



COVID-19 Factsheet: *Impacts and Opportunities*

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At the time of writing, the John Hopkins University dashboard had identified over 1.8 million deaths attributed to COVID-19.¹ Many countries are reinstating lockdown measures with the rise in new confirmed COVID-19 infections and deaths.² This review was conducted to identify recurring and noteworthy accounts of the economic, social, and political impacts of COVID-19, to date as well as potential future impacts in the medium to long term.

Economic impacts include – but aren't limited to – trade and growth, debt, employment, businesses, housing, income, education, and productivity. Social impacts encompass mental health, health services and behaviours, substance use, as well as observed disparities therein. Additionally, the pandemic revealed differences in government responses and challenges in balancing public health while maintaining their residents' rights and trust. Despite these challenges, opportunities have been identified to minimize infection risk, support public health measures, and implement an equitable recovery. Future opportunities are examined related to technology, changes to the workplace, healthcare, income inequalities, supporting the elderly, and other developments like public health, climate change, and education.

Economic Impacts to Date

Trade & Growth

National border restrictions have impacted the transportation of goods across countries.³ Interruptions within the global market have propagated throughout the entire network.⁴ This drop in global trade exacerbates stress for parts of the world already struggling with humanitarian issues, such as food insecurity.⁵ Countries are encouraged to utilize domestic supply sources.⁶

National Debt

Many countries were already facing a debt crisis, especially poorer nations.^{4,7} In developing countries, existing debt stress led to cuts in public healthcare.⁴ Economic stimulus policies are creating more debt.⁵ The G7 indicated it would suspend debt obligations for the poorest countries,⁷ with G20 ministers also announcing a debt suspension initiative.⁸ However, deferring debt payments could result in countries having greater obligations at the end of the suspension.⁷ International

financial institutions have been recommended to offer grants instead of loans, such that developing countries can maintain health system costs to address the social and economic impacts of the pandemic.⁴

Individual Debt

Loss of household income due to unemployment may result in defaults on debts.⁹ Defaults would decrease bank assets, posing challenges for new loans.⁹ There is also a projected decline in the flow of remittances to low and middle income countries.¹⁰ Among G7 nations, Canada carries the highest household debt as a percentage of disposable income (186%) and has trended up, while debt in the UK and the US has been on the decline since 2007.¹¹

Unemployment

Social distancing restrictions have resulted in job losses, especially for human contact jobs (e.g., travel-related professions and tourist industry), and created challenges in securing employment for individuals who are older (50+), and younger individuals with no professional skills.¹² According to the International Labour Organization, about 5 million-25 million jobs are predicted to be eradicated in the future.⁴

Small Business

The number of small business owners in the U.S. fell by 22% between February and April 2020, with black businesses experiencing the most acute decline at 41%.¹³ Businesses that continued to operate needed measures to maintain safe social distancing during shifts, as well as equipment to monitor for symptoms to minimize the spread of infection.^{3,14} Those that could shifted formats to accommodate health measures, including having employees work from home.^{3,14}

Rent & Evictions

Debt and lost income increased the risk of eviction.¹⁵ Some countries have imposed temporary rules to prevent landlords from evicting tenants. However, this creates a financial burden on property owners.¹⁶

Income Gap

COVID-19 measures have also highlighted existing inequalities. Social distancing measures are difficult for lower-

The Kelowna Homelessness Research Collaborative (KHRC), is a multidisciplinary team of researchers interested in understanding and supporting the provision of services to – and the perspectives of – individuals with lived experience of homelessness or who are vulnerable to homelessness. Investigators and collaborators are primarily based in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, Canada.

income residents, particularly for residents living in slums.^{4,17} 2020 saw simultaneous expansion of wealth of the billionaire class along with greater unemployment at lower income brackets compared to higher income brackets.¹⁸ The pandemic itself is fueled by existing inequalities that in turn might be exacerbated by the fallout in the years to come.¹⁹

Education & Productivity

Public health risks led to sustained or periodic shift to remote learning across all levels of education. This results in a loss to in-person resources for students who need them,²⁰ and those without access to digital learning resources are at risk of falling behind.²¹ Strategies need to be implemented to ensure online material and resources are available for students who need them.²² There have been associated impacts on working parents in terms of both capacity to work and associated stress.²³

