

The Impact of Income Support Surveillance Practices on Social Assistance Recipients' Capabilities

Prepared by: George Drazenovich

Supervised by: Dr. Mirella Stroink, Lakehead University

Date: May 2026

Table of Contents

1		Easy-to-Read-Summary & Why This Study Was Done
3		How the Study Was Done
4		What the Participants Told Us (Results)
6		What This Means
7		Recommendations
8		Benefits of This Research, Limitations, & Final Message
9		References

Easy-to-Read-Summary

Many people on social assistance feel stressed, watched, controlled, and treated as incapable. Strict rules, constant monitoring, and sudden benefit cuts create deep trauma. This report shares the real experiences of 5 people who were in legal disputes with Ontario Works (OW) or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and received help from Kinna-Aweya Legal Clinic.

Key Problems

- Ableism, invasiveness, controlling and paternalistic policies
- All-or-nothing benefit cuts risking homelessness and hunger
- Lateral oppression and peer reporting that creates mistrust
- Barriers to extra income and collective advocacy
- Loss of privacy and dignity

Strength Shown: Participants felt no fear about speaking out publicly and wanted their stories used for change. This courage comes from the accessibility and availability of Kinna-Aweya Legal Clinic.

Main Recommendation: Reinstate and expand **Universal Basic Income (UBI)** — a simpler, fairer system proven in Ontario’s 2017–2019 pilot.

Why This Study Was Done

Social assistance should help people live with dignity and exercise their basic human rights. Instead, many recipients experience the system as ableist, invasive, controlling, and paternalistic. Surveillance enables these harms, and the consequences of “showing up on the ODSP radar” are often dire.

While there is research on how unemployment affects mental health differently depending on gender, social class, age, location, ethnicity, and immigration status, there is very little research on how surveillance practices in social assistance programs specifically harm recipients’ psychological well-being and capabilities (Puig-Barrachina et al., 2011). This study helps fill that important gap.

This study draws on the Capabilities Approach developed by human rights philosopher Martha Nussbaum, building on the groundbreaking work of Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen and human rights activists. The capability approach fits neatly into social psychological theory and is in the process of being fully developed by human rights psychologists (Hagenaars, 2016).

Nussbaum characterizes “capabilities” as the real-life freedoms and opportunities people need to truly flourish — not just survive, but to live a life of dignity, make meaningful choices, form relationships, plan for the future, and participate fully in society. The capabilities approach is especially useful as a model for intervention and advocacy. It translates abstract human rights into a clear, practical framework that practitioners, legal clinics, and advocates can use to identify exactly which parts of people’s lives are being harmed and what specific changes are needed to support flourishing.

Martha Nussbaum’s 10 Central Capabilities. These are the basic things people need to flourish:

1. **Life** — Not to have one’s life reduced so that it is not worth living.
2. **Bodily Health** — To be adequately nourished and to have adequate shelter.
3. **Bodily Integrity** — Being secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence.
4. **Senses, Imagination and Thought** — Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one’s own choice.
5. **Emotions** — Being able to have attachments to things and people outside of ourselves... not having one’s emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety.
6. **Practical Reason** — Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life.
7. **Affiliation** — Being able to live with and toward others... being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others.
8. **Other Species** — Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
9. **Play** — Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
10. **Control over One’s Environment** — To participate in choices that govern one’s life, freedom from unwanted search and seizure, and the ability to enter into meaningful relationships (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 24).

This study applies these 10 Capabilities as a lens to measure the damage caused by current income support policies and practices.

This study builds on tragic cases like the death of Kimberly Rogers in 2002. Kimberly Rogers was found dead in her Sudbury apartment while under house arrest after being convicted of welfare fraud for collecting student loans (OSAP) while receiving social assistance. She was eight months pregnant at the time. Her death brought national attention to the harsh and punitive nature of Ontario's social assistance policies, including intense surveillance and strict rules. A Coroner's inquest followed, leading to several important policy recommendations for reform (Betteridge, 2003). While some changes were made, many of the same issues of control, surveillance, and inadequate support persist today.

Important Note on Scope: This research report is intended to discuss the **impact of the overall system** on those directly affected. Individual workers within the income support system often do their best to provide dignified and helpful services to the people they serve. It is not meant to disparage the efforts of reformers or frontline staff within the system, but rather to provide a clear voice from those most affected so that meaningful improvements can be made.

