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Vulnerabilities related to COVID-19 among LGBTQ2+ Canadians

by Elena Prokopenko and Christina Kevins

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Correction Notice

An error was found in this report and a correction was made to the dollar figure in the following sentence: According to the 2018 SSPPS (Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces), LGBTQ2+ Canadians were over-represented in low income categories and they were less likely than non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians to have a total personal income above \$60,000 before taxes.

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Vulnerabilities related to COVID-19 among LGBTQ2+ Canadians

by **Elena Prokopenko** and **Christina Kevins**

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) identified those facing economic barriers, and those with insecure, inadequate or nonexistent housing as particularly vulnerable populations during the pandemic (PHAC 2020a). Measures put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 bring a unique set of challenges to LGBTQ2+ Canadians - that is, Canadians who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, Two-Spirit or report another non-binary gender or minority sexual identity (see Terminology box). For instance, LGBTQ2+ youth may be forced to isolate at home with homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic family members (PHAC 2020b), and alternative housing options may not be available or affordable. Although there is no major dataset yet available to illuminate the experiences of LGBTQ2+ Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic, this article explores the inequalities in income, financial security and housing insecurity between LGBTQ2+ and non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians that existed prior to the pandemic using data from the 2018 Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces. These vulnerabilities could be exacerbated with additional stressors brought on by the pandemic.

Terminology

The language related to LGBTQ2+ communities is rapidly evolving and terminology may shift over time, vary by context, and mean different things to different people. LGBTQ2 is the official acronym used by the Government of Canada across its programs and policies. At Statistics Canada, the LGBTQ2+ acronym is used in order to reflect the broad scope of gender and sexual identities that exist in society.

Respondents were included in the LGBTQ2+ population on the basis of self-reported sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or another minority sexual identity such as asexual, pansexual or queer) or gender identity (transgender, including respondents with non-binary identities like genderqueer, gender fluid or agender). The Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces was used for the analysis in part because it is one of the select Statistics Canada surveys that can be used to study the LGBTQ2+ population.

The age and gender distribution of the LGBTQ2+ population puts them at higher risk for experiencing loss of employment

The Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces (SSPPS) showed that in 2018, LGBTQ2+ Canadians were generally younger than non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians and were significantly¹ less likely to identify as male. The age and gender distribution of the LGBTQ2+ population was also associated with higher risk for experiencing loss of employment.

The SSPPS found that in 2018, the LGBTQ2+ population represented 4% of the Canadian population overall. Youth (those aged 15-24) comprised 30% of the LGBTQ2+ population, compared to 14% of the non-LGBTQ2+ population. At the other end of the spectrum, while 7% of LGBTQ2+ Canadians were aged 65 or older, this was

1. Significantly different from non-LGBTQ2+ reference group ($p < 0.05$). See methodology section for information about significance testing.





the case for 21% of non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians. In terms of gender, among the LGBTQ2+ population, 44% of respondents identified as male, 52% identified as female, and 4% identified as gender diverse in 2018, meanwhile there was an almost 50-50 split (49.5% and 50.5%) between men and women in the non-LGBTQ2+ population.

Previous findings related to the impacts of COVID-19 have shown that, in Canada, youth (aged 15-24) have experienced the largest and most persistent declines in employment. Based on October 2020 estimates from the Labour Force Survey, the employment level of youth remains furthest from February 2020 levels for both women (- 11.5%) and men (- 8.9%), compared to a drop of 2.0% among men and 1.4% for women aged 25-54 (Statistics Canada 2020a). Given the high proportion of young people among the LGBTQ2+ population, it is likely that LGBTQ2+ Canadians may be among those disproportionately affected by job loss during the pandemic.

LGBTQ2+ Canadians have lower incomes and are more likely to experience financial insecurity

Financial resources can buffer the impacts of lack of employment and job loss. According to the 2018 SSPPS, LGBTQ2+ Canadians were over-represented in low income categories and they were less likely than non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians to have a total personal income above \$60,000 before taxes² (Chart 1). In particular, a significantly higher proportion of LGBTQ2+ Canadians (41%) had a total personal income of less than \$20,000 per year compared with their non-LGBTQ2+ counterparts (26%).³ The average personal incomes of LGBTQ2+ income earners were also significantly lower (\$39,000) than those of non-LGBTQ2+ (\$54,000) people in Canada.

Differences in income between the LGBTQ2+ and non-LGBTQ2+ groups may be attributed, in part, to differences in sociodemographic characteristics that affect personal income, such as age, marital status, presence of children in the home, education, industry or occupation. For instance, the SSPPS showed a significantly higher proportion of the LGBTQ2+ population was currently enrolled in school, CEGEP, college or university (24% compared to 13% among the non-LGBTQ2+ population), reducing their potential earnings.⁴ The analysis in this article did not, however, control for such factors.

