

## Social Effects of COVID-19 - Spruce Grove Report

### Purpose

The intention of this report is to update the City of Spruce Grove on information related to the social effects of COVID-19 and is a continuation of the reports from April and June 2020.

This report will:

- Highlight new information that has emerged since the previous reports.
- Analyse social policies and new data that have emerged between July – November 2020.
- Forecast future social effects into 2021.
- Provide recommendations to support social wellbeing, recovery, and community resiliency at the local level.

This report will specifically focus on the current economic and social landscape, and indicators such as rates of opioid-related deaths and suicide in Alberta, increasing COVID-19 active case numbers in Alberta and the Edmonton zone, and evolving COVID-19 research. Social policies implemented as a direct result of COVID-19 will be highlighted, and the report will conclude with a social analysis and recommendations.

### Methods and Limitations

Data was gathered by reviewing recent publications offered by organizations (e.g., government bodies, World Health Organization (WHO), Centre for Disease Control (CDC) and the Conference Board of Canada) and peer-reviewed articles. National news outlets were utilized to provide contextual examples of the data. Online information gathering used key words from primarily Canadian sources and was sorted by date to view the most recently published articles.

Local data includes results of the COVID-19 Recovery Survey conducted by the City of Spruce Grove<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Data from population survey is utilized for this report. This survey was conducted with 400 residents via landline telephone sampling. Age quotas were established to ensure appropriate demographic representation and findings reflect no greater than  $\pm 4.9\%$  at the 95% confidence level.

Limitations of this report include the following:

- COVID-19 and the systems that affected are complex and continually evolving. The total social effects will be discovered and revealed over time.
- Local context and analysis can be increased with data sharing across organizations.
- Recommendations are offered utilizing a social lens<sup>2</sup>.
- Methodologies used in peer-reviewed articles were not cross examined.
- As the pandemic progresses and the amount of available information grows, separating valid, current information from the deluge of misinformation becomes increasingly difficult for scientists, decisions makers, and the general public (McKinley, 2020).
- Given the speed at which changing during the pandemic, information captured in this report may not reflect recent information or social policies.

## The Current Economic Landscape

The health of the economy has direct effects on the social and physical well-being of individuals<sup>3</sup>. A growing body of research shows a connection between experiencing socioeconomic disadvantages (such as unemployment, poverty, debt, poor housing, and low income) and having poor mental health (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2010; Platt et al., 2017; Macintyre, Ferris & Quinn 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic is having significant impacts on the health, social and economic wellbeing of people in Canada and across the globe (Government of Canada, 2020a). Insight into economic trends and indicators provides understanding and linkages with residual current and future social effects.

## Unemployment

In June 2020, the unemployment rate<sup>4</sup> in Alberta reached 15.5%, which is the highest unemployment rate the province has recorded (Government of Alberta, 2020a). By October

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<sup>2</sup> The social lens utilised seeks to promote equity, diversity, inclusion, wellbeing, and social justice for vulnerable people to foster a thriving community for all residents

<sup>3</sup> E.g., income and employment are two key social determinants of health

<sup>4</sup> The unemployment rate is the measure of those that are unemployed (i.e., seeking work in the labour force) as a percentage of the total labour force (employed and unemployed) (Statistics Canada, 2020a)

2020, the unemployment rate improved to 10.7% as employment gains were made in healthcare and social assistance, transportation and warehousing, wholesale and retail trade, and natural resources (Government of Alberta, 2020a; Statistics Canada, 2020a). Improvements in unemployment rates in October 2020 were reported in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Prince Edward Island, and held steady in the rest. Despite these improvements, Alberta's current unemployment rate is the second highest in the country after Newfoundland and Labrador, and Alberta is lagging behind as other provinces near their pre-pandemic unemployment rates reported in February 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2020a).

### GDP

Another economic indicator displaying signs that Canada is on the path towards economic recovery is the growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). GDP is the most widely used indicator for assessing the health of, and tracking the size of, a nation's economy (International Monetary Fund, 2020). GDP is not synonymous with public wellbeing or enhanced quality of life as it does not factor in the economy's impacts on natural, social, and human capital (Giannetti et. al, 2015; Svenfelt, 2019; Dwyer, 2020).