The main goal is to lift up the real voices of participants and strengthen Kinna-Aweya Legal Clinic's advocacy efforts for systemic change.

How the Study Was Done

This research uses a **phenomenological approach** — a way of deeply exploring people's real-life experiences from their own point of view. Specifically, it follows **Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**, which helps researchers understand how people make sense of important events in their lives (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology and the Capabilities Approach both focus on ***the way life is actually lived by human beings***. Amartya Sen's theory changed how major institutions like the World Bank think about economic growth. Instead of only looking at abstract numbers like Gross Domestic Product, they began paying attention to real human experiences and outcomes. Martha Nussbaum built on Sen's ideas to create a practical list of 10 Central Capabilities — the actual freedoms and opportunities people need to flourish.

Because this study focuses on a shared experience, the participants were carefully chosen to be similar to one another. Experts recommend interviewing 5 to 10 people who have gone through the same kind of situation so the common patterns become clear (Polkinghorne, 1989; Alase, 2017). This study interviewed **4 adults** who were all:

- Receiving OW or ODSP
- Involved in legal disputes with the income support system
- Seeking help from Kinna-Aweya Legal Clinic

The **common experience** (or “phenomenon”) being explored is how surveillance practices, strict rules, and monitoring in Ontario’s income support programs make it harder for people to live with dignity and exercise their capabilities. Participants sought support from Kinna-Aweya because they felt the system was harming them. The clinic provides legal advice and assistance to people in the Thunder Bay area facing poverty-related legal issues.

- Interviews lasted about one hour and were done in safe, private places (or submitted in writing)
- Full anonymity — no names collected by the researcher
- \$10 Tim Hortons gift card + bus tickets
- Answers were carefully analysed and then mapped onto Nussbaum’s 10 Capabilities

Consent Note: One participant highlighted practical barriers many face: “I am poor, so I don’t have a printer, I don’t subscribe to Adobe... I’m not sure how I’m gonna sign it here?” Kinna-Aweya workers helped by witnessing verbal consent.

What the Participants Told Us (Results)

Participants described experiences far beyond simple surveillance. Here are powerful direct quotes that reflect the group’s realities:

One Participant’s Experience This participant finds joy and purpose in gardening, preserving food, raising chickens, ducks, rabbits, dogs, and spending time with grandchildren and children.

On ODSP demands: “I’m terrified of being cut off and having to pay back money I don’t have... I’m also terrified that I’ll miss a receipt or something that I accidentally did wrong as my mental illness and medication make it hard for me to focus, remember and be organized.”

Impact: “The impact has been crippling for me. Debilitating and extreme stress and anxiety... some days I can’t get out of bed. I am mentally and emotionally exhausted... I’m terrified of losing my house... I’m only 45. And I feel like I’m just constantly struggling on disability, but what choice do I have.”

When their adult child turned 18, benefits dropped sharply, creating a large overpayment and family disruption.

Another Participant’s Experience “To even get disability, is to prove you don’t have the financial safety net... Then remember... they only have one punishment for infraction of the rules... Your check gets stopped... the nothing puts you at risk of homelessness, and hunger.”

“Being on ODSP is like being married to a very powerful, controlling, jealous spouse... except I don’t have the option to run away.”

Lateral Oppression and Peer Reporting One participant described how the system encourages **lateral oppression** — people on ODSP or in the same community reporting on each other for any sign of extra income. This creates deep mistrust within communities and makes it much harder for people to come together for collective advocacy.

Participants described experiences far beyond simple surveillance. Their stories reveal how everyday activities and normal financial transactions can trigger intense scrutiny, benefit suspensions, and overpayments.

Creative Income Treated as a Formal Business One participant who occasionally creates and sells small handmade items as a creative outlet had her benefits suddenly suspended. Her ODSP caseworker demanded detailed verification that the activity was a hobby rather than a business, including receipts and tax documents. overpayment was also declared for deposits she believes were gifts. The stress has significantly worsened her mental health.

