

Social security digitisation and barriers to access



Digitisation is reshaping the social security system, affecting both its administration and the way people access Centrelink payments. Services Australia now generally expects people to claim and maintain social security payments through Centrelink online,¹ while phone or face-to-face services can be difficult to access.

Social security is a human right. It is vital that digital transformation guarantees access to payments to which people are entitled.

People's ability to eat and feed their children [is] at risk. Their health is at risk. When these systems fail, they have profound impacts on people. These are humanitarian risks – the system can't be allowed to fail. (Interview 21)

When digital services are designed and implemented effectively, they can extend critical services to those who might otherwise be excluded. They can also produce efficiencies for both providers and users, allowing resources to be reallocated where they are most needed.

While digital access may suit many people most of the time, research done by Economic Justice Australia (EJA) shows the shift to online services is restricting access to social security where people are unable to engage effectively with digital systems. The pace of digital transformation has exceeded the speed at which digital capability has developed within the community. The social security system is complex and often difficult to navigate, posing significant challenges for the shift away from face-to-face to digital services.

Digital exclusion

The shift to online services is underpinned by the assumption people have access to the internet, an email address they can regularly check, and access to myGov via a smart phone or computer. It also assumes people trust digital systems and know how to engage with them.

¹ The official name for Centrelink's online service delivery.

Instead, the 2023 Digital Inclusion Index² found two thirds of those surveyed experience some level of digital exclusion. Of those, one in 10 is highly excluded, including older people, those with low English proficiency, people living outside capital cities and people in First Nations communities. Meanwhile, Services Australia has been steadily reducing alternatives to online services such as paper forms, client-initiated postal communications and face-to-face servicing.

I recently tried to get Centrelink to engage by post for a person who was older and disabled and was told that they already set up a myGov. They don't remember a thing. They were pushed to use it. Staff don't recognise that having a computer/internet doesn't mean you can use it. They don't want to post things – [Centrelink staff] are trained to push people to use digital systems. (Interview 9)

In my work I assist a lot of older people with health-related social issues. It's common to have a spouse applying for Carer Payment when their spouse becomes unwell or is near the end of their life. These people have no internet connection at their farms, no signal, computers or smartphones, but also no digital literacy. I'm funded to help but now there [are] no paper or downloadable forms for Carer Payment on the Services Australia website – and none available from offices. People are dying before their carer is able to get paid for looking after them. (Interview 24)

'Digital by default' has become the norm. This includes people attending Centrelink offices who are regularly directed to use online services, even when they have attended a physical office because they want human assistance. People are being pushed onto computers in Centrelink offices without enough assistance from staff to navigate the digital interface. The same is true of people seeking assistance by phone.

People are being told that if digital engagement is too much, give [Centrelink] a call. But then they are made to engage digitally regardless ... no matter what Centrelink says. We are almost at the point that you can only maintain your payment if you engage digitally or if you have someone who can do it all for you. (Interview 13)

Services Australia's reliance on online services is contributing to delayed payments, overpayments, and payment suspensions and cancellations because some people find it difficult to engage with digital systems. Some of the challenges include being unable to claim a payment, report information, or answer specific questions to provide Services Australia with the information necessary to make an accurate assessment.

Services Australia is currently employing a range of strategies to reduce digital exclusion. While these will improve access for some, they will not necessarily eliminate the problem of digital exclusion.

² digitalinclusionindex.org.au/key-findings-and-next-steps

Efforts to improve online services must not come at the expense of those who are unable to engage digitally. There is an ongoing need for high-quality human services, including face-to-face, phone services and access points. People should be able to choose how they best engage with Services Australia to maximise accessibility.

Recommendation 1: That Services Australia provide accessible alternatives to online services, and engage with a cross-section of intended beneficiaries to develop means to improve access to non-digital systems.

Recommendation 2: That Services Australia design access options that provide customers genuine choice about whether they engage through online services, with flexibility to opt in or out at any time.

Recommendation 3: That Services Australia reintroduce readily accessible paper forms for all administrative processes including claims, requests for review, complaints, compulsory income management exemptions/exits and Centrepay administration.

Lack of digital skills

The push to digital services is problematic as it presumes people have the digital skills required to engage with Services Australia, such as navigating myGov and related e-government information. A recent myGov review³ found that 37 per cent of Australians find navigating online services difficult, with only 44 per cent able to find help when they need it.

