

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

June 2021



Student Research Series

Impacts of COVID-19 on Equity-Seeking Populations

Building Knowledge – Student Research Series

This series of bulletins features student research on a range of socio-economic topics. This report is based on research by students from the University of British Columbia's (UBC) School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP), in collaboration with BC Housing.

Introduction

Coronavirus disease, more commonly known as COVID-19, was first identified in Wuhan, China in late 2019. The virus quickly spread around the world.

The World Health Organization declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern in January 2020. The first case in British Columbia, Canada was identified on January 28. B.C.'s provincial government announced a state of emergency on March 17. Most nations, including Canada, are still in the midst of the pandemic one year later.

Governments acted to reduce the impact of the pandemic on their citizens. Measures were taken to decrease the spread of COVID-19 and to offset the loss of jobs and services.

This report summarizes some of the impacts of recent pandemics on equity-seeking groups, lessons learned, and initiatives to assist at-risk populations during the crisis. It also reviews local, provincial, and federal government actions taken to support at-risk populations during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Research Summary

In summer 2020, BC Housing partnered with UBC’s School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP) under the direction of Penny Gurstein, past director of SCARP and BC Housing Board member, to undertake research on the impacts of COVID-19 and government responses. Students Jonah Erickson, Cassidy Penner, and Mikayla Tinsley investigated various topics of interest related to this theme. This is a summary report of their findings. The full reports are available upon request from BC Housing.

Research was conducted during the “first wave” of COVID-19 in Canada (March to September 2020). Student researchers used literature reviews and case studies from around the world to summarize some of the impacts of recent pandemics on equity-seeking groups¹, lessons learned, and initiatives to assist at-risk populations during the current crisis.

While the Canadian government enacted widespread financial aid as part of its pandemic response, data suggests that some populations are struggling more than others.

Studies highlight that equity-seeking populations are disproportionately affected by COVID-19. These groups experience greater socio-economic marginalization, increased health risks, and prejudice, all of which may further threaten their well-being during a pandemic.

The student research reviewed risks and interventions pertaining to the following equity-seeking groups:

- ▶ Indigenous people
- ▶ Racialized communities
- ▶ Newcomers and refugees
- ▶ Individuals and households with low-income
- ▶ People experiencing homelessness
- ▶ People with disabilities
- ▶ People who are incarcerated
- ▶ Older adults
- ▶ Children and youth
- ▶ Women

Three themes are considered in this summary report:

- ▶ Increasing resilience – learning from past pandemics
- ▶ COVID-19 and homelessness
- ▶ Government responses to COVID-19 in Canada

This research was conducted independently by UBC students and the report findings do not necessarily represent the perspectives of British Columbia’s provincial government or BC Housing.

¹ According to the University of British Columbia Equity & Inclusion Office, equity-seeking groups are communities that experience significant collective barriers in participating in society. This could include attitudinal, historic, social and environmental barriers based on age, ethnicity, disability, economic status, gender, nationality, race sexual orientation and transgender status, etc. Equity-seeking groups are those that identify barriers to equal access, opportunities and resources due to disadvantage and discrimination and actively seek social justice and reparation. Online at equity.ubc.ca/resources/equity-inclusion-glossary-of-terms/



Increasing Resilience – Learning from Past Pandemics



Structural inequities in society mean some groups are more likely to be infected and face higher mortality rates during a pandemic. In the full report, *Increasing Resiliency Among Equity-Seeking Groups During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons from Past Pandemics*, author Mikayla Tinsley researched several past pandemics. The author compared them with present outcomes to understand what the impacts of COVID-19 may be on equity-seeking populations. The report explores what interventions may alleviate these impacts.

Past pandemics have shown higher rates of illness and mortality among equity-seeking populations. Evidence exists that some marginalized groups may be disproportionately affected by COVID-19 infection,

complications, and/or mortality.

- ▶ Indigenous people face worse housing conditions and overcrowding than the general population, which can make preventing the spread of viruses within households more difficult.
- ▶ People experiencing homelessness have significantly higher rates of serious pre-existing health conditions, which makes them more susceptible to disease.
- ▶ People experiencing homelessness may be more at risk of contracting air-borne viruses due to poor access to sanitation, and from living in congregate settings.
- ▶ People experiencing homelessness may be more at risk of contracting and spreading disease because of difficulty in contact tracing individuals with no fixed address.