Common Themes Across All 5 Participants

- Ableism and paternalism that treat disabled people as incapable of managing their own lives
- Invasiveness and unnecessary control through endless reporting, random audits, and bank/CRA access
- All-or-nothing benefit cuts causing fear of homelessness and hunger
- Lateral oppression and peer-to-peer surveillance that breeds mistrust and blocks collective advocacy efforts
- Barriers to entrepreneurial or sporadic work (gardening, breeding animals, making small handmade items, renting rooms)
- Worsened mental health, including exhaustion, depression, and suicidal thoughts
- Worry about disabled children's futures
- Strong desire for public advocacy: Participants expressed no fear or anxiety about speaking out. Several offered “thesis-length” stories and wanted their experiences used to push for change. This openness is a testament to Kinna-Aweya Legal Clinic’s community-based support.

These experiences frustrate free exercise of Nussbaum’s capabilities around **Control over One’s Environment, Emotions, Practical Reason, Bodily Health, and Affiliation.**

What This Means

The current system maintains vulnerability through ableist, invasive, and paternalistic policies. Surveillance enables control, while lateral oppression (peer reporting) destroys community trust and prevents collective advocacy. The human cost is profound trauma — yet participants’ courage to speak publicly shows how community based legal clinics such as Kinna-Aweya turns fear and isolation into empowered collective voice.

Recommendations – A Better Way Forward

Main Recommendation: Reinstate and Expand Universal Basic Income (UBI) in Ontario

In 2017, the Ontario government launched a large-scale Basic Income Pilot in Hamilton, Brantford, Lindsay, and **Thunder Bay**. Approximately 4,000 low-income participants received stable monthly payments up to \$1,415 per month for individuals and \$1,915 for people with disabilities with very minimal reporting requirements.

The pilot was cancelled early by the incoming government in 2018, with final payments made in March 2019.

It reduced stress, improved mental health, and allowed people to build lives without constant fear.

A permanent Guaranteed Basic Income would:

- Remove most surveillance, audits, and all-or-nothing cutoffs
- Reduce lateral oppression and peer reporting by removing the incentive to “catch” others
- Allow irregular earnings without penalty
- Restore privacy, dignity, and community trust
- Enable stronger collective advocacy

Other Immediate Steps:

- End all-or-nothing cuts — use partial holds or extensions
 - Simplify reporting and make it accessible
 - Raise OW and ODSP rates to actual living costs
 - Train staff to be trauma-informed and anti-ableist
 - Increase funding for Kinna-Aweya to continue building community solidarity
-

Benefits of This Research

Participants felt heard and saw their struggles as part of larger rights-claiming. Their willingness to share deeply personal stories — including the pain of lateral oppression — highlights the clinic’s success in providing safety and voice.

Limitations

Small group of 5 people from one clinic. Many said they could share far more. Their powerful accounts should guide larger studies and evaluation of a new Basic Income program.

Final Message

The participants made clear that being on ODSP too often means living under constant control with dire consequences. As one said: “The surveillance part serves to enable those aspects, and the consequences of showing up on the ODSP radar are indeed dire.”

Lateral oppression and peer reporting further isolate people and frustrate collective efforts for change. Yet these same participants showed remarkable courage and wanted their full stories told publicly. Thanks to Kinna-Aweya Legal Clinic’s practical, respectful support — including help with consent and paperwork barriers — they feel safe enough to speak out.

A Universal Basic Income offers a proven, dignified alternative that reduces fear, control, and division — and lets people focus on living and working together for a better system. It is time to listen.

References

Alase, A. (2017). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A guide to a good qualitative research approach. *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 5(2), 9–19. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.5n.2p.9>

Betteridge, G. (2003). Inquest jury recommends fundamental change to Ontario welfare system. *Canadian HIV/AIDS Policy & Law Review*, 8(1), 63–64.

Gilman, M., & Green, R. (2018). The surveillance gap: The harms of extreme privacy and data marginalization. *N.Y.U. Review of Law & Social Change*, 42(2), 253–307.

Hagenaars, P. (2016). Towards a human rights based and oriented psychology. *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 28(2), 183–202. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971333616657170>

Income Security Advocacy Centre. (2014). Inquest into the death of Kimberly Rogers. <https://incomesecurity.org/isac-cases/inquest-into-the-death-of-kimberly-rogers/>

Nussbaum, M. C. (2007). Human rights and human capabilities. *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, 20, 21–24.

Puig-Barrachina, V., Malmusi, D., Martínez, J. M., & Benach, J. (2011). Monitoring social determinants of health inequalities: The impact of unemployment among vulnerable groups. *International Journal of Health Services*, 41(3), 459–482. <https://doi.org/10.2190/HS.41.3.d>

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P.