Previous studies found that sexual orientation has a significant effect on personal income⁵. A recent analysis combining ten cycles of the Canadian Community Health Survey (Waite, et al. 2020) found significant gaps in income that favoured heterosexual men over their gay and bisexual counterparts, and heterosexual women relative to bisexual women. Bisexual men and women, and gay men constitute three quarters of the LGBTQ2+ population, according to the SSPPS. The high proportion of these relatively income-disadvantaged groups within the LGBTQ2+ population could contribute to the differences in income presented in Chart 1.

2. See methodology section for information regarding income calculations.

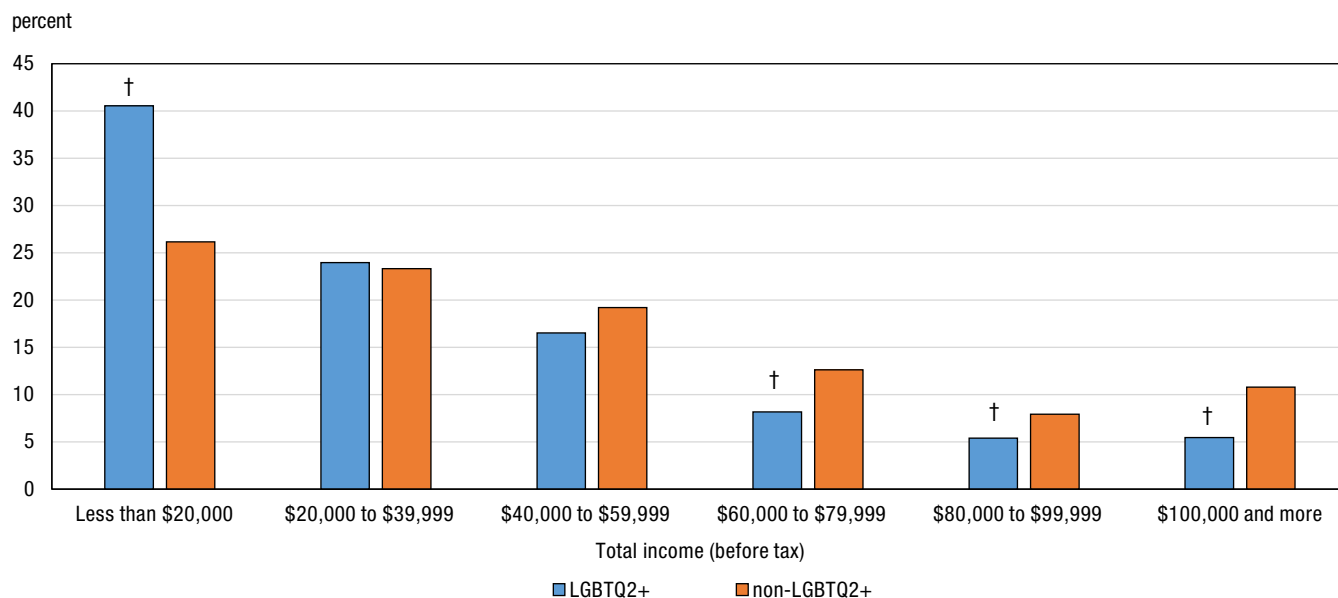
3. Given the age differences between LGBTQ2+ and non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians, results were examined by age groups. The pattern remained the same as the overall findings with LGBTQ2+ Canadians aged 15-34 over-represented in the lowest income category (significant difference). This pattern held among those age 35 and over, but the difference was not statistically significant. Statistically significant differences were identified using confidence intervals at the 95% level.

4. However, enrollment rates were not significantly different between LGBTQ2+ and non-LGBTQ2+ youths aged 15-24.

5. To date, no population-based data on the labour market outcomes of transgender or gender diverse Canadians have been reported (Waite, Ecker and Ross 2019).



Chart 1
Total personal income of LGBTQ2+ and non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians aged 15 and older, 2017 tax year



† statistically significant differences from the reference group (non-LGBTQ2+) were identified using confidence intervals at the 95% level
 Source: Statistics Canada, Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces, 2018.

In 2018, one-third (33%) of LGBTQ2+ Canadians found it difficult or very difficult to meet their needs in terms of transportation, housing, food, clothing, participation in some social activities and other necessary expenses, compared to 27% among non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians. A significantly higher proportion of LGBTQ2+ Canadians were also less likely to be able to handle sudden, unforeseen expenditures - 11% of LGBTQ2+ Canadians reported not being able to manage an unexpected expense of \$500, compared to 7% of non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians.⁶

Given that, pre-pandemic, many LGBTQ2+ Canadians had lower incomes, were having difficulties meeting their financial obligations, and would have difficulties handling unexpected expenses, they may be particularly vulnerable financially if they lost employment as a result of COVID-19.

