

# CIHR glossary of terms used in accessibility and systemic ableism

## Preamble

This glossary provides a list of common terms that CIHR will use to discuss accessibility and systemic ableism. It draws from Government of Canada documents, such as the [Accessible Canada Act \(2019\)](#) and the [Guide on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Terminology](#), and from many other sources. CIHR will review this glossary regularly to update terms and definitions, as needed.

In this glossary, definitions apply only to accessibility and systemic ableism policy work. Please consult other sources for legal usage of similar terms. Terms may have different definitions in federal Canadian and in international laws. The [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#) (1982) and the [Canadian Human Rights Act](#) (1985) identify grounds on which discrimination is prohibited which are not defined here.

**Ableism:** Ableism refers to prejudiced thoughts and discriminatory actions based on differences in physical, mental, and/or emotional ability; usually that of able-bodied/minded persons against people with illness, disabilities, or less developed skills (Source: [Guide on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Terminology](#); \*[Glossary of Terms: Race, Equity and Social Justice | icma.org<sup>1</sup>](#)).

**Accessibility:** Accessibility is the combination of aspects that influence a person's ability to function within an environment and to access it with ease (Source: [Translation Bureau Accessibility glossary](#); [SSHRC Accessibility notice](#); [Guide on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Terminology](#)).

**Alternate format:** Alternate formats refer to ways in which information is communicated other than through standard text. Alternate formats may include digital audio, electronic text, Braille, large print, or ASL/QSL translation with video voiceover. Note that adaptive or assistive technologies are often used to access information that is presented in alternative formats. (Source: \*[OCAD University – Types of alternative formats](#), \*[Queens University Accessibility Hub: What are Alternate Formats?](#)).

**Anti-ableism:** Anti-ableism refers to strategies, theories, actions, and practices that challenge and counter prejudiced thoughts and discriminatory actions based on differences in physical, mental, and/or emotional ability (Source: [Salem State University](#)).

**Assistive devices:** Assistive devices are tools that are designed, made, or adapted to help a person to perform a particular task. Many people with disabilities depend on assistive devices to enable them to carry out daily activities and participate actively and productively in community life (Source: \*[National Library of Medicine - Assistive devices](#)).

**Barrier(s):** Barriers are anything — including anything physical, architectural, technological, or attitudinal; anything that is based on information or communications; or anything that is the result of a policy or a

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<sup>1</sup> Sources marked with an asterisk are in English only.

practice — that hinders the full and equal participation in society of persons with an impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication, or sensory impairment or a functional limitation (Source: [Accessible Canada Act, 2019](#)).

**Bias:** Biases are shortcuts that the brain forms based on culture, a person's own experiences, what a person learns from others, institutional influences, and other external factors. As a result of these influences, people form judgments and make quick decisions, consciously or unconsciously (Source: [CIHR Bias in Peer Review Training Module](#)).

**Community partner in research:** A community partner in research is an individual, group of people, or network that enters into a formal, collaborative relationship to conduct research. Generally, community partners include persons with disabilities and/or persons with chronic health conditions. These individuals, groups or networks often advocate for disability rights, services, and supports or facilitate connections between community members (Source: Brookman-Frazee L, et al., [Characterizing the Use of Research-Community Partnerships in Studies of Evidence-Based Interventions in Children's Community Services](#). Adm Policy Ment Health, 2016).

**Disability:** A disability is any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication, or sensory impairment, or a functional limitation whether permanent, temporary, or episodic in nature, evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person's full and equal participation in society (Source: [Accessible Canada Act, 2019](#)).

**Disability income supports:** Disability income supports are financial payouts to qualifying persons with disabilities to help them with covering the cost of basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter. Such payouts could be administered by the federal, provincial, or territorial governments. (Source: \*[Settlement.Org Ontario Disability Support Program](#)).

**Disability supports:** Disability supports refer to a wide range of goods and services that assist a person with a disability in overcoming barriers to carrying out everyday activities. These include adaptive office equipment and work environments; information technology; assistive technologies;

sign language interpretation, captioning or other assistive communication; flexible work arrangements; attendant care support; and formalized assistance from a co-worker (Source: [Council of Canadians with Disabilities](#)).

**Discrimination:** Discrimination is any unfavorable or unfair treatment towards an individual or group, explicitly or implicitly, based on their race, ethnicity, color, national origin or ancestry, religion, socioeconomic status, education, sex, marital status, parental status, veteran's status, political affiliation, language, age, gender, physical or mental abilities, sexual orientation, or gender identity (Source: \*[Glossary of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Terms; Definitions: Let's Talk CIHR; NFRF Best Practices in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Research \(Canada Research Coordinating Committee\); Creating an Equitable, Diverse and Inclusive Research Environment: A Best Practices Guide for Recruitment, Hiring and Retention. Canada Research Chairs](#)).