Social Impacts to Date

Mental Health

Data from frontline workers in Wuhan shows that medical workers experience mental health problems, including stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, insomnia, denial, anger, and fear.²⁴ In turn, these mental health problems are affecting their fight against COVID-19 and overall well-being.²⁴ The mental health of the general population is also being affected, including increases in anxiety and depression symptoms, substance use, and exacerbated symptoms of previous mental health problems.^{24,25} A survey of individuals 25 years and under with a history of mental illness revealed that 83% reported the pandemic made their conditions worse.²⁰ Additionally, 26% disclosed that support was inaccessible due to cancellations of face-to-face services, with challenges reported in accessing online or phone support.²⁰

Stay-at-home orders are intensifying loneliness due to feelings of disconnection.²⁶ Social isolation and loneliness have been linked to increased risk of mental and physical health issues among the elderly.²⁷ Students are also exhibiting stress due to changes in school routines, which are important coping mechanisms for young people with mental health issues.²⁰ Children's depressive symptoms may be associated with loss of school routines, reduced outdoor activities, and social interactions.^{20,28}

Moving forward, public health education programs can increase awareness of mental health issues and provide greater access to self-regulatory mechanisms.⁴ In addition, advocate suggest that professional treatments should also be more widely available for the general public.⁴ Companies can also utilize their resources to support frontline services for mental and public health.⁴

Health Services

COVID-19 is putting a strain on healthcare services worldwide. Hospital capacities are maxing out, with healthcare workers forced to decide who receives critical care services.²⁹ Patients more vulnerable to cardiovascular disease

complications might suffer the consequences of limited emergency equipment.²⁹ Limited healthcare access also puts vulnerable populations at risk.³⁰ Overall, observed excess deaths may result from reported and unreported COVID-19 deaths as well as challenges in addressing other health needs.³¹ Data collected on direct COVID-19 deaths might be overlooking indirect COVID-19 deaths.³¹

Access to other health services, including detoxification centers and memory clinics, could be limited due to social distancing guidelines, posing significant challenges for those who require these services.^{30,32} Public health measures have also drastically changed our health behaviours, which might increase the need for some health services in the long-run.²⁹

Health Behavior

With social distancing measures in place, individuals might find it difficult to maintain active lifestyles. These measures promote sedentary behaviours, and the sudden shift to social distancing measures can lead to unhealthy diets.²⁹ Further, the number of individuals accessing health services has declined. Emergency rooms and other doctor visits have declined across the U.S.³³ Individuals are staying away from hospitals, sometimes for necessary and emergency care like mild heart attacks.³³ Physicians are concerned that patients with severe illnesses who avoid the ER might suffer from permanent damage.³³ Furthermore, individuals exhibiting symptoms of dementia may be discouraged or unable to access appropriate services.³² National healthcare data show an estimated decline of 67% in the number of outpatient visits in the week of April 12-18, 2020, compared to previous years.³⁴

Substance Use

Many individuals are continuing to struggle with substance use issues. Due to COVID-19, access and availability of direct services for those who engage in substance use have decreased.³⁵ Limited access to services, along with social distancing guidelines, is potentially increasing the likelihood of individuals going through withdrawals or suffering an overdose in isolation.^{30,35} Physical distancing measures and the closure of businesses and borders affect drug supplies and costs.³⁵ Those struggling with substance use need access to harm reduction services and more reliable and safer drug supplies.³⁵

Gendered Impacts

With the switch to remote learning and working, people are spending more time at home. This has increased the risk of violence towards women. In the first months of 2020, domestic violence reports increased by 30 percent in some countries.³⁶ This is potentially an area for policymakers and family violence social services to collaborate in assisting abuse victims.⁴ Alternative delivery models and tools, such as encrypted apps that collect DV evidence and help victims to take action, could be incorporated into organizations.⁴ This is specifically important for diverse community groups, including those who may be forcibly confined or living in remote communities.⁴ Additionally, more women have lost

their jobs than men.³⁷ Some mothers with young children have seen a reduction in their work hours by 4-5 times more than fathers.³⁸ Women have also taken on additional childcare needs, including homeschooling.^{36,37} UN Women has advocated for a gender-responsive recovery plan to address these factors.³⁹