BC Housing Perspective

BC Housing welcomes this important research as it sheds light on the disproportionate impact that COVID-19 is having on marginalized communities across the province. Prior to COVID-19, our communities were facing significant issues. Long-standing structural and systemic inequities have contributed to a growing homelessness crisis in cities across BC and Canada. And every day we are losing people from all walks of life to the toxic illicit drug crisis.

The pandemic has served to amplify these socio-economic gaps and we've seen large numbers of people who have been displaced. People experiencing homelessness are faced with reduced services and supports, including reduced access to washroom facilities, nutritious food, and safe, comfortable places to spend their day. These research findings are important to helping evolve our service delivery. In the past year and a half, we mobilized a number of critical responses to homelessness:

- ▶ **Creating more than 3,000 spaces for safe accommodation in 122 Community Self-Isolation Sites;**
- ▶ **Relocating more than 1,000 people to safe, indoor accommodation from Oppenheimer and Strathcona Parks in Vancouver and Pandora, Topaz, and other parks throughout Victoria;**
- ▶ **Purchasing 15 hotels in 9 communities with over 1,100 rooms for temporary accommodation and long-term homes; and**
- ▶ **Continuing to support our housing partners by distributing more than 3.5 million essential supplies and delivering more than 1.65 million meals to people living in social housing.**

In addition to COVID-19, marginalized communities continue to experience the impacts of colonialism, systemic racism, inaccessibility, and other forms of oppression. We see this in the disproportionate number of Indigenous, Black and trans youth who are experiencing homelessness. We have responded by including trauma-informed homeless outreach, partnerships with Indigenous organizations, culturally-informed services, and our ongoing Reconciliation work.

We have learned a lot during COVID-19 and there is still much work to do to support marginalized communities. This research report has underscored one thing that we know to be true: everyone deserves a secure, affordable home. And we remain focussed on delivering housing as quickly as possible to people who need it most.

Past Pandemics at a Glance

Pandemic	Primary modes of transmission	Date	Location of first identified case	Total number of cases	Estimated number of deaths	Mortality rate
HIV/AIDS	Sexual contact, sharing needles, transmission from mother to infant during birth	First confirmed case 1959 Pandemic is ongoing	Likely Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo	38 million people living with HIV/AIDS today 75 million infected since the start of the pandemic	32 million	Over 90% without treatment With treatment, HIV positive people have a relatively normal life expectancy
SARS	Aerosol droplets from coughing, sneezing, talking and breathing Touching contaminated surfaces and then touching your face	Nov. 2002 - July 2003	Guangdong, China	8,437	813	Roughly 15%
H1N1 Pandemic	Aerosol droplets from coughing, sneezing, talking and breathing Touching contaminated surfaces and then touching your face	Jan. 2009 - August 2010	Mexico	24% of global population (estimate)	284,000	0.01% (estimate)
COVID-19	Aerosol droplets from coughing, sneezing, talking and breathing Touching contaminated surfaces and then touching your face	Dec. 2019 - ongoing	Wuhan, China	127 million*	2.8 million*	Estimates vary significantly May be less than 2% in Canada

* data as of March 2021

Research on past pandemics has shown it is common for groups that were already marginalized to face increased discrimination and violence. Aside from the direct effects of being ostracized or the victims of violence, this may also affect the quality of care and services offered to these groups.

Pandemics can also have far-reaching effects on employment and labour. Public health restrictions put in place during COVID-19 caused major increases in unemployment around the world. While Canada's economy is improving, the recovery is not equal across all demographics. Youth and women are the most significantly affected. There are also significant racial and ethnic disparities. Work in low-paying jobs has been slower to recover to pre-pandemic levels.

Percentage Experiencing Financial Difficulties

Canadian national rate:19.5%

Filipino Canadians:35.2%

Latin American Canadians:33.7%

Black Canadians:28.2%

Chinese Canadians:22.7%

Non-visible minority Canadians: 15.9%

Percentage of Canadians age 15-69 living in a household experiencing financial difficulties.

Source: Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey, August 2020

Following past pandemics, government agencies, shelter operators, and housing advocacy groups noted the importance of adequate housing in order to follow quarantine, social distancing, and sanitation guidelines. Many of the same challenges are experienced during the COVID-19 crisis.

Evidence from the SARS pandemic shows that the incidence of psychiatric disorders increased, and the effects lasted for years. The COVID-19 pandemic is leading to a more prolonged lockdown and has further reaching effects on daily life than SARS. It has also caused many more infections and deaths. It is reasonable to expect that COVID-19 will therefore have a longer and more severe impact on mental health, lasting years after the emergency ends.

