

Health and social challenges associated with the COVID-19 situation in Canada

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On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization assessed the COVID-19 situation as a pandemic. COVID-19 (also known as the novel coronavirus) is having a profound effect on the health, behaviour and social activities of Canadians.

In an attempt to slow the transmission of COVID-19, federal, provincial and territorial governments in Canada have urged Canadians to limit their interactions with others and to practice physical distancing measures, as well as to stay and work from home to the extent possible.

Statistics Canada is working closely with its federal partners, including the Public Health Agency of Canada, to inform the Government of Canada's response to COVID-19.

The objective of this release is to provide information about the personal characteristics and social factors that could play a role in how COVID-19 affects the lives of Canadians.

Older people and individuals with pre-existing health conditions are more at risk of developing complications from COVID-19

The [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) (PHAC) has identified older people, individuals with a weaker immune system and people with certain pre-existing health conditions as being more at risk of developing complications from COVID-19.

According to daily epidemiological reports produced by PHAC, Canadians requiring hospitalization were generally older, and the most commonly reported pre-existing health conditions among cases were respiratory disease, cardiac disease, and diabetes.

Using a variety of data sources, the sections below provide statistical information on health and social vulnerabilities in the context of COVID-19. While the discussion below is based on national trends, most information is also available at the provincial level. Readers interested in learning more are invited to click on the links below.

What do we know about the age and pre-existing health conditions of Canadians?

In 2019, 38% of the Canadian population was aged 50 and older, and this proportion varied considerably by province and territory. According to Statistics Canada's [annual demographic estimates](#), the province with the oldest population was Newfoundland and Labrador, where 46% of people were aged 50 and older. That figure was over 40% in all three Maritime provinces (Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick) and in Quebec.

Older people are also more likely to report the pre-existing health conditions listed above. According to data from the [Canadian Community Health Survey](#), 33% of Canadians aged 50 and older reported having high blood pressure, 14% reported having diabetes, and 5% reported having chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Even within younger age groups, people with pre-existing conditions may also be at greater risk. According to [PHAC](#), Canadians aged under 50 account for approximately one-half of all reported COVID-19 cases in Canada up to now. Among Canadians aged 18 to 49, 5% reported having high blood pressure and 2% reported having diabetes. About 1.5% of those aged 35 to 49 reported that they had COPD (data are not available for younger age groups).



Collective dwellings and non-standard settings can make physical distancing difficult

For some individuals, practising physical distancing may be difficult, thereby increasing the risk of contracting COVID-19. These include individuals in nursing homes and seniors' residences, custodial settings (such as correctional facilities), and other group settings such as shelters.

At the time of the last census, in 2016, close to 700,000 Canadians [lived in collective dwellings](#) (i.e., dwellings of a commercial, institutional or communal nature), representing 2% of the overall Canadian population. The majority of these people were living in seniors' residences, nursing homes, or facilities that are a mix of the two.

Of the 6 million Canadians aged 65 and older, more than 7% lived in health care and related facilities (nursing homes, seniors' residences, residential care facilities, and hospitals). This percentage also varied by province, from 5% in Newfoundland and Labrador to 10% in Quebec.

Correctional facilities may present a greater risk because of the higher levels of risk factors for infection, and close contact. On average, there were 38,786 adults [in provincial, territorial or federal custody per day](#) in Canada in 2017/2018.

People experiencing homelessness also live in environments that are conducive to a disease epidemic, because they may not be able to access and use traditional services and standard resources. While estimates of the homeless population are difficult to produce, the 2016 Census counted over 22,000 individuals living in shelters and an additional 65,000 living in service collective dwellings, such as rooming houses or motels and other establishments with temporary accommodation services. According to [Employment and Social Development Canada](#), close to 150,000 people use shelters every year across Canada.

Living alone: Older Canadians living alone are more at risk of social isolation

In March 2020, federal, provincial and territorial governments introduced a series of measures to limit the spread of the virus, including school and daycare closures, and bans on large gatherings of people, and ordered the closure of businesses deemed "non-essential." Canadians were also asked to practice physical distancing measures, limit their interactions with others, and to stay home if they could.