The table below summarizes the changes in Canada's real GDP this year showing steady increase since April 2020:

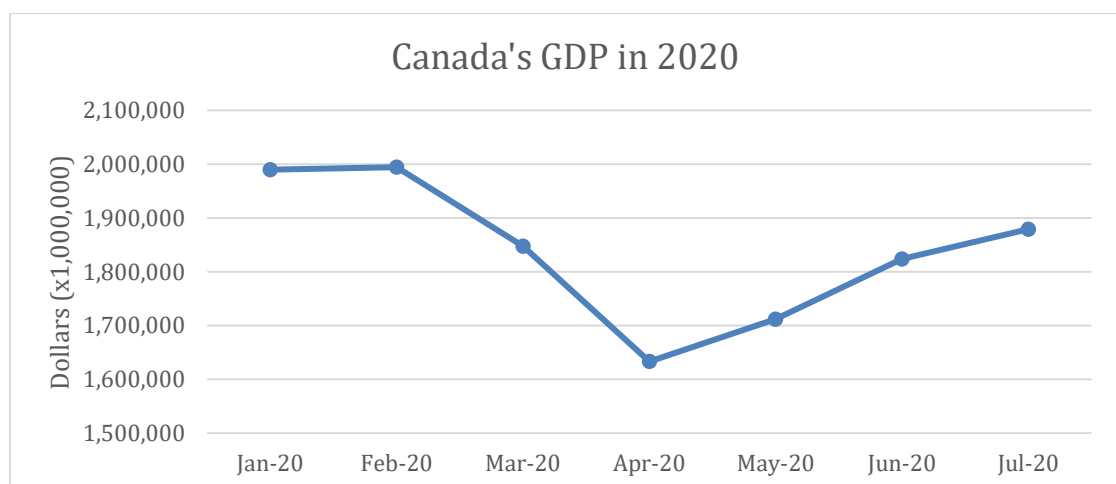


Table 1. Aggregation of Canada's GDP, seasonally adjusted at annual rates, across all industries reported in the North American Industry Classification System (Statistics Canada, 2020b)

Although monthly GDP figures show improvements since April, it is anticipated that Canada's GDP will have contracted by 8.2% by the end of 2020 (The Conference Board of Canada, 2020a).

In Alberta, the provincial government is anticipating GDP to contract by 8.8% in 2020, which would be the largest annual decline the province has experienced in modern day history (Government of Alberta, 2020b). The Conference Board of Canada predicts that Alberta's GDP will fall by 11.3% in 2020 and that the combination of lock downs and low oil prices will mean Alberta's economy will be the hardest hit by the pandemic (True North Wire, 2020; The Conference Board of Canada, 2020a).

### **Local Economic Impacts**

The City of Spruce Grove COVID-19 Recovery Survey found:

- 69% of residents reported changes to employment or income within their households as a result of COVID-19; of those affected, 31% reported temporary layoffs, 26% reported reduction in hours, and 14% permanently lost their jobs.
- 53% of respondent's households accessed COVID-19 support programs and resources. CERB<sup>5</sup> was the primary benefit that Spruce Grove residents accessed, with 32% of the city's population or approximately 11,450 people<sup>6</sup> applying.
- Approximately 24% of the province's population<sup>7</sup> applied for CERB (Government of Canada, 2020b; Government of Alberta, 2020c). The rate of Spruce Grove's population accessing CERB is 8% higher than the Provincial rate.
- Respondents rated economic development programs and support for local businesses as having the highest level of importance for recovery efforts.

Alberta's economic landscape was declining prior to COVID-19, with 54,000 jobs being lost between November 2019 – January 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2020c,

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<sup>5</sup> CERB was available between March 15, 2020 and October 3, 2020 and provided applicants with \$2,000/month. People can still retroactively apply for CERB payments until December 2, 2020 (Government of Canada, 2020f; The Canadian Press, 2020a).