It is one thing to know how to navigate the app, but if you need to upload a statement, you need to go online to another platform and attach/upload the documents – there is an assumption that people can do that – but many can't. People get frustrated or forget to do it. (Interview 7)

Some people have a phone or computer but struggle to use it because they lack digital skills or don't trust the safety of online services. With the recent slew of high-profile data breaches, this concern has become more pressing for Centrelink recipients.

You need to have confidence with technology. Older people may have a phone but no skills to use it. One older client makes her son take her to Centrelink – she lacks skills and is also afraid of scammers. (Interview 11)

People without confidence on a computer are afraid of 'breaking' the system if they do something wrong and they can't troubleshoot, so they get stuck. (Interview 16)

Making contact [is a barrier]. We have families that are very dubious of things like myGov, which makes things really difficult. They're really quite fearful of government departments having all of their things in the one place. (Interview 26)

³ my.gov.au/en/audit

Online services also pose significant access issues for some people with disability, particularly people with cognitive impairment or intellectual disabilities.

Some people with disability don't necessarily know that they have to report their income. They think that Centrelink got them the job where they work – think that they are reporting their income and Centrelink knows what it is. The Centrelink office sets it up on the computer for them – and puts them onto online services – but then they don't get information/don't know how to access the system/don't know they are meant to update information. (Interview 8)

Social security is complex, and questions or prompts used within the system may not be understood by people with low English proficiency. Even people with strong English proficiency struggle to comprehend automated communications, forms and reporting, which leads to incorrect payment decisions.

A client had her Parenting Payments cut off – because English was not her first language and she didn't really understand what was being asked of her online. (Interview 8)

Social security is so complicated, and there are so many situations where clients think they need A, but should actually be looking at B, C, and D ... Given the communication difficulties of a lot of clients, without someone who can be flexible in their communication, they often miss out on what they could be pursuing. (Interview 20)

Recommendation 4: That Government allocate additional funding to get more Services Australia staff onto the frontline to provide face-to-face services to people experiencing barriers to online services.

Recommendation 5: That Services Australia increase assistance for customers attempting to use digital systems within a Centrelink office (or Agent's Office or Access Point), including showing people how to navigate the digital systems and recognising where elements of digital engagement are beyond the customer who should be referred into non-digital support.

Lack of affordability

Social security payments are low, and poverty exacerbates the digital divide. Some people on low incomes do not own devices while others attempt to access online services from out-dated phones and devices on which they are unable to install current versions of software.

A lot of our clients wouldn't be able to afford a new phone, so I do anticipate we are going to have a few issues [regarding the 3G shutdown]. [A worker] said she had one [issue] already. (Interview 25)

Online access is also affected by people's inability to afford a phone plan, internet plan or pay-as-you-go data. The cost of phones and data drastically affects some people's ability to maintain reporting requirements such as changes in income, changes in circumstances and mutual obligations. Not all calls to Services Australia are free, and some people can only make necessary contact through a 1300 or 13 number or may not know a free 1800 alternative is available. Difficulty engaging with digital systems causes distress as people genuinely seek to maintain their social security income.

People don't have access to technology because they are in poverty. They don't have reception. They don't have internet. They don't have a smartphone. (Interview 15)

I don't think people realise that those 1300 numbers aren't free. So if you are ringing from a mobile, there goes your credit. Yeah, it is a significant barrier. And even though phone boxes now are free, so you could go into a phone box and ring that number, there's not many of those around. And you'd be very vulnerable sitting on the side of a road. (Interview 25)

Some people don't have access to a phone, don't have access to credit. (Interview 26)

While the Telephone Allowance can be paid to people on a select few payments, the current rate of \$35.60/quarter does not meet the cost of even the cheapest mobile phone or internet service plan.

Recommendation 6: That the government establish a Digital Allowance to address the cost of online connectivity for people on low income.

Limited accessibility in regional and remote areas

Research into the availability of internet services in regional and remote areas⁴ indicates the need to re-think digital transformation approaches based on metro-normative assumptions that people have access to online services.

This is what gets me about these systems - people are continually disadvantaged as a result of poverty. You're almost a hostage to a rural property. There's very little that you can do to get out of that situation. (Interview 25)

If you are on social security, you don't have much cash - so access to hardware such as a computer/tablet is hard. If you do have a device, you likely have an old one that doesn't cope with the technical requirements of the

⁴ digitalinclusion.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/first-nations-digital-inclusion-advisory-group-initial-report.pdf

*system. You also need to have enough data which a lot of clients don't have.
(Interview 16)*

Digital exclusion increases with distance from population centres, with significant pockets of people left behind. In regional and remote areas, internet connectivity is often poor and/or expensive. Remote Area Allowance has minimal impact given it has not been indexed since 2000 and does not provide enough to cover the increased cost of food and services in remote areas, let alone digital connectivity.