There are increased demands for services during pandemics, as well as challenges in administering them. Domestic abuse increases during lockdowns. Unemployment and poverty strain financial support programs, food banks, employment services, and homeless shelters.

Another challenge for some, is the fact that many agencies transitioned primarily or exclusively to online services at the beginning of COVID-19. However, inequities in access to the internet and digital technologies, particularly for low-income households and older people, continues to be one of their greatest challenges.

The Global Impact of COVID-19

In terms of its effect on everyday life and on the global economy, COVID-19 surpasses the impact of other pandemics compared in Tinsley's report. By late March 2021, the virus was estimated to have infected over 127 million people around the world. Because it has no known treatment, is airborne and challenging to contain, no jurisdiction has been able to completely control its spread.

Efforts have instead been to "flatten the curve," and keep the number of simultaneous cases in check to avoid hospitals becoming overwhelmed. Most jurisdictions have had varying degrees of quarantine or physical distancing restrictions imposed since their first outbreaks. There have been widespread impacts on financial, physical, and mental well-being to a degree not seen in our lifetime.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Widespread financial assistance was provided during the COVID-19 pandemic, but many people are still struggling.
- Internet access is essential and needs to be universal.
- Mental health issues need to be addressed.
- Living in overcrowded housing or being homeless makes it extremely challenging to avoid safety risks of a pandemic.
- We need more and better data regarding COVID-19 testing, infections, mortality, and race/ethnicity.

COVID-19 and Homelessness



In the full report, COVID-19 and Homelessness – a Literature Review and Case Studies of Government Responses in Vancouver, Toronto and Los Angeles, author Cassidy Penner set out to answer two questions:

1. How does COVID-19 affect people experiencing homelessness?
2. What initiatives were used to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 infection and transmission among people experiencing homelessness?

The report indicates that people experiencing homelessness are at an elevated risk from COVID-19. Modelling and projections from early shelter outbreaks suggest high transmission rates can occur among people experiencing homelessness.³

Risks of Transmission Among People Experiencing Homelessness

People experiencing homelessness face a variety of challenges that put them at greater risk of transmission:

- ▶ Living in congregate settings
- ▶ Limited access to basic hygiene supplies and facilities such as showers and bathrooms
- ▶ Underlying chronic health issues and comorbidities
- ▶ Unreliable access to health care
- ▶ Difficulty with contact tracing and treatment

Case Studies

The full report references case studies regarding COVID-19’s impact on people experiencing homelessness conducted in Boston, Hamilton, and Arkansas. The report also describes responses carried out in the early months of the pandemic in Vancouver, Toronto, and Los Angeles.



³ Penner’s report cites a study that found 36 per cent of residents in a large shelter in Boston tested positive for COVID-19 in spring 2020.

Penner, C., *COVID-19 and Homelessness - A Literature Review and Case Studies of Government Responses in Vancouver, Toronto, and Los Angeles*. 2020

⁴ Based on preliminary results from the 2020 Metro Vancouver Homeless Count

⁵ Based on the 2018 Toronto Street Needs Assessment Survey

⁶ Based on the 2020 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count

Response: Vancouver

- ▶ Issued guidelines to homelessness service providers
- ▶ Expanded shelter capacity to allow for physical distancing and enhanced cleaning
- ▶ Opened two emergency response centres
- ▶ Acquired/converted hotels and other properties to provide alternate spaces for people who needed to isolate, made more room in shelters, and increased housing supply
- ▶ Decampment of Oppenheimer Park tent city residents

Culturally grounded approaches and strategies respect people’s background and experience. Many of the people living in Oppenheimer Park had experienced various forms of institutional and colonial violence. As part of the decampment plan, there were daily ceremonial welcomes by representatives of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. Uniformed police officers were not involved to avoid retraumatizing anyone who may have had negative experiences with law enforcement or incarceration. PHS Community Services staff identified groups of people living together in the encampment and tried to ensure they were moved to the same buildings. These steps helped empower the campers to overcome the challenges they faced in moving.