Health Disparities

COVID-19 disproportionately impacts various age, racial, and income groups. Older adults are more likely to have underlying conditions that increase their risk of COVID-19 infection and death.³² Data from April 2020 revealed that more than 95% of COVID-19 deaths were 60 years old and over, and those 80 years and older made up more than half of the deaths.³²

In addition to disparities in age groups, racial groups such as Hispanic or Latinx, African American, and Indigenous groups are continuing to experience health inequalities. Across the U.S., Hispanic/Latinx groups account for 28.4% of cumulative COVID-19 cases with known ethnicities reported from data collected in May-June 2020.⁴⁰ In twenty-seven states, COVID-19 data with known race or ethnicity showed higher percentages of cases in Hispanic groups than the proportion of Hispanic groups within their state population.⁴⁰ Similarly, the death rate for African Americans is 2.65 times the rate for other groups.²⁵ Health disparities within these racial groups are related to underlying conditions and less access to health care that place individuals at a higher risk of poor COVID-19 outcomes.^{25,40} Additionally, immigration status and language barriers can pose absolute and perceived restrictions for securing essential services and public benefits to access COVID-19 related care and resources.⁴⁰

Some Indigenous communities have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19; the infection rate in the Navajo Nation of North America is ten times higher than the general population in reported regions.⁴¹ The higher infection rate in certain regions is influenced by inadequate housing and a lack of running water.⁴¹ Health authorities and governments need to include Indigenous groups in the short, medium, and long-term recovery plans and policies.⁴¹ Furthermore, there are disparities in the presentation of COVID-19 prevention information. Language barriers are impeding public service announcements from reaching Hispanic/Latinx and indigenous communities.^{40,41} Thus, providing public service announcements in other languages spoken within communities can be an effective tool.^{40,41} Those living in poverty are likely to have poor housing conditions and sanitation, placing them at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19.⁴² Furthermore, these groups are unequally affected because they lack access to high-quality public health and medical care.⁴² Consequently, recovery strategies should include addressing this issue.

Political Impacts to Date

Authoritarianism & Freedom

Leaders are tasked with implementing public health measures while also maintaining personal freedoms. Firstly, most

countries have implemented stay-at-home measures, which some people view as violating individual rights.⁴³ However, attempts to invoke constitutionally protected liberty have failed because public protection in a health crisis takes precedent over social and economic freedoms.⁴³ Secondly, in some countries, the right to free speech has been impacted. For example, those who attempted to sound early warnings about COVID-19 in Beijing were silenced.⁴⁴ This response may have enabled the virus to spread more quickly.⁴⁴ In addition, free speech was restricted especially of any reports highlighting the inadequate response by the Chinese government.⁴⁴ International human rights law recognizes that restrictions on some rights can be justified in the case of public emergencies and threats to public health.⁴⁵

Managing Misinformation

The internet is instrumental in disseminating information. However, the information created and circulated is not always accurate or credible. The pandemic may strengthen censorship regimes as a way to curb the spread of misinformation.⁴ In the Philippines, the government has taken steps to criminalize fake news.⁴⁶ Additionally, social media platforms have different approaches to managing the spread of misinformation. Facebook works to interrupt economic incentives for fake news and building new products to reduce the spread.⁴⁷ Also, they include more information about stories so individuals can make informed decisions about the content.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Twitter adds labels or warnings and adds a link to sources containing further information regarding the content of the tweet and may even remove the tweet altogether.⁴⁸ Misinformation is dangerous because it can negatively influence how people respond to the pandemic and impede community efforts in combating the outbreak. Although platforms have strategies to manage misinformation, fake news is still spread throughout the internet.

Trust in Institutions

Government responses to COVID-19 have impacted the relationship with their people. Leaders of countries that immediately acted against the virus have increased their popularity and strengthened their residents' trust.⁴⁹ In comparison, a delay in government response based on limited information contributed to poor judgments causing a decrease in credibility.¹² There is some indication that weaker governments with delayed interventions and less healthcare-related policies to fight the pandemic have lost their citizens' confidence.⁵⁰ Some leaders have gone as far as misleading their people and blaming other governments or people for the virus.⁵¹ Moreover, some countries and leaders have used the pandemic to extend their political agenda despite its effects on their people; elections in at least fifty-six countries were postponed at the nation and subnational level, giving leaders more time in office.⁴⁹ Inadequate government responses to COVID-19 may leave a lasting political impact on individuals experiencing the pandemic during their "impressionable years" (18-25 years old).⁵⁰