<sup>6</sup> According to the 2018 Census, Spruce Grove's population is 35,766; assuming 32% of residents applied:  $35,766 \times 32\% = 11,445.12$ ; rounded up to 11,450 (City of Spruce Grove, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> As of July 1, 2020 Alberta's population was 4,421,876;  $1071450/4421876 = 24\%$  (Government of Alberta, 2020c).

2020d). It continues to struggle to recover as a result of various factors, including collapsing oil prices<sup>8</sup>, the economic shut down, and decreased demand for oil (The Conference Board of Canada, 2020b; Royal Bank of Canada Economics, 2020; CBC News, 2020a). While Canada's GDP is steadily increasing and provincial unemployment rates are nearing their pre-pandemic February 2020 levels, recovery appears to be happening at a slower rate in Alberta.

## The Current Social Landscape

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020 and there is a lot of uncertainty as to when it will end (WHO, 2020a; Bliss et. al, 2020; Varlik, 2020). While the pandemic affects all people living in Canada, it is not impacting everyone equally due to factors such as access to resources, power and privilege, employment and income, and overall health and wellbeing prior to the pandemic (Government of Canada, 2020a; City of Spruce Grove, 2020a, 2020b). The structural determinants of health<sup>9</sup> are contributing to health inequities because they dictate how resources, money, and power are distributed within society which provide individuals with greater or lesser agency over their health (City of Spruce Grove, 2020b; Government of Canada, 2020a). This contributes to increased risks of exposure and susceptibility to COVID-19 for certain populations, including homeless people, racialized and Indigenous people, people with disabilities, migrant workers, temporary foreign workers, immigrant populations, and low-income individuals (Government of Canada, 2020a). Additionally, the pandemic is exacerbating issues around mental health, addictions, suicide, and trust in health recommendations from various sources.

### Mental Health

The Spruce Grove COVID-19 Recovery Survey found that supports for mental health and addressing social isolation is a priority within the local community with respect to the pandemic recovery efforts, with 73% of respondents indicating it is important. Mental health is being challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic. This sustained crisis is leading to

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<sup>8</sup> The Russia-Saudi Arabia price war in March collapsed global oil prices and caused Alberta producers to cut back production and capital spending

<sup>9</sup> Includes social and economic policies, societal values and norms, governance structures, etc.

the new phenomenon “pandemic fatigue” which refers to the exhaustion and feelings of numbness resulting from the unrelenting stress of COVID-19 (UCLA Health, 2020; Pittaro, 2020). Community members are also experiencing grief for the way life was before the pandemic, including loss of freedoms, rituals, and events, which impacts their sense of self and feelings of connectedness (Haelle, 2020; Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Ontario, 2020; Weir, 2020). Mental health is also being challenged by physical distancing measures, especially for Indigenous people<sup>10</sup> and children confined at home (Government of Canada, 2020a). Healthcare professionals, frontline workers, and informal caregivers<sup>11</sup> are also reporting negative mental health from the increased pressures and stress of their work (Lai et. al, 2020; Government of Canada, 2020a).

Increasing incidences of discrimination are leading to poorer mental health for some groups. Statistics Canada reported that 30% of participants of Chinese descent felt that race-based incidents had increased since the start of the pandemic<sup>12</sup> (Statistics Canada, 2020e). Online incidences of anti-Asian hate, sinophobic<sup>13</sup> behaviours, and stigmatizing language has increased during the pandemic (Government of Canada, 2020a). Researchers conducting a study in March and April, 2020 found that higher incidences of acute discrimination directed towards those of East Asian descent during the pandemic is resulting in higher levels of mental health symptoms compared to white residents in Canada (Wu et. al., 2020). Approximately of 6% of Spruce Grove’s population is of Asian descent<sup>14</sup> (City of Spruce Grove Economic & Business Development, 2019).