**Disability tax:** Disability tax is an experience persons with disabilities have when completing additional daily tasks regarding disability and inaccessibility that take time away from their research and productivity. Scholars with a disability must navigate accommodation processes through the filter of their own needs in an opaque and confusing system that is built for standardized bodies and abilities (\*[Canada Research Chair Equitable Research Productivity Assessment](#), University of British Columbia).

**Disablism:** Disablism is individual and institutionalised discriminatory, oppressive behaviour arising from the belief that disabled people are inferior to others (Source: CIHR Bias in Peer and Merit Review Modules Glossary; \*Campbell, F. K. [Inciting legal fictions: Disability's date with ontology and the ableist body of the law](#). *Griffith Law Review 2001*; Council of Europe. (n.d.). Disability and disablism. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/disability-and-disablismScope>. (n.d.).).

**Diversity:** Diversity is a term used to describe the presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society. Diversity encompasses acceptance and respect of individual identities, which includes, but are not limited to, the dimensions of race, language, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, sex, sexual orientation,

socio-economic status, age, disability, neurodivergence, physical appearance, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies, ancestry, culture, geographic background (See also [equity](#), [inclusion](#)) (Source: [Guide for Applicants: Considering equity, diversity, and inclusion in your application, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council \[NSERC\]](#)).

**Equality:** Equality refers to equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for different groups of people. Equality refers to the state of being equal while [equity](#) refers to the state of being just, impartial or fair. However, equality of opportunity by itself does not guarantee equal outcomes for different groups of people (Source: [Guide for Applicants: Considering equity, diversity and inclusion in your application](#) [NSERC]).

**Equity:** Equity means fairness; people of all identities being treated fairly, even if it may appear unfair. It means ensuring that the processes for allocating resources and decision-making are fair to all and allocated in a way that supports people who may have different needs in order to access, to the best degree possible, equal opportunities. Equity is needed to achieve [equality](#). For example, treating people as equals in an environment in which historical and systemic disadvantages prevent people from operating as equals can be inequitable – it lacks the fairness of a truly equitable situation (Source: [Tri-Agency EDI Action Plan](#); [Guide for Applicants: Considering equity, diversity and inclusion in your application](#) [NSERC]; [Definitions Let's Talk CIHR](#); [Best Practices in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Research](#) [SSHRC]).

**Employment Systems Review:** An employment systems review is a comprehensive review of an organization's policies and practices to identify systemic and attitudinal barriers to employment opportunities for designated group members. The goal of the employment systems review is to provide an explanation for major gaps in representation, and to serve as the basis for developing an employment equity action plan to address barriers (Sources: [Employment Systems Review - A Guide For The Federal Public Service - Canada.ca](#)).

**Experiential knowledge:** Experiential knowledge means the understanding and expertise an individual gains through lived experiences,

rather than from formal education or professional training (Source: [American Psychological Association](#)).

**Human Rights Model of Disability:** The human rights model recognizes that disability is a natural part of human diversity that must be respected and supported in all its forms; people with disabilities have the same rights as everyone else in society and impairment must not be used as an excuse to deny or restrict people's rights (Source: \*[Disability Advocacy Resource Unit](#)).

**Inclusion:** Inclusion is defined as the practice of ensuring that all individuals are valued and respected for their contributions and equally supported (Source: [Guide for Applicants: Considering equity, diversity and inclusion in your application](#) [NSERC], [Definitions Let's Talk CIHR](#), [Best Practices in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Research](#) [SSHRC]).

**Inclusive language:** Inclusive language refers to decisions over various forms of communication (including writing and speaking) that, through their grammar, structure, and word choice, take into account everyone that is both being addressed directly and being discussed. More broadly, inclusive language consciously avoids perpetuating discrimination or stigmatization against any marginalized group (Source: [Creating an Equitable, Diverse and Inclusive Research Environment: A Best Practices Guide for Recruitment, Hiring and Retention](#)).

**Intersectionality:** Intersectionality is a term coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, and built upon by other Black feminist scholars, which acknowledges the ways in which people's experiences are shaped by their multiple and overlapping identities and social locations, as well as intersecting processes of discrimination, oppression, power, and privilege. Together, these interlocking identities and processes can produce a unique and distinct experience for an individual or group, such as the creation of additional barriers or opportunities (Source: Crenshaw, Kimberlé. [Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989](#)).

