers to accessing ID. In order to obtain a birth certificate, an applicant must recall and provide information about their birth and parental lineage as it is stated on their birth registration.

Many Indigenous communities however have been disconnected from their family histories, both through the physical removal of Indigenous children from their families as well as through the erasure of Indigenous cultural identities and histories, including family names, and their replacement with colonial conceptions. Barriers facing this group include lacking the familial knowledge required to fill in the forms as well as instances of adoption records being lost or misplaced, leaving these individuals in a procedural loophole. In some instances, survivors of the Scoop have been told by Vital Statistics that they do not exist or that their birth records were destroyed by fire. Navigating these realities may mean that survivors have to relive these traumatic experiences during their ID applications.

Other provinces are now recognizing that ID is necessary to navigate the modern world and are doing something to support those who fall through the cracks. Manitoba needs to do more.

Through consultation with both community organizations working directly and indirectly on this issue, as well as government agencies responsible for ID provision, four opportunities for improvement to reduce the barriers to ID for low-income Manitobans are presented:

1. A fee waiver that enables low-income Manitobans to obtain or replace a birth certificate for free.
2. Access for individuals leaving prison, and youth exiting CFS, to obtain government-issued ID prior to leaving.
3. The creation of an ID storage facility in Winnipeg.
4. Expansion of the MPI guarantor list (used to issue photo-ID) to include professionals that low-income and/or marginalized populations are more likely to have contact with.

In addition to these strategic reforms, areas of concerns were identified relating to ID access and provision in Manitoba. These areas of concern have been identified as next steps. These next steps include: greater support for those experiencing difficulties navigating ID systems including training for frontline staff in a trauma-informed care lens; and providing greater support to new parents during the registration process when children are born.

Implementing the above reforms and further investigating next steps would help to support vulnerable Manitobans in accessing the benefits, supports and services to which they are entitled, as well as increased opportunities for greater inclusion, economic advancement, and financial stability for these individuals. As ID is a critical tool in the fight against poverty, reducing barriers must be understood as part of this larger effort.

Ellen Smirl is Project Coordinator for CCPA-MB and the author of [Access to Identification for Low-Income Manitobans](#). Thank you to SEED Winnipeg and the Manitoba Research Alliance via the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for funding this research.

References available upon request.

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