### **Addictions**

Alberta saw a surge in opioid overdoses amid the pandemic with 301 reported opioid related deaths between April to June 2020. This is more than double the rate between January to March 2020, and nearly double the rate from the same time last year<sup>15</sup>. This

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<sup>10</sup> 60% of Indigenous participants in a Statistics Canada survey indicated their self-perceived mental health was worse since onset of physical distancing compared to 52% non-Indigenous respondents

<sup>11</sup> Including those caring for a friend or family member with a long-term health condition, problems related to aging, or a physical or mental disability

<sup>12</sup> Compared to 18% among visible minority participants and 6% of non-visible minorities

<sup>13</sup> Sinophobia refers to anti-Chinese sentiments

<sup>14</sup> 2,089 individuals identified as either: Chinese, South Asian, Filipino, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean, and Japanese. 2089/35,766 total population in Spruce Grove = 5.8%

<sup>15</sup> 153 overdose deaths reported April – June, 2019 (Government of Alberta, 2019)

means that nearly the same number of people have died from opioid overdoses in those three months as the province's total COVID-related deaths (398 as of November 12, 2020) since the start of the pandemic<sup>16</sup> (Government of Alberta, 2020d). Vulnerable people with substance use disorders are experiencing increased isolation, anxiety and stress on top of the challenges in accessing supports and services they need due to public health measures calling for physical distancing and limited trips outside the home (Government of Alberta, 2020e; Government of Canada, 2020a). In March, there was a decrease in utilization of harm reduction and treatment services, and a significant increase in the number of harms from opioid use. Adherence to treatment programs fell from 86% in March to 52.6% in April and 55.8% in May, but began to rebound in June to 84.2%. Toxicity of illegal drugs also increased because closing borders disrupted illicit substance supply chains, and many dealers contaminated products with toxic additives to stretch their supplies (Fletcher, 2020; Government of Canada, 2020a; The Canadian Press, 2020b).

### **Suicide Rates**

Alberta has the highest rate of suicides in Canada; approximately 500 of the 4,000+ people that die by suicide in Canada every year are from Alberta (Labine, 2020). There is no clear reason why this is, but some suspect Alberta's boom and bust economy connected to oil prices may be a contributing factor (Labine, 2020). Since March 2020, Alberta crisis centres are reporting increased numbers of suicide-related calls. For example, call volumes to the Edmonton region Canadian Mental Health Association distress line have increased by 5% overall compared to 2019. The Distress Centre in Calgary reported a 23.5% increase in suicide-related contacts since March, with a spike of 83.8% in calls at the end of August compared to the same time last year (Labine, 2020). Despite increased calls, preliminary data shows that suicide deaths in 2020 are trending below the six-year-monthly average (Thomas, 2020). Alberta's Associate Minister of Health credits this decrease in part to the \$53 million invested in the COVID-19 Mental Health and Addiction Action Plan which has included improvements to existing distress line services, clinical supports, recovery treatments, and online services (Thomas, 2020).

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<sup>16</sup> Pandemic was declared on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020a)

## **School Re-entry**

In preparation for the 2020/2021 school year during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Alberta developed three different scenarios for the re-entry plan. Schools re-opened this fall under Scenario 1 with classes resuming in person and additional health measures being implemented to keep students and staff safe. Students had options to return to the classroom, learn online with the option of transitioning to the classroom at specified dates throughout the academic year, learn exclusively online, or opt for homeschooling with a guardian. The Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) had about 70% of students return to in-person learning at the start of the school year (Bench, 2020). At the end of the first quarter in early November, EPSB and Edmonton Catholic School Board noted there were significant numbers of students moving in between online and in-person learning, with more elementary-aged students moving to in person and more high school students moving online (Stolte, 2020). Lower income jobs are less stable and less likely to be able to be done remotely which meant these parents/guardians likely sent children back to in-person learning (City of Spruce Grove, 2020a; Qian, 2020).