Populism & Partisanship

There are variations in the way political leaders have reacted to COVID-19. Different responses have led to different outcomes in containing the virus. In Canada, political elites and the public agree on the seriousness of COVID-19 and the necessity of social distancing.⁵² In contrast, within the U.S, the opposing parties have different views on areas of focus. For example, an analysis of U.S house and senate tweets reveals that the Democrats have mentioned the crisis more often and emphasized the virus's threats on public health and American workers.⁵³ On the other hand, the Republicans' tweets focused more on China and businesses.⁵³

Potential Long-Term Impacts

Economic Recovery

COVID-19 has affected communities, businesses, and organizations around the world. Lockdown measures contributed to the loss of revenue and income for individuals, businesses, and the public sector.⁵⁴ Countries have implemented temporary financial relief to support individuals and businesses. The U.S government implemented the CARES Act loans for small businesses and a lending program for Main street businesses, along with restarting the Asset-Backed Loan Facility used in 2008-2009.⁵⁵ Despite loans and temporary relief funds, global poverty is expected to increase, impacting the UN Sustainable Development Goal of ending poverty by 2030.^{17,56,57} The global economic growth is estimated to be cut down by 3.0%-6.0% , and global trade could decline by 18%, putting a financial toll on emerging economies.⁹ The economic impacts due to the pandemic have increased the risk of a global recession.⁹

Isolationism & Nationalism

Government and leader responses vary from country to country and have produced different outcomes. While some leaders have put political ideologies aside to support their people, other countries have maintained their political agenda despite its damage to their people.⁴⁹ Some leaders openly blame people and countries for the cause of the crisis, fueling negative views towards certain groups.⁵⁸ Blaming people or countries may lead to a lack of coordination in global recovery strategies. In contrast, countries that share their strategies are at an advantage of strengthening trust and cross-border collaboration in the future.⁴

Most governments are prioritizing the vaccination of health care personal, with essential workers and those with pre-existing conditions next in line.⁵⁹ Although some countries have the necessary equipment to transport and administer vaccines, others do not. Refrigeration is crucial for storing some vaccine candidates, so delivery and storage across countries in Africa will more limited electricity will be extremely challenging.⁶⁰ Uncooperative vaccine allocation was predicted to be half as effective in preventing deaths.⁶¹

Employment Shifts

Digital transformation has accelerated greatly due to the pandemic. Digital changes include an increase in contactless payment options and self-checkouts, potentially reducing the risk of transmitting the virus.³ Some businesses might realize that some operations can be automated, resulting in technology-induced unemployment.⁴ However, technology may not be able to entirely replace human workers during a crisis.³

Future of Small Business

In addition to temporary closures, some businesses may be forced to close permanently.^{62,63} Businesses that did not receive any financial aid might resort to significant budget cuts, take on more debt, or declare bankruptcy.⁶² However, businesses across industries are also taking this opportunity to update their services to keep up with consumer changes.⁶³ Emerging business may start online, while in-person businesses may incorporate digital strategies to enhance their services.⁶³

Opportunities to Leverage

Technology as Utilities

Technology has been an especially useful tool during this pandemic. It has been utilized globally for the delivery of goods from online services , as well as a mechanism for product traceability.⁶ Tech giants such as Amazon were used to deliver various items from groceries to toilet paper and medical supplies to the elderly on behalf of public health agencies.³ Videoconferencing platforms became everyday tools for working and studying online.⁴ Telehealth enabled the continued delivery of health services, and could continue to be an option even after the pandemic.⁶⁴

Flexible Employment Models

A post-COVID world might transition away from the typical 9-5 workday, have more independent work, and potentially reduce the need to travel for meetings.^{4,14,65} This in turn would allow employees to live beyond the limits of a typical commute.^{3,14,65} Current in public transportation could be a part of the new 'normal' post-COVID-19.¹⁴

Healthcare

COVID-19 has highlighted various gaps and associated opportunities in healthcare systems around the world. Researchers suggest implementing universal healthcare coverage to ensure everyone can access health services.^{4,66} In addition, universal coverage would strengthen social safety nets and enhance individual resilience.⁴ The World Health Organization recommends that all countries provide their people with essential health packages that include prenatal care, immunizations, and treatment of infectious diseases.⁶⁶ Quality health care should be accessible for all individuals.