Physical distancing measures may have a greater impact on the health and well-being of Canadians who live alone or who have a limited social network, those who are living in a difficult environment, or those who depend on others for their safety and well-being.

Social isolation can be a particular challenge for those who are living alone, especially if they have little or no interaction with others. According to a [study](#) from Statistics Canada, social support and participation are associated with better mental and physical health outcomes.

In 2016, there were 14.1 million private households in Canada. For the first time, one-person households [became the most common type](#), accounting for 28% of all households. They were followed by couples with children, who accounted for 26% of Canadian households. Quebec (33%) and Yukon (32%) had the highest proportions of one-person households.

Many of these one-person households were seniors, who often need additional support from family and friends for necessities such as food or health care. Among seniors living in private households, 33% of senior women and 17.5% of senior men were living alone in 2016.

Staying connected: Not all Canadians have access to the Internet or friends who can help

For people living alone, access to technology may be especially important to stay connected with friends and family members, order basic necessities such as food or medication online, and seek information.

However, not all Canadians have access to the Internet, especially among the senior population. In 2018, 91% of Canadians aged 15 and older [used the Internet](#), but that proportion was 71% among seniors. Older women (68%) were less likely than older men (75%) to use the Internet. Additional data about Internet use by Canadians can be found [here](#).

Social isolation can be a particular challenge among those who do not have friends or acquaintances. [A Statistics Canada study of social capital](#) indicated that more than 10% of seniors aged 65 to 74 did not have close friends, and this proportion was 15% among seniors aged 75 and older.

For additional information about the population living alone in Canada, please consult [this page](#).

Housing conditions: A challenging environment for many Canadians

By contrast, other Canadians may face challenges when they live in close proximity with others for extended periods of time, and may have difficulty taking additional steps to isolate themselves.

Canadians living in smaller dwellings or unsuitable accommodations may face a particular challenge. These Canadians may have a higher degree of social interaction than those living in larger dwellings with more space or fewer household members, and they may have less space for their daily activities.

In 2016, 3.9 million Canadian households (28% of all Canadian households) [lived in an apartment building](#). Of these, more than one-third (35%) lived in an apartment building of at least five storeys. Most households who were living in apartments were renters.

These numbers varied across the country. In Quebec, for example, the proportion of households living in apartment buildings was 38%, compared with 6% in Newfoundland and Labrador.

In addition, close to 700,000 households, or 5% of all households in Canada, [lived in housing that was not considered "suitable"](#) in 2016. A dwelling is considered unsuitable if it does not have enough bedrooms for the size and composition of the household, on the basis of the National Occupancy Standard developed by the Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation.

This proportion was significantly higher in First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. In 2016, close to one-fifth (18%) of the Indigenous population lived in housing that was considered not suitable for the number of people who lived there. This highlights the uniquely challenging situation of Indigenous people in Canada, including difficulties accessing health care services, clean water, food and supplies, as well as a higher incidence of poverty, among other barriers.

Multigenerational households, which are defined as households containing three or more generations of grandparents, parents and children, can also face particular challenges. In 2016, 2.1 million Canadians lived in multigenerational households. Some population groups, such as Indigenous peoples, are more likely to live in multigenerational households.

Some Canadians, particularly women and children, face a higher risk of domestic violence

Another potential issue of concern for some Canadians who are staying in their house for extended periods of time is the risk of domestic violence, particularly in the case of women and children. According to the latest Statistics Canada [report on police-reported family violence](#), 18,965 children were victimized by a family member in 2018. In 59% of cases, the child was victimized by one of his or her own parents, who most often lived in the same residence.

In 2018, there were over 99,000 victims of police-reported intimate partner violence (IPV) aged 15 to 89 in Canada. IPV includes violent offences that occur between current and former legally married spouses, common-law partners, boyfriends and girlfriends and other kinds of intimate partners. Most police-reported IPV occurred in a dwelling occupied by both the victim and the accused, and women accounted for 8 in 10 victims.