Response: Toronto

- ▶ Enhanced infection prevention and control guidance
- ▶ Instituted physical distancing in the shelter system
- ▶ Opened new temporary facilities with showers and washrooms
- ▶ Screened and tested for COVID-19
- ▶ Introduced isolation and recovery programs
- ▶ Rehoused people rapidly
- ▶ Leveraged investments for permanent housing
- ▶ Ensured housing stability by converting and redeveloping older shelters into permanent supportive housing sites

Response: Los Angeles

- ▶ Issued guidance to homelessness service providers
- ▶ Expanded shelter access
- ▶ Increased access to hygiene facilities
- ▶ Quarantined symptomatic and COVID-19-positive people under a medical sheltering program
- ▶ Housed people experiencing homelessness temporarily in unused hotel rooms

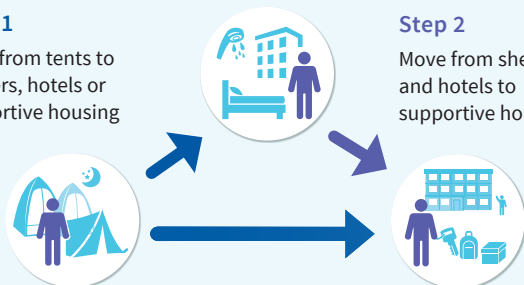
Oppenheimer Park Decampment

In spring 2020, approximately 300 people were living in and around Oppenheimer Park. In late April, the Province issued a public safety order mandating the evacuation of the encampment.

Between April 29 and May 9, BC Housing in partnership with PHS Community Services, Vancouver Coastal Health, and a City of Vancouver outreach team, successfully moved 269 people experiencing homelessness into shelters, hotels, and supportive housing. The partners used a community-based approach that was culturally appropriate and sensitive to the trauma and violence experienced by many of the campers.

Step 1

Move from tents to shelters, hotels or supportive housing



Step 2

Move from shelters and hotels to supportive housing

LESSONS LEARNED

- ➔ People experiencing homelessness are at an elevated health and transmission risk from COVID-19.
- ➔ Outbreaks of COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness pose a risk to the wider community.
- ➔ The pandemic has exposed significant vulnerabilities in homeless support services and shelter systems.
- ➔ Government responses provide opportunities for long-term solutions to homelessness.

Government Responses to COVID-19

Given that pandemics have a greater impact on certain groups, research is needed to document best practices and lessons learned from government responses. In the full report, *Government Responses to COVID-19 in Canada*, author Jonah Erickson gives an overview of the actions taken by the federal government, as well as the provinces and territories. The report also outlines responses from the City of Victoria and the City of Toronto, as well as from two First Nations: Ta'an Kwäch'än Council and the Tłı̨chǫ Government.

COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of collective responses by all levels of governments (municipal, provincial, federal and Indigenous). It has also demonstrated the important role that provinces and territories play in supporting their citizens. Research shows that, while the federal government often sets the standard for services, the provincial and territorial governments are better able to tailor services to meet the needs of their regions, and their specific populations. The pandemic also highlighted the challenges municipalities face in responding to such crises given their limited capacity. Local governments and First Nations are often at the forefront of pandemic management and support; they require continued research on strategies to further support their role.



Provincial and Territorial Responses to COVID-19

PROVINCE / TERRITORY	BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	NBW	NS	PEI	NFDL	YK	NWT	NVT
Initiatives – Individual Supports													
Self Isolation Financial Support		+	+									+	
Temporary Wage Supplement	+		+		+	+			+			+	
Job Risk Recognition Program				+		+	+	+	+	+			
Job Restart Program				+									
Rental Supplement	+								+		+	+	
Rental Supplement (low-income only)				+									
Income Assistance								+					
Rental Freeze/Moratorium	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		+	+
Utility Relief	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+			
Prescription Pill Support							+	+					
Tax Credit	+												+
Disability Support	+			+	+								
Special Needs Youth	+												
Youth in Care	+		+										
Childcare for Essential Workers	+											+	
Job Protected Leave	+						+						
Funding for Children					+		+				+		
Low Income Seniors Supplement	+			+	+		+						
Student Loan Repayment Freeze	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Emergency Student Aid			+				+						
Indigenous Student Financial Assistance	+												
Initiatives – Community Supports													
Food Bank Funding	+	+		+				+					
Seniors Organization Funding	+	+				+		+	+				+
Shelter Funding	+	+	+	+	+	+		+		+			
Transition Home Funding	+					+		+					
Indigenous Funding	+				+								
Daycare/Childcare Operators	+	+		+			+		+				+
Youth Employment	+								+	+	+		
Mental Health Supports		+		+									
Mask Program		+											
Research Funding				+									
Non-Profit Organization Funding				+	+								
Gift Card Program									+				

Actions from the Assembly of the First Nations

Indigenous people experience a high degree of socio-economic marginalization and are at a disproportionate risk in public health emergencies. They were even more at risk during the pandemic because of a lack of access to effective monitoring and early-warning systems, and adequate health and social services.

