

# BIG IDEA 1.1

## Power and privilege can lead to injustice

### FOCUS: What is power?

Most simply, **power** is the ability to get things done. More broadly, power is also about influencing or changing the behaviour of others to help get things done.

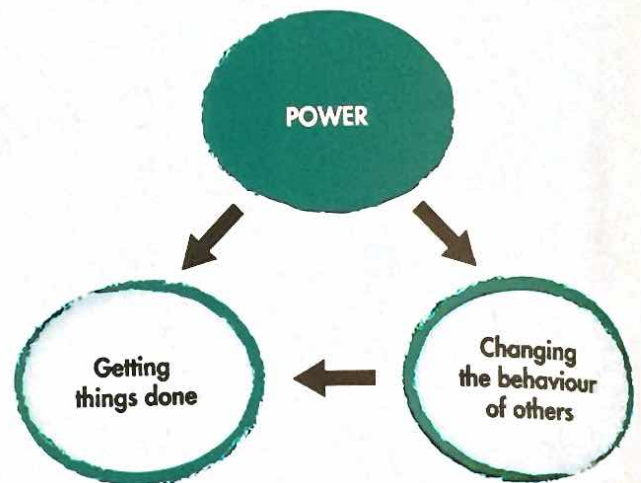
So while we all have power, other people and groups also have power over us. They may use their power to get us to think and behave in ways they believe are best. For example, schools have the power to make rules about attendance and completing assignments. Friends may have the power to influence what we say and do. Have you ever thought about how they get that power?

### Types of power

There are basically two ways you can try to change what people think and do: force them or persuade them.

**Hard power** is used to force people to do things out of fear or threat of punishment. Governments use hard power (laws) to put criminals in jail and protect citizens. Bullies use hard power to threaten, abuse, and intimidate others.

**Soft power** changes behaviour through persuasion and influence. People act because they believe they need to or should, not because they feel threatened. Charities use soft power to convince people to support their cause and donate funds. Some individuals and groups use soft power to argue that it's all right to hate and persecute other groups in society.



**SOURCE 1:** What type of power is being used in this example? Do anti-smoking campaigns affect how you think about smoking?

## Sources of power

Where does the power to influence what people think and do come from? There are many different sources of power.



### AUTHORITY

Power from **authority** is based on a formal position or role that comes with specific powers and abilities. Prime ministers, elected officials, school principals, and police officers have authority-based power.



### REWARD

The capacity to **reward** people is a source of power. Rewards can be material (money and privileges), or emotional (affection, acknowledgment, and praise). Businesses and corporations have reward power.



### FORCE

Power from **force** is based on the capacity to threaten, harm, and punish. Force can be physical (armies), economic (financial loss), or emotional (abuse).



### KNOWLEDGE

Having specialized knowledge and skills can be a source of power. Experts such as scientists and professionals gain power and influence because they can do things others can't.



### RESPECT

People who are highly trusted, respected, and admired also have the power to influence others. Elders, friends and family, and people of great accomplishment can have the power of respect.

▲ **SOURCE 2:** How can someone have more than one source of power at the same time?

## The use and abuse of power

Power itself is neither good nor bad—it is how people use or abuse power that matters. Power can be used for good and for evil, and history is full of examples of both. Citizens and democratic societies need to be aware of who has power, how it is used, and how it can be used for positive change.

"The thing women have yet to learn is nobody gives you power. You just take it."

*Roseanne Barr*

"With great power comes great responsibility."

*Spider-Man*

"The Native concept of power is how much you can empower people around you. You bring them up to your level, you make them feel good, you make them feel strong, you make them feel confident..."

*Waneek Horn-Miller*

**Q1** How might power lead to injustice?

**Q2** Is there anything we can do to ensure people don't abuse power?

**Q3** Who has power in your life?

Active citizenship



Knowing who has power



Identifying abuses of power



Getting and using power for positive change

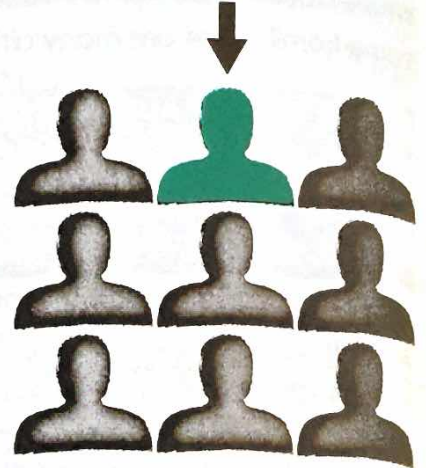
## FOCUS: What is privilege?