**Lived experience:** Lived experience refers to the personal knowledge gained through direct, first-hand involvement in events rather than through assumptions based on second-hand information. The term comes from qualitative research methods, where knowledge is sought through engaging with people's accounts of their experiences. In social policy, lived experience is increasingly used to frame user involvement in service improvement. It is a mechanism for participatory democracy, giving marginalized groups genuine opportunities to contribute to policy making through the expertise of their lived experience (Source: \*[Australian Institute of Family Studies](#); \*[Oxford Reference](#)).

**Medical model of disability:** According to the medical model, disability is defined in relation to biology and not in relation to social or geographical environments. Disability is regarded as a defect or sickness. This model places the source of the problem within the person (intrinsic to the individual), and solutions are found by focusing on the person. The medical model often refers to a person with a disability as a victim - this can be very patronizing and offensive (Source: [Public Service Alliance of Canada](#)).

**Neurodiversity:** Neurodiversity refers to the variation in the human brain regarding sociability, learning, attention, mood, and other mental functions (Source: [Guide on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Terminology](#); \*[Glossary of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Terms](#)).

**Patient engagement:** Patient engagement in research is an approach that involves meaningful and active collaboration in governance, priority setting, conducting research, and knowledge translation. Depending on the context, patient engagement may also engage people who bring the collective voice of specific, affected communities (Source: [Patient Engagement](#), CIHR).

**Patient partners:** Patient partners are experts with unique experiences and knowledge gained through living with a condition or illness, receiving treatment, or supporting a loved one who is a patient. Patient partnership entails meaningful and active engagement of patients in the governance, priority setting, and conduct of research. Patient partners also summarize, distribute, share, and apply research's resulting knowledge, (i.e., the process known as knowledge translation and exchange). The term could



refer to an individual or a community partner representing a disability group (Source: [University of Ottawa Heart Institute](#)).

**People/person with disability:** People/persons with disabilities refers to individuals with any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication, or sensory impairment — or a functional limitation whether permanent, temporary, or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person’s full and equal participation in society. This term utilizes person-first language, which clarifies that a person isn’t a disability, condition, or diagnosis but rather, a person has a disability, condition, or diagnosis. It replaces the terms such as Handicap, The Handicapped, The Disabled, Wheelchair-bound, or Cripple, which do not reflect the individuality, equality, or dignity of people with disabilities (Source: [\\*Glossary of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Terms](#)).

**Social model of disability:** According to the social model, disability is a consequence of environmental, social, and attitudinal barriers that prevent people with an impairment from a maximum participation in society. This model centers on social barriers that keep persons with a disability from participating actively in all political and social institutions. This model places the source of the problem on society. Solutions must focus on social change and not solely on the individual with the disability. This model focuses not only on physical or environmental but also other barriers of a social nature such as prejudice, stereotyping (Source: [Public Service Alliance of Canada; Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017](#))

**Systemic ableism:** Systemic ableism includes the physical barriers, policies, laws, regulations, and practices that exclude people with disabilities from full participation and equal opportunity. This can be seen through lack of accessibility or accommodations in schools and in the workplace, when buildings aren’t accessible (e.g., no ramps or elevators, no interpreters available), or through ableism in healthcare, such as limited or no insurance coverage for people with ‘pre-existing conditions,’ or [triage policies](#) that allow doctors to deny care based on factors including a patient’s medical history and disabilities (Source: [Diversability](#)).



**Systemic discrimination:** Systemic discrimination refers to a system-wide form of discrimination. It consists of distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of one's belonging to a category of people. This can apply to gender, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, or other factors. It is often a mixture of intentional and unintentional actions that will have a more serious effect (or disproportionate impacts) on certain groups (Source: [Department for Women and Gender Equality Introduction to GBA+ Glossary](#)).

**Unconscious bias:** Unconscious bias is an implicit attitude, stereotype, motivation, or assumption that can occur without one's knowledge or intention. Unconscious bias is a result of one's life experiences and affects all types of people. Everyone carries implicit or unconscious biases (Source: [CIHR Bias in Peer Review](#); [Guide for Applicants: Considering equity, diversity and inclusion in your application](#) and [Unconscious Bias – NSERC Chair for Women in Science and Engineering \[BC and Yukon Region\]](#) [NSERC]; [NFRF Best Practices in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Research](#) [SSHRC]; [Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in Action at CIHR](#)).

**Universal design:** Universal design refers to the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design (Source: \*Ronald Mace, quoted in [Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education](#)).

**Workforce availability:** Workforce availability refers to the estimated availability of people in designated groups as a percentage of the workforce population. For the core public administration, workforce availability is based on the population of Canadian citizens who are active in the workforce and who work in those occupations that correspond to the occupations in the core public administration (Source: [Employment Equity in the Public Service of Canada](#)).