In remote Australia, Centrelink service centres can be hundreds of kilometres away. The National Agent and Access Point (NAAP) program⁵ funds 354 Centrelink agents and 213 Centrelink access points primarily in regional, rural, remote and very remote areas. Under the program, community organisations provide digital equipment including phones, Wi-Fi, computers with internet connection and scanning equipment to upload documents. NAAP-funded agents report that current funding is inadequate to meet demand or keep the Centrelink service operating. Because of this, people seeking assistance with digital access or a social security issue are often directed to use a computer without assistance about how to do so.

EJA research reveals a wide range of approaches among agents, who have different levels of resourcing and training. More needs to be done to increase agents' capacity to assist people who are unable to engage digitally, with additional assistance also required at access points.

Recommendation 7: That Government increase funding to community organisations providing the National Agent and Access Point Program (NAAP) to ensure adequate resourcing and service provision.

Recommendation 8: That Services Australia expand the role of Agents to support and mentor people in the use of online services, with alternative phone-based support available at access points.

First Nations inclusion

The digital divide in Australia is significant. When measuring the scale of digital inclusion, the latest Australian Digital Inclusion Index provided an Index Score of 73.4 for non-First Nations Australians and 65.9 for First Nations Australians. On average, First Nations Australians experience poorer access to the internet, higher costs relative to income to access the internet and lower levels of digital ability. The gap progressively widens in regional, remote and very remote areas.

EJA research highlights the impact of the digital divide on social security access, particularly in remote First Nations communities where digital access can be particularly limited.

[There may only be] one person in the family receiving payment because it is so difficult for the rest of the family to stay engaged because they can't meet

⁵ niaa.gov.au/our-work/closing-gap/national-agent-and-access-point-naap-program-services-australia

mutual obligations, don't have internet, and can't find a job because the nearest town is 200km away. (Interview 18)

One community had one phone and one computer. The phone was down for a week and the computer was down for 12 months with no one who could fix it. They couldn't do things to notify Centrelink, couldn't use income management to buy food. It is hard for Centrelink offices or people in major cities to understand this. (Interview 21)

The First Nations Digital Inclusion Roadmap is an important initiative. Efforts to address First Nations people's digital exclusion calls for a multi-pronged strategy that is responsive to local needs and informed by community-led organisations, peak bodies and First Nations businesses. The roadmap notes some of the current efforts being made to increase connectivity-boosting infrastructure by a range of agencies including private telecommunications partners, state governments and the Federal Government (including the Department of Social Services). Cross-portfolio coordination is essential to increase social security access, including digital mentoring to assist people in claiming social security payments and maintaining correct entitlements.

Recommendation 9: That the government ensure all Commonwealth-funded strategies to improve digital access include consideration of the critical role of digital servicing in facilitating social security entitlements and support.

Recommendation 10: That the government ensure all Commonwealth-funded digital mentorship initiatives are community-led.

It is important to recognise that some First Nations people are unable to access social security entitlements because of digital exclusion. Community legal centres play a critical role in helping people access their social security rights, but lack resources to meet the demand for social security representation – let alone to assist all of those who experience barriers to using online services.

The solution is proactive outreach conducted in partnership with community-controlled organisations. EJA members can rarely afford to undertake outreach, but when they do it is not uncommon to hear distressing stories of people surviving on incorrect and low rates of payment or no payments at all. More funding is required to provide First Nations access to specialist social security legal assistance.

Recommendation 11: That Government increase permanent core funding for EJA's member centres to provide specialist social security legal assistance to people in First Nations communities.

Recommendation 12: That Services Australia expand the Community Partnership Program.

Digital access and proof of identity

Services Australia's default to digitisation is reflected in the information available about claiming social security payments. Relevant pages on the Services Australia website generally

state, 'The easiest way to claim is online', followed by instructions about how to do so. This is not accompanied by information about alternative ways to make a claim.

The first step in the claim process involves setting up a myGov account. The second step is to obtain and upload proof of identity (POI) documents. This combination of steps alone can be enough to lock people out of making a claim.

Older women, for example, chances are they can turn on a phone and do a few things, but getting onto their myGov account and logging into Centrelink is just very challenging. (Interview 26)

Aside from the process requiring digital literacy, devices and data, POI can be a major stumbling block. EJA members support clients who have been without income support for weeks or months solely because they lack POI, with no assistance offered by Centrelink staff despite various mechanisms that are in place to support people in proving their identity.