A **privilege** is a special benefit or advantage that is available only to certain people or groups. Since privileges are available only to a certain few, some people have more advantages than others.

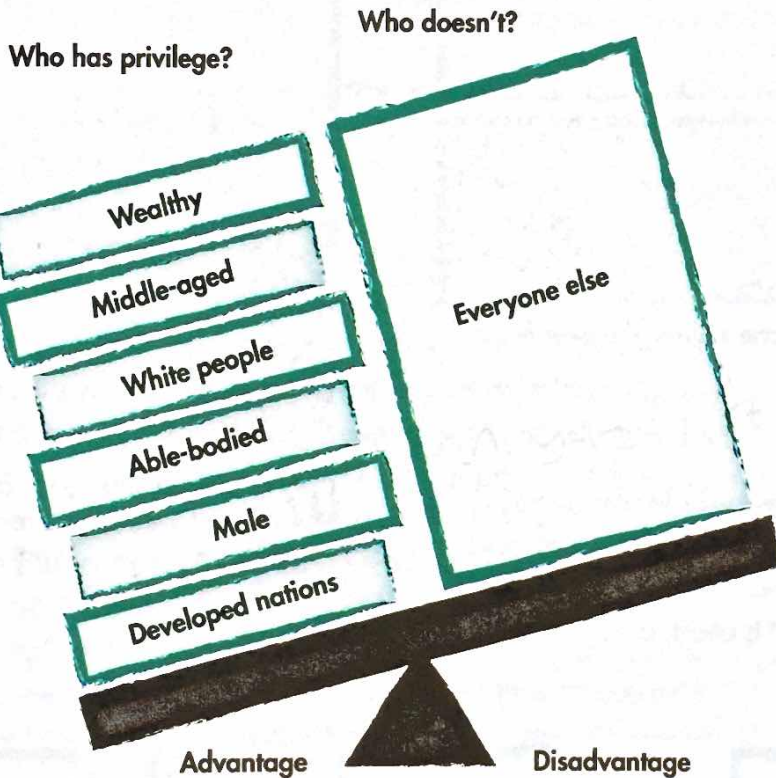
**Earned privilege** is a result of effort and achievement. For example, an earned privilege might be getting a promotion at work for a job well done, or graduating from high school and getting a good job. **Unearned privilege** is an advantage people have based solely on their social class, gender, physical abilities, geographical location, or other attributes. Unearned privileges can be unfair because they are determined by chance and not by what people have done or deserve.

Imagine you arrive at a building but can't get in because there is no wheelchair access. If able-bodied people in power choose to make buildings that do not include access for wheelchairs, they are reinforcing their unearned privilege, and using their power in a way that puts others at a major disadvantage.

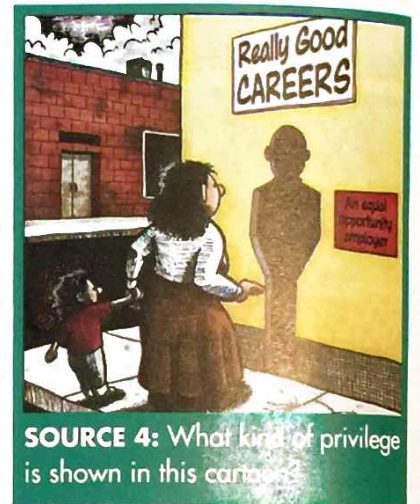
A privilege is available only to some



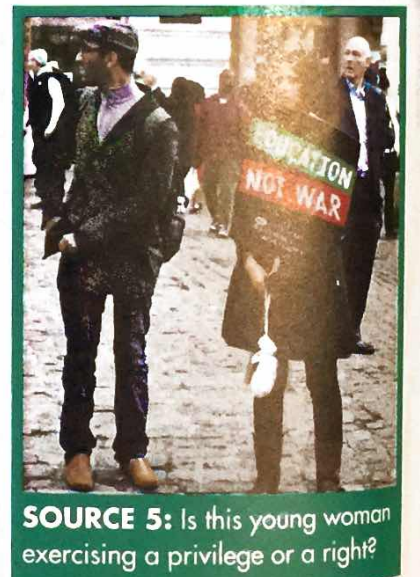
A right applies to everyone



▲ **SOURCE 3:** How well does this diagram reflect Canada today, your school, or your community? How might it look in another nation?