As of November 24, 2020 there are zero schools under the “enhanced” status, 64 schools under the “watch” status, 114 schools that are “open but with an outbreak of 2-4 cases”, and the remainder are considered “open” (Government of Alberta, 2020g). Additionally, all City of Spruce Grove schools are open, and there are outbreaks of 2-4 cases at Prescott Learning Centre, Copperhaven School, and Spruce Grove Composite High School (Government of Alberta, 2020g).

## **Rising COVID-19 Cases**

As stated in the previous Social Impacts – June report, research was suggesting that a second wave was probable. On September 23, 2020, Justin Trudeau announced that there is no doubt that Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec have entered a second wave of the pandemic (CBC News, 2020c). COVID-19 cases continue to rise in Alberta with record numbers being consistently reported throughout October and November. On November 22, Alberta broke its one-day record increase for the fourth consecutive day with 1,584 new COVID-19 confirmed cases (CBC News, 2020e). This number was higher than daily cases reported in Ontario and Quebec, which are approximately 3.5 and 2 times more populous



than Alberta respectively (CBC News, 2020e). As of November 24, 2020, there are 93 active number of cases in Spruce Grove and the city is under “enhanced” status whereby additional health measures are put into place, such as the enactment of the mask bylaw (Government of Alberta, 2020d). In response to the growing cases, the province has suspended asymptomatic testing for individuals who do not have a known exposure to someone infected with COVID-19. This measure aims to reduce wait times for test results and to limit the spread of the virus, since it was determined that only 0.11% of asymptomatic Albertans contracted the virus without known exposure (CBC News, 2020d). Of Alberta’s active cases, 85% do not have an identified source and the spike in cases has overwhelmed the contact tracing system, meaning that 3,000 positive cases that are backlogged from more than 10 days ago will no longer be investigated (CBC News, 2020f).

### **Prevention Guidelines**

The World Health Organization, Government of Canada, and Government of Alberta all recommend wearing non-medical masks or face coverings when out in public and in settings where it can be difficult to maintain 2 meters of distance (World Health Organization, 2020b; Government of Canada, 2020e; Government of Alberta, 2020f). Masks are meant to be used as a complementary tool towards keeping oneself safe during the pandemic alongside regular hand washing, physical distancing, and staying home when sick (World Health Organization, 2020b; Government of Canada, 2020c; Government of Alberta, 2020f). It has not been proven that masks protect the wearer but, when worn properly, they reduce the spread of that person’s potentially infectious respiratory droplets (World Health Organization, 2020b; Government of Canada, 2020c; Government of Alberta, 2020f). Emerging evidence is suggesting that COVID-19 is airborne and can be spread by aerosol particles, which has prompted the Government of Canada to update guidelines to include wearing masks indoors when with people who are not from your household, and to maximize ventilation as best as possible in the winter by ensuring HVAC systems are in good working order, opening windows when the weather permits, and reducing noise levels in public places so people can speak as quietly as possible (Government of Canada, 2020e).

### **Spread of Misinformation**

In the age of the internet and social media, misinformation<sup>17</sup> tends to spread more rapidly than truth, is often more popular than accurate messages, and is very difficult to debunk once it has been spread (Wang et. al, 2019; Government of Canada, 2020a). Dissemination of misinformation during the pandemic is dangerous because it can prevent the delivery of accurate information from reaching the public, hindering efforts to fight the virus.

Misinformation can also promote unsafe behaviours that increase the spread of COVID-19 and cause poor physical and mental health outcomes (Tasnim, Hossain, & Mazumder, 2020). It can also exacerbate fears, conspiracy theories, and racism, resulting in unconstructive, harmful behaviours (Government of Canada, 2020a).

According to the COVID-19 Recovery Survey, Spruce Grove residents are getting their main sources of information on COVID-19 from a variety of channels:

- 52% of respondents indicated using the Government of Alberta's COVID-19 website
- 42% indicated using online media sources
- 41% indicated using social media
- 39% indicated using radio news
- 36% indicated using the Government of Canada's COVID-19 website
- 35% indicated word of mouth through friends, family, and co-workers.

## Social Policy Response to COVID-19

The social policy response is viewed from a holistic frame that includes formal policy and legislation changes, practices, and activities specifically targeted to address social factors that are being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This encompasses financial supports, public safety measures, and paradigm-shifting policies that are receiving renewed interest as they could contribute to recovery efforts and alleviating stressors Canadians are experiencing.

### Canadian Emergency Response Benefit transition to new Employment Insurance

The Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) temporarily assisted Canadians struggling due to work interruptions resulting from the pandemic. On September 27, 2020, the

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<sup>17</sup> Includes inaccurate information shared intentionally or unintentionally that causes harm.

Government of Canada transitioned to a simplified Employment Insurance (EI) program (Government of Canada, 2020d) from the CERB. The temporary measures expected to be in place for one year to help Canadians access EI are: 120 hours of work required to qualify<sup>18</sup>; minimum benefit rate of \$400 per week; and, at least 26 weeks of regular benefits. EI Premium rates are frozen for employees at the 2020 level for two years so employers and employees do not need to pay increased premiums during this time of economic uncertainty (Government of Canada, 2020d). Along with these temporary changes to EI, three new taxable benefits that are effective for one year starting September 27, 2020 have been introduced:

- 1) Canada Recovery Benefit<sup>19</sup>
- 2) Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit<sup>20</sup>
- 3) Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit<sup>21</sup>

### **Guaranteed Basic Income**

The goal of a guaranteed basic income is to ensure all individuals within a given society can stay above the poverty line and afford the basic necessities of life (e.g., food, clothing, and shelter). In Spruce Grove, the poverty line for a family of four is an annual household income of \$44,874<sup>22</sup> and at least 1,325 families<sup>23</sup> are below it (Statistics Canada, 2020f; City of Spruce Grove Economic & Business Development, 2019). The Federal government is currently looking into the potential of evolving the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) into a guaranteed basic income (Lum, 2020). This could support self-employed workers that do not qualify for EI and have been stressed by the pandemic.

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<sup>18</sup> Compared to pre-pandemic requirements to have 420 insurable hours to qualify for regular benefits (job loss) and 600 insurable hours to qualify for special benefits (sickness, maternity/parental, compassionate care or family caregiver) (Government of Canada, 2020d).

<sup>19</sup> \$400/week for 26 weeks for people not eligible for EI; must apply every 2 week period to confirm they still meet the eligibility; taxable

<sup>20</sup> \$500/week for 2 weeks for people who cannot work because they are sick or must self-isolate because of COVID-19; workers need to have missed 60% or more of their scheduled work for the weeks they are applying for this benefit

<sup>21</sup> \$500/week for 26 weeks per household; workers would apply after the period they are seeking support for and confirm they meet the requirements; two members from the same household cannot apply for this benefit for the same period of time

<sup>22</sup> Market basket measure: 2018 reference period; Alberta, population 30,000 to 99,999. This is a measure of the disposable income a family would need to be able to purchase a basket of goods that includes food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and other basic needs (The Conference Board of Canada, 2011)

<sup>23</sup> 1740 households earn less than \$40,000/year and 76.17% of households are families therefore  $76.17\% \times 1740 = 1325$ . Cannot discern how many make between \$40,000 - \$44,874. This number is an estimate.

**Face Coverings Bylaws**

Several municipalities across Canada, including the City of Spruce Grove, developed Face Coverings Bylaws. The City of Spruce Grove's Temporary Mandatory Face Coverings Bylaw (bylaw # C-1128-20) was approved by Spruce Grove City Council on August 17, 2020. This bylaw is enacted when the city is under a "watch" status as determined by Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health. In addition to other factors, a watch may be implemented by the Province when there are at least 10 active cases and more than 50 active cases per 100,000 population. In Spruce Grove this means the threshold is 18 active cases. On October 23, 2020 the bylaw was implemented and is currently in place (as of November 17, 2020) (City of Spruce Grove, 2020c).