The Assembly of First Nations (AFN) established a COVID-19 National Task Force to assist members in its ongoing planning and response. The task force provides credible, useful information to the AFN executive committee and supports its efforts to inform First Nations about developments regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in their regions, as well as opportunities for further support.

As First Nations navigate the changing landscapes of COVID-19, the importance of collaboration and partnership (as exemplified by the AFN National Task Force) may be an important factor in supporting the continued resiliency of Indigenous communities.



LESSONS LEARNED

- Equity-seeking populations are disproportionately affected by COVID-19.
- Communication needs to be culturally grounded, personally relevant, and focused on increasing resilience and self-efficacy.
- Cultural responsiveness is necessary for increased resiliency and pandemic preparedness.
- Safe, secure, and stable housing is key.
- Non-profit and community agencies play an integral role in supporting equity-seeking populations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Research highlights that equity-seeking populations are disproportionately affected by COVID-19. These groups experience greater socio-economic marginalization, increased health risks, and prejudice, all of which may further threaten their well-being during a pandemic.

Early predictions of widespread outbreaks of COVID-19 among people experiencing homelessness has yet to occur in the areas studied. Because of a lack of available data, it is unclear to what extent this is due to the success of government interventions.

While the Canadian government enacted widespread financial aid as part of its pandemic response, data suggests that some populations are disproportionately affected and are struggling more than other Canadians. These groups include, but are not limited to, youth, older adults, people with disabilities, Indigenous people, and people experiencing homelessness. More data needs to be collected regarding employment and financial difficulties, as well as data related to COVID-19 testing, infections, and mortality among these distinct groups.

Many services moved to online delivery early in the lockdown. People without internet access are often at a clear disadvantage, and this may lead to calls for better access in all parts of the country.

Access to safe, secure, and stable housing is a key determinant of health under the best circumstances. This reality was felt even more acutely during the first months of the pandemic when people were asked to social distance.



Government responses to COVID-19 for people experiencing homelessness offer important opportunities for long-term solutions to homelessness. To mitigate risks of pandemics, governments must build on lessons learned from COVID-19, and provide permanent housing options.

Non-profit and community agencies demonstrated their vital role in supporting at-risk populations during times of crises. Despite great challenges, the sector proved able to innovate rapidly and adapt to systemic changes, modify existing programs, develop new programming, and implement measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The pandemic is expected to exacerbate mental health issues. Additional resources are required and will likely be needed beyond the introduction of vaccination programs. Mental health must be recognized as equally important as physical health, and should receive the same benefits under provincial health insurance plans.

Collaboration and communication are vital in the fight against COVID-19. Partnerships allow for collective action. Government agencies must be open and transparent in addressing the concerns and priorities of equity-seeking populations. Actions must be culturally grounded, relevant, and strong in promoting self-efficacy and people's ability to exert control over their situation.

Continued research, innovation, and knowledge sharing are imperative as we look to create more resilient communities.

Limitations

The student reports were undertaken during the “first wave” of COVID-19 in Canada (March to September 2020). Our understanding of the virus was limited at this time and the science around its spread continues to rapidly evolve.

There is a lack of data regarding the impact of COVID-19 on our citizens and on equity-seeking people specifically. Some of the articles used in the students’ reports were written in the early stages of the pandemic and are speculative. Several articles had yet to undergo formal peer review.

There is currently no published data on COVID-19 infection, transmission, or mortality rates among people experiencing homelessness in the case studies considered. This makes it difficult to assess the relative efficacy of COVID-19 homelessness responses.



More Information

Visit BC Housing’s Research Centre at www.bchousing.org to find the latest research, publications and workshops on key challenges and successes in building and operating affordable, sustainable housing.

Please contact BC Housing’s Research Centre by email to request the full reports:

- ▶ Government Responses to COVID-19 in Canada, by Jonah Erickson
- ▶ COVID-19 and Homelessness – A Literature Review and Case Studies of Government Responses in Vancouver, Toronto, and Los Angeles, by Cassidy Penner
- ▶ Increasing Resiliency Among Equity-Seeking Groups During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned from Past Pandemics, by Mikayla Tinsley

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