**SOURCE 4:** What kind of privilege is shown in this cartoon?

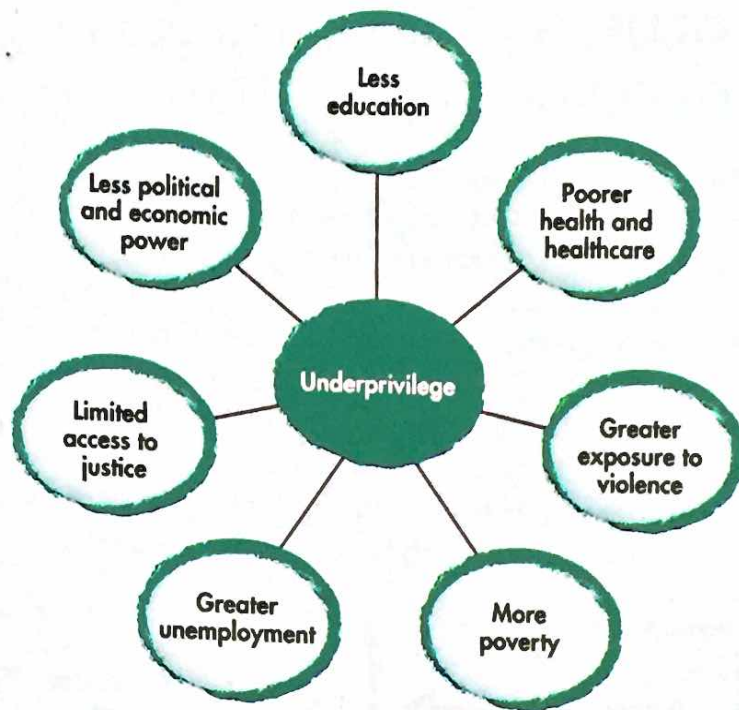


**SOURCE 5:** Is this young woman exercising a privilege or a right?

## The consequences of underprivilege

In spite of the many privileges we enjoy as Canadians, significant disadvantage and underprivilege have always existed in our country. The gap between privileged and underprivileged people can be significant and affect the most fundamental aspects of a person's life, such as their health, education, basic mobility, ability to get work, income, safety, and access to justice.

Often too, people with fewer advantages have difficulty breaking the cycle of these conditions. Social programs such as financial aid for education are designed to help people overcome these barriers.



▲ **SOURCE 6:** Why might these disadvantages lead to a continuing cycle of underprivilege?

### Facts about people with disabilities

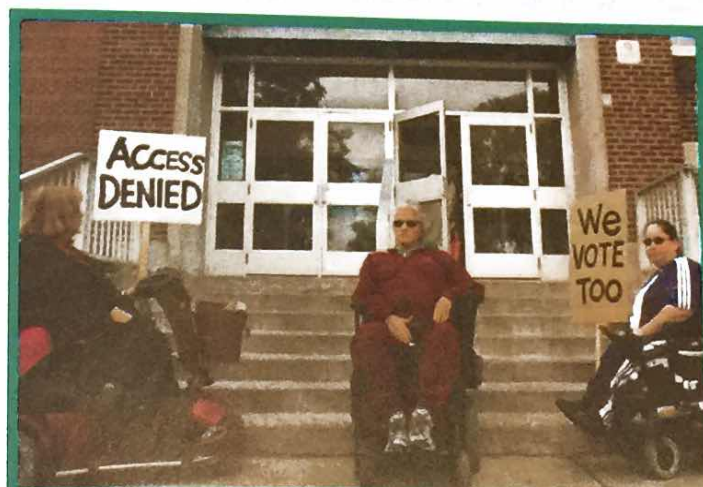
Number of people in Canada with disabilities:  
1 in 7

Children with disabilities are more likely to live in low-income households

30% of parents reported their disabled children faced physical assaults from other children at school

One in four unemployed persons believe they were refused a job because of their disability

▲ **SOURCE 7:** People with disabilities in Canada experience significant disadvantages compared to other Canadians. What can be done?