Families with strained resources are also more vulnerable

Canadians who have fewer resources at their disposal may also feel more strained in times of crisis. This includes [food insecure](#) households, [low-income families](#), and families that do not have enough savings to maintain well-being for three months—all of which are potentially vulnerable during an extended emergency situation.

In 2017/2018, approximately 9% of households in Canada were considered "food insecure." About 3.2 million Canadians, or close to 9% of the population, lived below [Canada's Official Poverty Line in 2018](#). For children under 18 years of age, the poverty rate was slightly over 8%, meaning that 566,000 children lived below the poverty line in Canada.

Furthermore, just over one-half of Canadians had enough savings to maintain well-being for at least three months, which suggests that a large number of Canadians do not have enough financial resources to withstand a sudden drop in income for an extended period of time. Among Canadian families that reported having debt in 2016, 11% [skipped or delayed a non-mortgage payment](#) (such as payments on a credit card, payments for utility services, or car payments) in the past year.

The various dimensions of well-being can be examined in the infographic, "[Canada's Official Poverty Dashboard: Snapshot, February 2020](#)."

Helping one another: Volunteering and caregiving activities

A number of Canadians depend on the help of family members, friends and volunteers for their daily activities. In 2018, for example, approximately one in four Canadians aged 15 and older (7.8 million people) [provided care to a family member or friend](#) with a long-term health condition, a physical or mental disability, or problems related to aging.

Most often, caregivers are not in the same household as care receivers. In 2018, 62% of caregivers were not in the same household or did not live in the same building as the person to whom they were providing care. This percentage corresponds to 4.7 million Canadians who may find it more difficult to provide care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the 3.3 million Canadians [who received care in Canada](#), 31% received care from someone who was not in the same household as them. Although 4 in 10 care receivers were seniors, younger people also received care. Mental health problems were the most commonly cited reason for receiving care.

Physical distancing measures can also take a toll on those who are providing care to a family member living with them, often because additional help or support may be harder to come by. Many caregivers do not have all the help they need, even in normal times. In 2018, 40% of caregivers with unmet needs reported that they would have liked [additional home care support](#).

Statistics Canada's commitment to measuring the social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic

Physical distancing and isolation measures will likely continue to be an integral part of our lives for weeks to come. While people will continue to adapt to the situation, long periods of isolation could have an impact on physical and mental health. In addition, the economic effects of COVID-19 could have significant social and well-being consequences. The impacts of other social changes, such as school and business closures, could also be significant. Some populations, such as First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, are more vulnerable and could be disproportionately impacted. Statistics Canada will continue to provide up-to-date information on trends and analysis on a range of topics and will work with partners to meet their needs for additional data and analysis.

We thank our dedicated employees who are working remotely under difficult conditions to provide highest-quality, factual information. We also thank Canadians who are providing us with information on how they are doing, and we thank businesses who continue to inform us about their situation.

Note to readers

In this release, multiple data sources are used to highlight the social and health challenges associated with the COVID-19 situation.

Over the last two weeks, your national statistical agency has responded to this challenge by setting up the infrastructure necessary for its dedicated employees to collect information vital to the economy and society—remotely and safely. Statistics Canada employees are working hard to support critical government operations with data, analytics and methodological expertise.

As part of its continued commitment to provide Canadians with much-needed information during the COVID-19 pandemic, Statistics Canada partnered with the Public Health Agency of Canada to make preliminary information on the number of confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus disease (also known as COVID-19) available to the public. More information about this initiative can be found in the article, "[Detailed preliminary data on confirmed cases of COVID-19](#)," published in The Daily on March 30, 2020.

Statistics Canada also recently released a [portal](#) on COVID-19 data and analysis, which includes an [interactive economic dashboard](#) with key indicators to help monitor the impact of the pandemic on economic activity in Canada. On April 9, Statistics Canada will release data on the labour market situation in Canada as of the third week of March 2020. Statistics Canada has also launched the web panel survey, [Canadian Perspectives Survey Series](#), which asked Canadians how they are coping.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey numbers [2620](#), [3226](#), [3302](#), [3313](#), [3604](#), [3901](#), [4432](#), [4501](#), [4502](#), [5024](#), [5200](#) and [5251](#).

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca).