



## **The Psycho-Social Impacts of Covid-19: A Review of the Literature**

**Executive Summary**

Katherine Bell

July 2020

**Canadian Poverty Institute**

---

**The Canadian Poverty Institute**  
150 Ambrose Circle SW  
Calgary, Alberta  
T3H 0L5

[PovertyInstitute@ambrose.edu](mailto:PovertyInstitute@ambrose.edu)

[www.povertyinstitute.ca](http://www.povertyinstitute.ca)

@CndPovertyInst

### Executive Summary

While there is no consistent definition of disasters used in literature, many studies agree that disasters share three primary characteristics according to Goldmann & Galea (2014). First, disasters threaten harm or death to a significant percentage of the population; second, they cause disruptions of service, social networks, and social processes which can result in loss of resources; and third, disasters result in secondary consequences, such as identifiable mental and physical health outcomes (Goldmann & Galea, 2014). While epidemics are a unique category of emergency and do not have the same catastrophic physical repercussions as natural disasters, epidemics can share the same three primary characteristics as disasters described historically and can result in physical harm, service and resource disruption, and lasting psycho-social impacts. By this definition, COVID-19 is found to be a “disaster” that has significantly impacted the lives of individuals on a local, national and global scale. It is therefore valuable to anticipate the short-term and long-term impacts of the virus by exploring key trends in how historical disasters and epidemics have impacted individuals, especially the most vulnerable populations. The following document uses key learnings from historical disasters and epidemics and emerging research on the global and national impacts of COVID-19 to explore the psycho-social impacts of COVID-19 on mental health.

Findings indicate that the increased isolation, financial unpredictability, stress, and shock of the COVID-19 pandemic can result in severe and long-term psychological distress. Specific demographics and vulnerable groups, as described in this report, have also been found to be more at risk during uncertain times, and can therefore feel psychological impacts of COVID-19 more drastically (Makwana, 2019). Despite the increase in mental health concerns of Canadians during the pandemic and findings from historical disasters and pandemics indicating the variety of adverse impacts of emergencies on mental health, findings reveal that Canadians are not receiving accessible and quality resources to help them cope with complex psycho-social impacts and uncertainties introduced by COVID-19.

- **Impacts of Disasters and Epidemics on Mental Health:** Studies have indicated a strong relationship between epidemics and disasters and increased mental health concerns. Disasters and Epidemics can introduce several shocks that are associated with elevated levels of acute psychological distress that can result in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, Substance Use Disorder, and other psychological symptoms and comorbidities. While historical epidemics are most commonly associated with increased rates of depression and anxiety, research suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic may present unique psychosocial impacts due to its length, spread, media exposure, and unpredictability.
- **Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian Mental Health:** Recent data suggests that the mental health of Canadians has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with reports of anxiety increasing from 5% to 20% and depression from 4% to 10%. Increased levels of

anxiety and depression were found to be associated with economic loss, concern for family members, self-isolation, household conflict, and social media and news exposure. Several Canadian cities have experienced an increase in distress center calls and predict increased suicide rates across Canada due to unemployment.

- **Vulnerable and Most Impacted Populations:** Specific populations have been found to be more vulnerable to experiencing psychological distress due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Children have especially been impacted by media exposure, family conflict, and loss of routine. Visible minorities and recent immigrants have reported increased experience of stigma and racism and gender diverse individuals have been found to be more worried about the impacts of the epidemic than male or female counterparts. Individuals with low social economic status, seniors, and individuals with pre-existing health and mental health concerns are also adversely impacted.
- **Mental Health Supports:** Findings indicate that, despite increased distress center calls, there has been a slight decrease in individuals accessing mental health supports during the outbreak (from 22% to 20%). In addition, 33% of Canadians surveyed reported limited access to mental health supports since the pandemic and 27% reported that the quality of mental health support has declined. In this way, an increased percentage of Canadians are in need of mental health supports, but fewer are accessing them since COVID-19, and those who are, are not getting the quality of support needed.

In conclusion, a large body of research indicates that historical disasters and pandemics can have lasting negative impacts on the mental health of survivors. Emerging data on the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that the virus has been a disaster that has and will have lasting impact on the mental health of individuals on a local, national, and global scale. Recent Canadian surveys report increased levels of anxiety, depression, and isolation. Specific populations are found to be more impacted and at risk of developing adverse psychological symptoms, especially children, immigrants and visible minorities, and gender diverse individuals. The global reach of the pandemic, media-coverage, and wide-spread loss of routine and social network has exposed a significantly greater population to stress, loss, and uncertainty than historical disasters and epidemics, making it increasingly necessary to improve access and quality of mental health resources to impacted individuals and vulnerable populations.

---

## FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

The Canadian Poverty Institute  
Ambrose University  
150 Ambrose Circle SW  
Calgary, Alberta,  
T3H 0L5  
[www.povertyinstitute.ca](http://www.povertyinstitute.ca)  
[povertyinstitute@ambrose.edu](mailto:povertyinstitute@ambrose.edu)