**Childcare**

The federal government is exploring a Canada-wide early-learning and childcare system to support COVID-19 recovery (Evans, 2020; Ferguson, 2020). While the details have yet to be released, the goal of a universal childcare system is to have a system funded primarily through the government with low to no fees for parents and guardians (Kennedy, 2020). Alberta had previously implemented a subsidized, \$25-a-day childcare pilot program in 2017; the first phase of it ended on July 31, 2020 and meant that approximately 1,300 families across 22 daycare centers experienced increased costs for childcare. The second phase of the program which includes 6000 spaces across 100 centers is expected to end in April 2021. These policies changes have added strain to families accessing the program, causing them to feel additional stress during the pandemic (CBC News, 2020b).

**Pharmacare Plan**

Before the pandemic, approximately 7.5 million people in Canada had no or inadequate prescription drug coverage. Between March and April 2020, three million jobs were lost because of the COVID-19 lockdown. Unemployment continues to be high resulting in even more people living in Canada have lost prescription drug coverage from their employment-related benefits (Heart and Stroke Foundation, 2020). The need for improved access to pharmaceuticals has increased as a result of the pandemic and has renewed interest in a pharmacare program. A recent study published by the Angus Reid Institute found that

within the past year, 23% of Canadians have not filled or renewed their prescriptions because they cannot afford to keep the recommended dosage schedule. The study also found that Canadian's were twice as likely to lose prescription drug coverage than to gain it, and that 37% of households earning less than \$50,000 reported paying for at least half of their prescriptions within the past year. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, 86% of Canadians indicated support for a national pharmacare program and 77% believe it should be a high priority for the government (Angus Reid Institute, 2020). On November 18, 2020, Bill C-213 (Canada Pharmacare Act introduced as a private member's bill) underwent its second reading in the House of Commons (Parliament of Canada, 2020).

## Analysis

This section explores what the information presented means now, in the future, and locally for the City of Spruce Grove. The information to-date demonstrates a continually shifting terrain for the City of Spruce Grove to navigate economic, health, social, and political factors interplaying in dynamic ways.

The path forward to recovery is dependent on both understanding the current context and anticipating future changes. Economically, Alberta as a whole and Spruce Grove residents have been significantly affected by the downturn in the economy. Spruce Grove residents accessed CERB 8% above the provincial average. One explanation could be that, compared to the provincial averages, more Spruce Grove residents work in construction and retail<sup>24</sup> which Statistics Canada identified as two of the four<sup>25</sup> industries that face longer paths to recovery (City of Spruce Grove, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2020g). The second wave, and subsequent public health orders, are likely to further exacerbate the strain on the economy and people's livelihoods. Canada's average GDP annual growth rate between 1962-2020 is 3.04% (Trading Economics, 2020). Given that it is projected to contract by 8.2% in 2020 (The Conference Board of Canada, 2020a), this means it could take nearly 3 years to get back to the pre-pandemic levels once economic recovery begins. Economic recovery is expected to

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<sup>24</sup> Nearly 16% of employed Spruce Grove residents work in the construction sector (compared to average 10.5% Albertans) and 13% of employed residents work in the retail industry (compared to average 10.6% Albertans) (City of Spruce Grove, 2017; Alberta Government, 2018)

<sup>25</sup> The other two industries are accommodation and food services, and transportation and warehousing.

take longer in Alberta than the rest of Canada, and the City of Spruce Grove could be looking at a minimum of 3-5 years to return to economic baseline after the pandemic ends.

Significant research links economic hardship and financial insecurity with social issues including domestic violence, mental illness and suicide ideation/ attempts, addictions, and food and housing insecurity (City of Spruce Grove, 2020a, 2020b). The City of Spruce Grove can anticipate that more residents will experience these social issues as a direct result of stress from the pandemic and economic challenges. For example, an estimated 1325 families in Spruce Grove were living below the poverty line in 2019 (City of Spruce Grove Economic & Business Development, 2019). This number is projected to be much higher when 2020 data is available.