LGBTQ2+ Canadians may be at greater risk of losing access to safe and secure housing

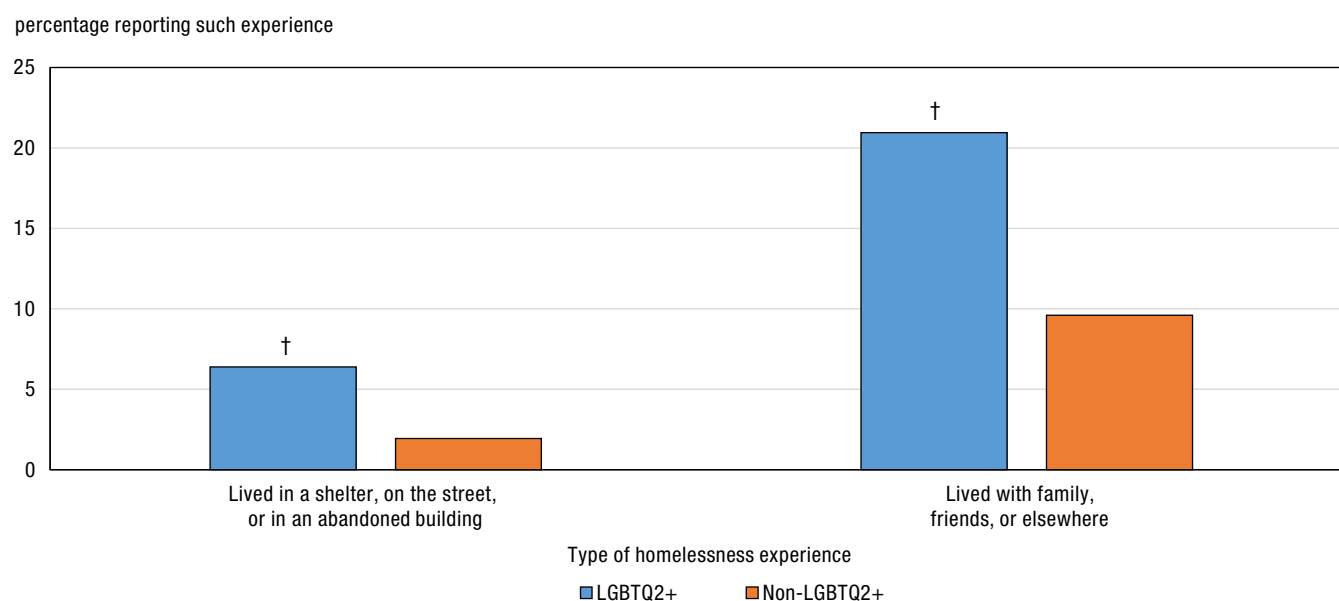
In order to isolate safely at home within a pandemic situation, it is key that a person has access to quality housing and a healthy and safe home environment. Furthermore, people experiencing homelessness face additional risks from COVID-19 and associated complications due to barriers in access to healthcare and community resources. These risks and barriers to access could be exacerbated if specialized LGBTQ2+ programs, services and supports are lacking, or if they face discrimination when accessing resources for the general population. Such circumstances would prevent them from effectively following public health advice to self-isolate, practice physical distancing, and perform proper hand hygiene (PHAC 2020c).

6. A higher proportion of the younger LGBTQ2+ population (aged 15-34) reported being unable to cover an unexpected expense of \$500, but the difference was not statistically significant from their non-LGBTQ2+ peers. There was a similar pattern for those aged 35 and over with a higher proportion reporting difficulties covering an unexpected expense, but this difference was not statistically significant from non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians in the same age group.



The 2018 SSPPS found that LGBTQ2+ Canadians were more than twice as likely as their non-LGBTQ2+ counterparts to have experienced some type of homelessness or housing insecurity in their lifetime (27% vs. 13%, respectively).⁷ The SSPPS asked about the types of homelessness experienced by respondents (Chart 2) and found that LGBTQ2+ Canadians were three times more likely than non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians (6% versus 2%) to report having had to live in a shelter, on the street, or in an abandoned building. They were also more than twice as likely (21%), compared to non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians (10%), to report having lived with family or friends because they had no other place to stay. Among those who did not report these two situations, LGBTQ2+ Canadians were twice as likely to report having to temporarily live somewhere other than home because they were leaving an abusive or violent situation (7% versus 3%). These findings suggest they are more likely to have insecure attachment to safe and secure housing.

Chart 2
Experiences of homelessness reported by LGBTQ2+ and non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians aged 15 and older, 2018



† statistically significant differences from the reference group (non-LGBTQ2+) were identified using confidence intervals at the 95% level
Source: Statistics Canada, Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces, 2018.