Supporting the Poor

The measures in place resulting from COVID-19 have disproportionately affected the poor.^{17,42,67} Governments have responded differently to support their people with varying benefits and support packages.⁶⁸ For example, the U.K and Denmark provided their people with a basic income to stop them from going to work.⁶⁹ Other countries, like Spain, have implemented a permanent basic income.³ Additionally, organizations have contributed to global financial support. The World Bank is committing to \$160 billion to financing global COVID-19 responses.⁶⁸ The United Nations Development Programme proposed a temporary basic income for low-income countries.⁶⁸ In the long run, a universal basic income could help narrow the income gap, reduce food insecurity, and improve health and well-being.^{22,70}

Supporting the Elderly

The elderly individuals are at risk for mental and physical illness. With social distancing measures in place, many elderly individuals may become isolated, impacting their mental and physical health. Various methods have been identified to better support elderly individuals throughout the pandemic to meet their mental and social needs, including staying connected on online platforms and participating in virtual activities like group choir, board games, mass, or religious services.²⁷ Online supports for the elderly might pose challenges, as many elderly individuals may not be familiar with the use of technology.

Public Health

In the future, public health could include incorporating epidemic-intelligence divisions to track disease outbreaks and careful screening for any symptoms when entering countries by air, land, or sea.²² More than 6000 individuals have signed a petition supporting health as a shared EU competence in the EU and allowing the bloc to act as a federal state in health emergencies.³ This would allow for greater movement of medical staff and patients. Countries hit harder would have medical staff sent to their region.³ In addition, hospitals that reach their maximum capacity could move patients to other countries with a greater capacity.³ In Canada, provinces could gain more freedom in managing public health.⁶ National public health agencies have teamed up with tech companies (e.g., Facebook) to keep individuals informed about COVID-19.³ The pandemic has revealed weaknesses in public health systems, creating opportunities for growth in a post-COVID-19 world.⁶

Governance

Throughout the pandemic, there has been a divergence in response from government and leaders.⁷¹ Collective action at the national and international levels will make for a better recovery post-COVID-19.⁴ In the present, cooperation is required on research and knowledge, as well as maintaining global supply. However, in the future, communication on potential outbreaks is essential for early intervention.⁴ Additionally, institutions like The World Health Organization

can oversee collaboration and assist in navigating pandemic responses.⁴ However, WHO needs better funding to carry out its job, and governments must follow the advice.⁴

Climate

Climate change existed before COVID-19 and current measures have shown different ways in which countries can work to address climate change. A post-covid-19 future should strive to be greener.⁷¹ An improvement in urban environments has been noticed in many cities. According to satellite data, atmospheric levels of nitrogen dioxide have dropped over cities and industrial centers across Europe and Asia.¹⁴

Education

Suggestions in future adjustments to education include incorporating health education, social studies, and science into the k-12 curriculum and beyond to educate students on their responsibilities and rights as citizens of a democracy under stress.²² To offset the cost of higher education, universities and colleges could provide free education in exchange for at least 2 years of work experienced in public services.²²

Canadian Homelessness in Response and Recovery

A summary of poverty and social assistance in Canada preceding the COVID-19 identified that while poverty and welfare dependency have fallen in the past 20 years, gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups have persisted.⁷² In addition to broad federal programs of income benefits and wage subsidies,⁷³ the federal government expanded investment into both the Homelessness Strategy⁷⁴ as well into Rapid Housing through the Housing Strategy.⁷⁵ Although a series of housing policies have been implemented, locally and around the world,⁷⁶ there is further work to be done. Further housing and economic policies may be needed to support recovery of experienced hardships and to maintain established goals, including that “everyone in Canada has a home that they can afford and that meets their needs”.⁷⁷

A recent report assesses potential long-term impacts of the current recession on rates of homelessness in Canada.⁷⁸ It advocates for the federal government to monitor the evolution of socioeconomic indicators, since the onset of the pandemic and moving forward for years to come. It also proposes greater economic support at the federal and provincial levels, particularly time-limited assistance focused on homelessness prevention.

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