The Government of Canada is currently exploring reform of the Employment Insurance program. There are several lessons and takeaways with the implementation of a Universal Basic Income-like program such as CERB. Certainly, the impact of COVID-19 would have been worse without this social safety net especially in Spruce Grove where over one quarter of residents accessed this program. Studies have shown that guaranteed basic income increases quality of life, improves health, stimulates the economy, helps reduce income gaps, and is more efficient than providing traditional social welfare services (Calnitsky & Gonalons-Pons, 2020; Collier, 2020; Frankel, 2020). Critics of basic income argue that it supports low pay and insecure employment trends, is far too costly, shifts resources from those in need, and discourages workforce participation (Clifford & Dunk, 2020; Collier, 2020,). There is also substantial stigma about how individuals spend their benefits with one of the most referenced being that it facilitates access to drugs and alcohol. From an evidence-based perspective, the benefits of a universal basic income are substantial and CERB has demonstrated the resiliency that this kind of program offers.

Childcare also plays a role in the recovery for local community because it enables parents/guardians to participate in the workforce (Bateman, 2020; Qian, 2020). Women's participation in the labour force, in particular, is down to the lowest levels in three decades (Deschamps, 2020). Additionally, women are averaging 95 hours of work per week of caregiving since COVID-19 (compared to 68 hours per week beforehand). Men's hours have

also increased as they are doing an average of 46 hours of caregiving per week since the pandemic which is up from 33 hours before (Gregory, 2020). Having a more affordable childcare system has proven to increase participation in the workforce (Fortin, 2017). While the development of a universal basic income and childcare are within other government jurisdictions, the City of Spruce Grove can advocate for this as other municipalities, such as Calgary and Edmonton, are doing as the Federal Government explores options. As well, the City can anticipate additional policies to support a stronger social safety net, such as a Canadian pharmacare plan, as lessons from the pandemic create long-lasting societal changes.

Socially, as the pandemic draws out, all individuals within society are experiencing various levels of fatigue, stress, grief and loss, and tensions between individual rights and freedoms and actions for the collective good. Mental health is a high priority for recovery with Spruce Grove residents as 73% of those surveyed indicating its importance. This number indicates that likely within their immediate household, many residents are experiencing some mental health challenges as a result of the pandemic, comparable with the households impacted economically. Research around determinants of mental health has identified the three most important determinants of mental health are social inclusion, freedom from discrimination and violence, and access to economic resources (Keleher & Armstrong, 2005).

The pandemic has exacerbated and put a spotlight on systemic inequalities, increasing vulnerabilities for those that were already vulnerable (Bryant, Aquanno, and Raphael, 2020; City of Spruce Grove, 2020a, 2020b). For example, the rise in instances of discrimination and stigmatization towards individuals of Asian descent has put members of this group further at risk. This growing strain and awareness has created opportunity to foster and create more equitable and resilient systems through recovery, in a way that was not within the foreseeable future prior.

Skepticism about the urgency of COVID-19 and resistance to following public safety protocols amongst Albertans are impeding efforts to slow the spread (Kauffmann, 2020). This skepticism is difficult to counter as distrust in governments and science is growing (Dornan, 2020; Government of Canada, 2020a). Mask use, as an example, has been controversial in part because messaging has changed throughout the pandemic and

consistent policies are not in place among various jurisdictions. Alberta is the only province in Canada to not have a province-wide public health order regarding mandatory masks. Mask are mandatory in in the Edmonton and Calgary zones for indoor places of worship and workplaces. Several municipalities in Alberta have introduced mask bylaws though with variance in application; however, is likely causing confusion and mistrust regarding this health measure. As the recovery survey indicates, Spruce Grove residents are getting information on COVID-19 from a variety of sources including government websites, social media, and news outlets demonstrating a need for mixed forms of communication and consistency in the messages relayed.

## Conclusion

This report has used a social lens to explore the economic and social impacts the COVID-19 pandemic is having on the community of Spruce Grove. It provides a continuation of the reports published in April and June 2020 and aims to equip local decision makers with information needed to support the community through this crisis and recovery.

Any questions should be directed to the [Social Planning Unit](#).



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