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Perceptions of safety of Indigenous people during the COVID-19 pandemic

by Paula Arriagada, Tara Hahmann and Vivian O'Donnell

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Perceptions of safety of Indigenous people during the COVID-19 pandemic

by **Paula Arriagada, Tara Hahmann** and **Vivian O'Donnell**

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting social disruption have left many to struggle with feelings of uncertainty, stress, and fear. A sense of personal safety, whether in the home or in public, is an important aspect of this uncertainty. A perceived lack of safety can have a significant adverse effect on individuals and communities (Perreault 2017), particularly among more vulnerable populations.

Recent studies based on crowdsourced data have highlighted some of the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic among Indigenous participants, including greater mental health and economic impacts compared to non-Indigenous participants (Arriagada et al. 2020a, 2020b). Building on these findings, this article focuses on the perceptions of safety, both at home and in public, among Indigenous people.

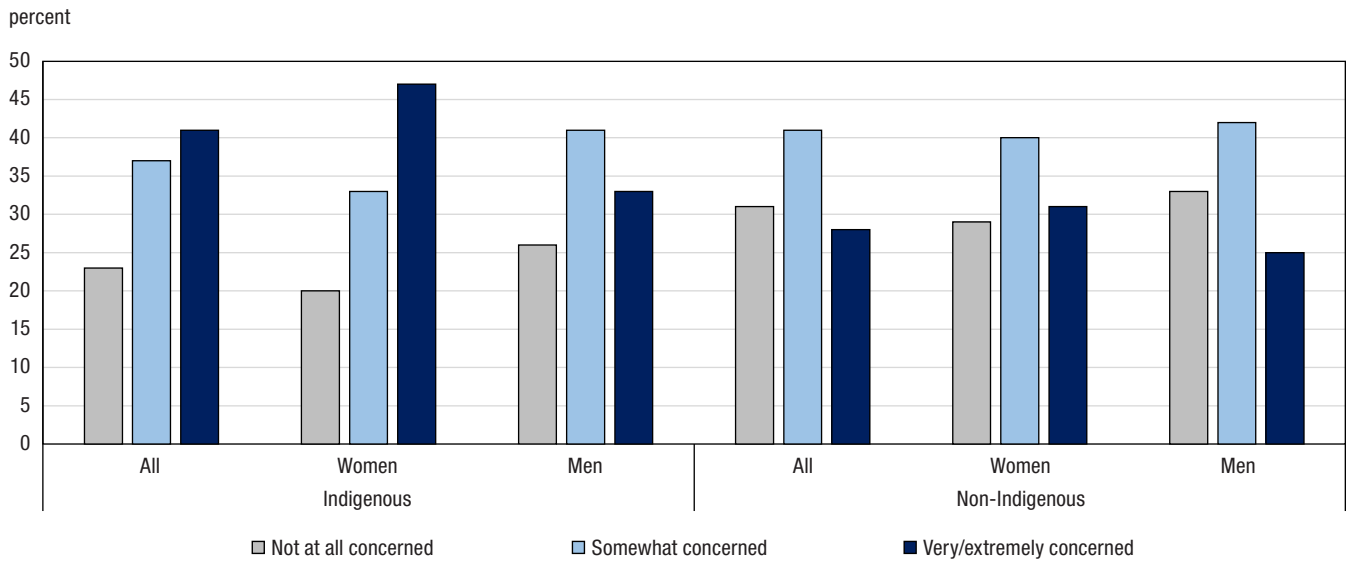
The analysis is based on two crowdsourcing data collection initiatives. From May 12 to May 25, approximately 1,400 First Nations people, Métis and Inuit aged 15 and older participated in our online questionnaire “Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians: Perceptions of safety”. Between April 24 and May 11, 2020, another 1,400 participated in the online questionnaire “Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians: Mental Health”. Readers should note that crowdsourcing data are not based on sampling principles, and as such, these findings cannot be applied to the overall Indigenous population. However, these findings provide important insight into the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the well-being of Indigenous participants as measured by their perceptions of safety.

Concern about the impact of confinement on family stress highest among Indigenous women participants

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Canadians have been spending more time at home. Higher rates of overcrowding among the Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2020) and greater mental health impacts of COVID-19 (Arriagada et al., 2020a) combined with shelter in place recommendations may further increase vulnerability to victimization (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020).

Concerns about the impact of confinement on family stress can provide insights on perceptions of safety at home. Among Indigenous participants, 41% reported that they were “very” or “extremely” concerned about the impact of confinement on family stress, compared to 28% among non-Indigenous participants (Chart 1). Indigenous women participants (47%) were more likely to report this concern than Indigenous men (33%).

Chart 1
Concern about the impact of COVID-19 on family stress due to confinement, Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, April 24 to May 11, 2020



Source: The impacts of COVID-19 - Mental Health.