A recent analysis of the Canadian Housing Survey (Statistics Canada 2020b) identified inadequate housing as an issue faced by LGBTQ2+ Canadians. The survey found that in 2018, households where the person responsible for the housing decisions was lesbian, gay, bisexual or another minority sexual identity were more likely to be living in core housing need⁸ (17%, compared to 11% among households whose main decision-maker was heterosexual). The same analysis found that 30% of LGB+ households reported spending at least 30% of their income on housing and shelter costs, compared to 21% among households of heterosexual respondents. These findings suggest access to housing is more precarious among the LGBTQ2+ population.⁹ The high proportion of LGBTQ2+ individuals

7. This finding remained statistically significant even when comparing the two populations by age groups. Both younger (aged 15-34) and older (age 35 and over) LGBTQ2+ Canadians were significantly more likely to have ever experienced some kind of homelessness than non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians in those age groups.
 8. Households whose dwelling is considered inadequate, unaffordable or unsuitable and whose income levels are such that they could not afford alternative suitable and adequate housing in their community.
 9. Users should be cautious not to make direct comparisons to the SSPPS-identified LGBTQ2+ population due to differences in sampling methodology (this is further explained in the methodology section below).



already on the economic margin means they could be facing especially difficult choices related to housing and living arrangements.

Previous research has shown that rejection from the parental household increases the risk of homelessness among LGBTQ2+ youth (Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2019), suggesting the family home may not be a safety net for LGBTQ2+ youths if they lose access to housing. In 2018, the SSPPS found that a significantly higher proportion of LGBTQ2+ youth aged 15-24 (35%) were living outside their parents' homes compared to non-LGBTQ2+ youth (24%).

Familial rejection can make home an unwelcome place for LGBTQ2+ youth, leaving fewer housing options during this time of job loss and reduced income that has disproportionately affected young people in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2020a).

This article presented findings from Statistics Canada surveys conducted prior to COVID-19 that suggest the LGBTQ2+ population may have characteristics that make them more vulnerable to financial and housing stressors as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated public health restrictions. The analysis showed that the demographic composition of this population places a disproportionate share at risk of employment loss, lower personal incomes, and more financial difficulties pre-pandemic, which could affect their ability to buffer income losses due to work interruptions. LGBTQ2+ Canadians were also at higher risk of experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity, which could make it difficult to self-isolate or quarantine, and to follow public health recommendations. Access to safe and secure housing may be especially precarious for youth facing unwelcoming environments at home.

Methodology

This article examines differences in social and economic vulnerabilities of LGBTQ2+ Canadians compared to non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians, and how this could place them at greater risk to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistically significant differences were identified using confidence intervals at the 95% level. All reported differences were significant unless otherwise stated.

The term 'LGBTQ2+' refers to persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, Two-Spirit, or persons reporting another non-binary gender or minority sexual identity. While members of these communities differ in the types of challenges and discrimination that they face depending on where they fall on the spectrums of sexual orientation and gender, this article groups them together due to small sample size. Moreover, this article does not take into account the effect of belonging to multiple vulnerable population groups (e.g. based on ethno-cultural background, Indigenous identity or disability), and both LGBTQ2+ and non-LGBTQ2+ Canadians may face discrimination on the basis of other identity characteristics.

This analysis is primarily based on data from the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces that was collected by Statistics Canada in 2018. Results are based on responses from more than 45,000 people in Canada, and the sample is representative of the Canadian population 15 years of age and older. Upon contact with a household, one household member aged 15 years of age and over was randomly selected to complete the questionnaire. While the survey focused primarily on experiences and characteristics of violent victimization, as well as other unwanted experiences while in public, online, or at work, it also includes components on attachment to housing and financial security, which formed the basis of the analysis for this article. For more information on survey definitions and methods, refer to the Statistics Canada survey information page: [Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces](#).

The sampling unit in the Canadian Housing Survey (2018), mentioned in the analysis, was the dwelling. One questionnaire was completed per dwelling by the person responsible for housing decisions.



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In the context of this analysis, total personal income refers to receipts from certain sources, before income taxes and deductions. To reduce respondent burden and improve data quality, the 2018 SSPPS income information was derived from respondent income tax files from 2017. Total before-tax income represents the total income received from all sources, including employment income, government transfers, investment income, private retirement pensions and any other income, excluding capital gains or losses. It is important to note that income information was only collected by this method for respondents in the provinces. In the territories, income information was collected directly from respondents, who were asked to provide their best estimate of their total personal income, before taxes and deductions, from all sources during the year ending December 31, 2017. Due to the different collection methods and levels of precision, as well as the relatively small sample size in the territories, this portion of the analysis was restricted to the provinces. This resulted in 0.3% of respondents being excluded from the analysis.



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