A lot of people aren't in the welfare system who probably need it or could benefit from it ... For example, we know of First Nations people who are not claiming benefits because of all the issues around evidence and that sort of thing. (Interview 1)

The problem is particularly challenging for First Nations people who are disproportionately disadvantaged. Pathfinders National Aboriginal Birth Certificate program estimates around 160,000 First Nations people have never had their births registered – a critical first step to securing official POI. This issue requires further resourcing as well as service providers who are available to help those struggling to provide POI.

Recommendation 13: That Services Australia use its information gathering powers to access required documents held by other government departments, including Births, Deaths and Marriages, to proactively assist people struggling to satisfy POI and other documentary requirements.

Recommendation 14: That Services Australia develop a mechanism to work with state agencies to facilitate assistance to people struggling to obtain POI and satisfy POI requirements.

Recommendation 15: That Government fund Pathfinders to assist more First Nations people to register their births and obtain essential POI.

Digital systems often require passcodes or multi-factor authentication. These lock people out of their myGov accounts when they don't have access to devices or online accounts where passwords have been stored. Although such processes safeguard people's personal information, they regularly exclude people from accessing online services.

If they've fled [domestic violence] they might not have any passwords or have ID ... [even so] the customer service attendant will say, yep, try this online or try that or call this number. But from there, it's a really long process and I think if – older people in particular – they didn't have someone like us around to help them, they would probably end up giving up. (Interview 26)

There is a need for service provider assistance to help people troubleshoot issues when the person is locked out of their accounts.

Recommendation 16: That Services Australia develop identity verification and authentication processes using inclusive design practices involving a cross-section of users, including people with minimal digital capacity.

Recommendation 17: That Services Australia develop additional person-to-person assistance where the creation and ongoing use of a Digital IDs and identity verification processes pose problems for people.

Person-centred design

An unintended consequence of the reliance on online services is the exclusion of people from payments, which in turn fuels distrust and disengagement. The frustration that can arise from online interactions can also intensify issues experienced by people who are particularly vulnerable, including stress that compounds existing poverty and trauma.

One man had complex mental health issues. He had a disability for a long time and was incredibly stressed. Centrelink put the wrong code in, and a letter incorrectly went out that said he had been cut off his payments. He would have killed himself if he hadn't had access to help to fix it. (Interview 12)

People's circumstances change quicker than they used to – people move, people change jobs, there's much more complexity in daily lives. Most problems with government come with changes in circumstances. People whose lives don't change much are OK. Automation is terrible for people who face ups and downs [and] dynamic circumstances. Often, they drop off because they get sick of dealing with the system. (Interview 15)

When people become alienated from Centrelink, they are less likely to engage with government services. This can have long-term repercussions, including not being connected to services that could help them when they are experiencing a crisis such as homelessness or family violence.

For those without much in the first place, it doesn't take much to push them down to a place where they feel totally disempowered. (Interview 1)

People end up accepting bad decisions because it's simpler to do so – it is a cycle of disempowerment, because the most vulnerable people disengage and are most susceptible to having payment suspensions, etc. (Interview 10)

It is crucial that barriers to online services for people who are at greatest risk of digital exclusion are considered when systems are designed. This requires genuine codesign to ensure systems are designed with a practical understanding of the reasons why people can't use them effectively.

While Services Australia does consult around the edges, they are not looking at the experiences of people who are the most vulnerable, relying on income support. They are not taking into account the lived experience of what it is like to deal with your livelihood through automated systems. (Interview 14)

I think there's a lot of deflection ... like just call the hotline or call this and call that ... or try it online. But for a lot of our clients, it's just not doable, especially in the mental state that they might be in as well. They can barely eat, let alone apply for things online. (Interview 26)

Genuine codesign should be supported by resources to enable intended beneficiaries to participate in the design process. These intended beneficiary groups should include older people, people with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people experiencing vulnerability, and other groups that are likely to experience challenges using online services.

Recommendation 18: That Services Australia undertake detailed mapping and analysis to establish where people have not been able to engage digitally and develop strategies to ensure their right to social security.

Recommendation 19: That Services Australia engage in genuine codesign with a representative cross-section of intended beneficiaries to participate in the design process of accessible digitisation initiatives.

Resources

- 'European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade', *European Union*
- 'Human Rights and Technology Final Report', *Australian Human Rights Commission*
- 'Trauma-informed AI: Developing and testing a practical AI audit framework for use in social services', *ADM+S Centre*
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- 'A roadmap for First Nations digital inclusion', *Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts*

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