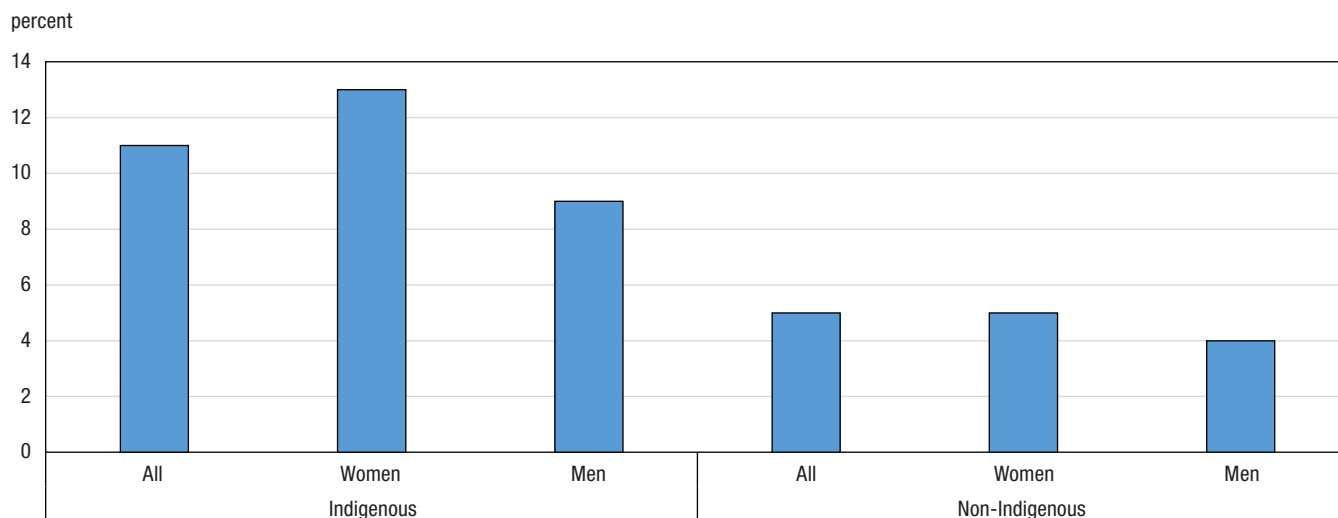
Indigenous participants were more likely to report being concerned with the impact of COVID-19 on violence in their home

Participants were also asked about their level of concern regarding the impact of COVID-19 on violence in their home. This is an area of developing concern due to self-isolation measures that are found to increase risk of interpersonal conflict (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020). While most Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants expressed that they were “not at all” concerned, 11% of Indigenous participants reported some level of concern (somewhat/very/extremely)¹ regarding the impact of the pandemic on violence in their home, more than twice the corresponding percentage among non-Indigenous participants (5%) (Chart 2). The level of concern among participants surrounding violence in the home was higher among Indigenous women (13%) than among Indigenous men (9%).

1. Because of small frequencies, it was necessary to group all levels of concern (somewhat/very/extremely).

Chart 2

Percentage reporting some level of concern about the impact of COVID-19 on violence in the home, Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, April 24 to May 11, 2020



Source: The impacts of COVID-19 - Mental Health.

Indigenous participants report lower sense of safety in their neighbourhood compared to non-Indigenous participants

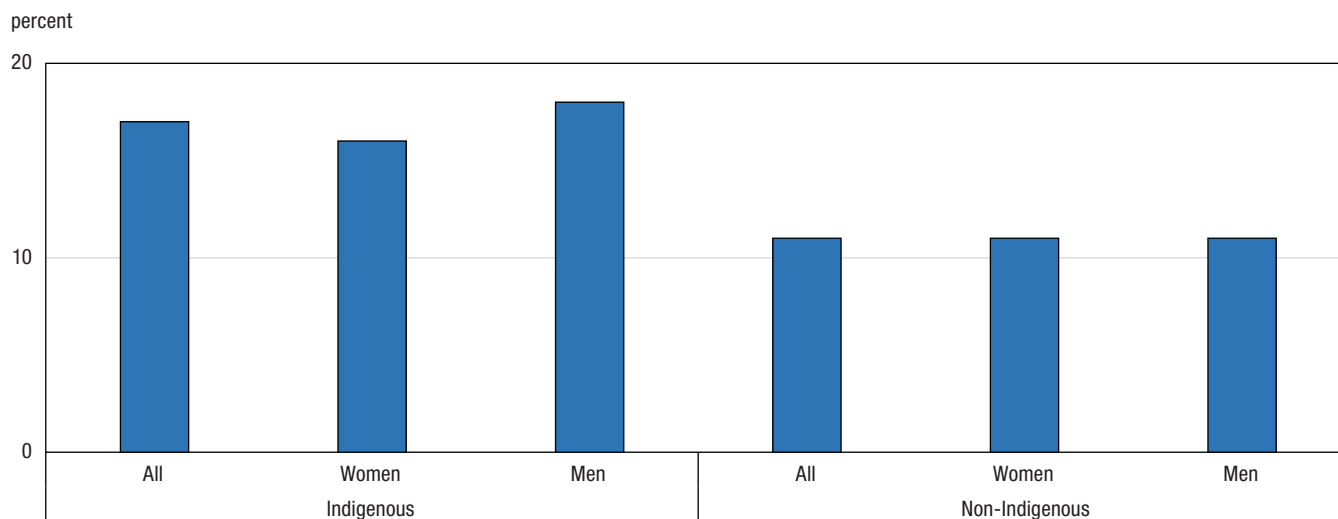
Participants were asked whether they believe crime in their neighbourhood since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic had increased, decreased or stayed the same. While perceptions of crime are not necessarily consistent with police-reported crime trends, these perceptions are important because fear of crime can impact upon an individual's sense of well-being and can impact community cohesion (Perreault, 2017).