**SOURCE 8:** Disabled voters at a polling station in Canada. Why is this lack of access so significant? How are people with disabilities acting for change?

**Q4** What privileges do you and your friends enjoy? Which ones are earned and unearned?

**Q5** Who decides which disadvantages should be addressed?

**Q6** Has power and privilege led to injustice in your life, for you or others?

## FOCUS: How might power and privilege lead to injustice?

**Injustice** means a lack of fairness. **Fairness** means treating people without favouritism or discrimination. Is it always unfair that some people have more power and privilege than others?

People who have power often try to hold onto it. And sometimes the more power they have, the more they want to keep it at the expense of others. When power and privilege are used to exclude others and put them at a disadvantage, that creates injustice. That injustice can be deliberate when people conspire to hold on to power or privilege, or it can be an unintended consequence of actions and policies.



On the other hand, there are many examples of people giving up their unearned privileges and using their power to help others. They choose to share what they have to support their communities and work for what is fair.

### What is fair?

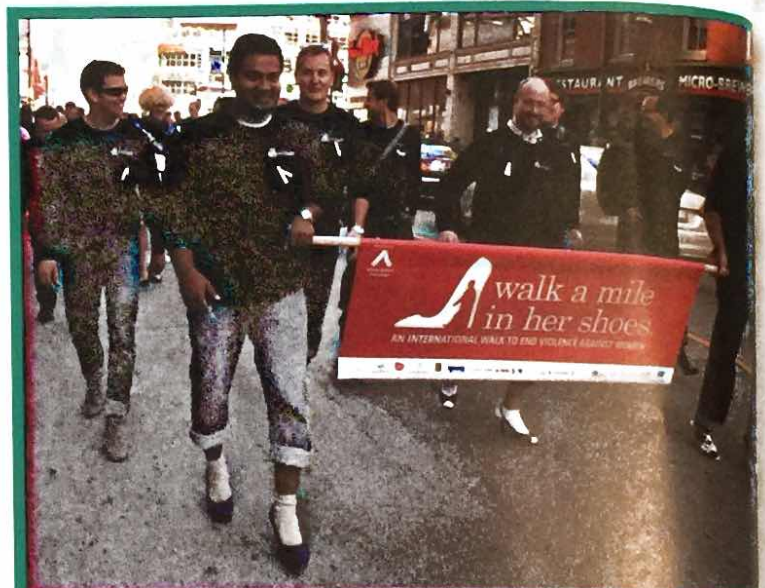
However, being fair can be complicated. Fair does not always mean "the same." If you have trouble reading English because it is not your first language, is it fair that you have to write the same test in the same way as other students? Or does fairness mean giving you a little extra time or help to overcome that barrier?

In a **democracy**, it is particularly important that everyone feels they are treated fairly. That often means balancing a lot of competing needs and interests.

"It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it."

Aung San Suu Kyi

◀ **SOURCE 9:** When power and privilege reinforce each other, they can create injustice. What examples have you seen?



**SOURCE 10:** Men participate in the "Walk a mile in her shoes" march to raise awareness about violence against women. How are power and privilege being used in this example?

**Q7** How do you know what is fair?

**Q8** Think of a specific example of injustice. Do you think it was deliberate or unintended?

**Q9** How would you respond to each of the scenarios on the next page?

**Yes, because...**

These groups face language, discrimination, and physical barriers that make it harder for them to get hired.

**Is it fair that...**

Government ministries give preference to hiring members of visible minorities, people with disabilities, and women?



**No, because...**

Hiring should be based on merit alone.

**Yes, because...**

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit have their own traditional systems of justice. In addition, these groups are overrepresented in the Canadian prison system and underrepresented on juries.

**Is it fair that...**

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit offenders are given the option of a traditional community-based Elder panel or sentencing circle, instead of being sentenced in a regular court?



**No, because...**

The law should treat everyone the same.

**Yes, because...**

Students from these families face more barriers to continuing their education than others.

**Is it fair that...**

Students who are the first in their families to go to college or university may be eligible for special funding from the government?



**No, because...**

That's not fair to other students who are in financial difficulties but don't qualify.

**Yes, because...**

When women and girls earn income, they reinvest 90% of it into their families, compared with 30-40% for men.

**Is it fair that...**

Females in Africa are targeted for special aid programs?



**No, because...**

Financial aid to developing nations should not discriminate on the basis of gender.