Among Indigenous participants, 17% reported that they believed crime had increased in their neighbourhood since the start of the pandemic, compared to 11% among non-Indigenous participants (Chart 3). There was little gender difference among Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants.

Feelings of safety when walking alone after dark in their neighbourhood is another aspect of perceptions of safety, and Indigenous women participants were least likely to report feeling very safe when doing so. Among Indigenous participants, 24% of women reported feeling very safe when walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark, compared with 43% of men. Among non-Indigenous participants, 30% of women and 49% of men reported feeling very safe. This is consistent with previous results from representative surveys; generally, higher percentages of men feel safer walking alone after dark than women (Perreault, 2017).

Chart 3

Percentage reporting feeling crime in neighbourhood has increased since the start of the pandemic, May 12 to 25, 2020



Source: Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians - Perceptions of Safety.

Indigenous participants twice as likely to feel that people are being harassed or attacked because of their ethnicity or skin colour

Perceptions of safety at the time of COVID-19 might also be impacted by perceived or experienced discriminatory or racist responses to fear directed at marginalized groups (Devakumar et al., 2020). Over 1 in 5 Indigenous participants (22%) felt that people are being harassed or attacked because of their race, ethnicity or skin colour “often” or “sometimes” in their neighbourhood. In comparison, 11% of non-Indigenous participants felt the same. Differences in perceptions between Indigenous men and women participants were small.

Experts have highlighted how social isolation and quarantine measures can lead to increases in domestic violence with options for support being reduced and/or forced to change their mode of delivery (Usher et al., 2020, Illesinghe, 2020). Therefore, while participants expressed concerns about their safety at home and in public, their access to support services may be limited during the pandemic. Still, 22% of Indigenous participants and 9% of non-Indigenous participants contacted resources (excluding police) for reasons related to crime, with counselor, psychologist and social worker services the most commonly reported.²

This article is the fifth of a series of releases aimed to inform on the economic, social and health challenges facing Indigenous people during the COVID-19 pandemic. A first [Daily article](#) examined health and social vulnerabilities among Indigenous people living in rural, remote and northern communities, while a [second article](#) focused on vulnerabilities to socioeconomic impacts among those living in urban areas. A [third article](#) reported on the mental health of Indigenous people during the pandemic, and a [fourth article](#) reported on employment and financial impacts of the pandemic among Indigenous people. Over the coming months, Statistics Canada will continue to report on the impacts of the pandemic on Indigenous people.

2. The percentages refer to the proportions of participants who had contacted or used any of the following resources because of crime in their area: crisis centres or crisis lines, victim services or witness assistance programs, victim support groups or centres, counsellors, psychologists, or social workers, community, family, ethnic, or cultural centres, shelters or transition homes, sexual assault centres and other support groups.

Methodology

The analysis is based on two crowdsourcing data collection initiatives: Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians–Mental Health was collected between April 24 and May 11, 2020, and Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians–Perceptions of Safety was collected between May 12 and May 25, 2020. These are two separate crowdsource initiatives with different sets of participants.

Unlike other surveys conducted by Statistics Canada, crowdsourced data are not collected under a sample design using probability-based sampling. Methodological adjustments have been made to account for age, sex and provincial differences. However, these adjustments are for the general Canadian population and do not take into account the differences in age structure and geographic distribution of the Indigenous population. Because of these limitations, it was not possible to report findings separately for First Nations people, Métis or Inuit or for diverse subpopulations within the Indigenous population (for example, those living on reserve or those living in Inuit Nunangat). Caution should be exercised when interpreting the findings.

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