

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Meeting the COVID-19 Challenge: Social impact and response in Prince Edward County

Reporting period: March 20, 2020 to March 31, 2021

Prepared for: The County of Prince Edward

Prepared by: The County Foundation

INTRODUCTION

2020 was a truly unprecedented year. Not since the 1918 influenza pandemic infected an estimated 500 million people and caused at least 50 million deaths¹ has the entire world's population found itself at severe mortal risk at the same time.

In mid-March, around the world, across Canada, throughout Ontario and here in Prince Edward County, the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly disrupted daily life. How we communicate, work, shop, learn, travel and socialize immediately changed. The upheaval the pandemic caused and continues to cause goes well beyond its medical impact. It is a human, economic and social crisis.

This report explores the social and economic impact of COVID-19 on Prince Edward County and the community's response to this ongoing crisis. It covers the period from March 20, 2020 – the start of Ontario's first provincial lockdown – to March 31, 2021. The promising news is that more than one year into the pandemic, people are now being vaccinated against COVID-19.²

While many aspects of life may normalize once "herd immunity" is reached, actions to address the pandemic are ongoing. Although the pandemic affects everyone, the health, social and economic impacts of the virus are being borne disproportionately by vulnerable populations.³ COVID-19 has revealed and magnified these inequities, demanding a new response from policymakers.

The data cited in this report is drawn from quantitative and qualitative primary and secondary sources. Areas of study are based on The County Foundation's Vital Signs® framework. Statistical data was gathered from national, provincial and municipal sources as well as from studies by community and regional organizations. Qualitative data reflects the thoughts and opinions of 55 key County service providers who represent 44 organizations.



The County of Prince Edward



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PEOPLE, PLACE and CULTURE

Prince Edward County is a rural island community in Southeastern Ontario, with employment concentrated in the hospitality/tourism and agricultural sectors. Our estimated population is 25,464⁴ and is older, with the median age at least 13.2 years higher than Ontario's.⁵

The rate of COVID-19 infection and deaths in our health region of Hastings Prince Edward has remained markedly low, at 310 per 100,000 population (as of March 31/21), compared to Ontario's at 2392.⁶

During these challenging times, community members are working together to support the most vulnerable, especially seniors and youth. However, the volunteer base has shifted from primarily seniors to younger generations, as people aged 70+ are advised to self-isolate at home due to higher health risks.

Shutdowns and social isolation are testing our connection and resilience. While local businesses and organizations are responding by delivering services in new ways, the local creative economy is among the hardest hit sectors.

During 2020, public activism to address race, gender, class, religion and sexual orientation inequities became widespread.⁷ Creating a sense of belonging for all residents starts with acknowledging systemic discrimination and intolerance. Public demonstrations, community conversations, meaningful activities and increased efforts toward inclusion are among the actions being undertaken to address long-standing inequities.



HEALTH and WELLNESS

Hastings Prince Edward residents fall within several high-risk health categories which can also make them more susceptible to COVID-19 complications. When compared with the province, the median age of citizens is higher, as are rates for obesity, smoking, heavy drinking and prevalence of chronic disease.⁸

The existing opioid crisis has been intensified by the pandemic. Hastings Prince Edward was one of five regions in the province to see a 30% increase in hospital attended overdoses in 2020 compared to the same period in the previous year.⁹

The negative mental health impacts of COVID-19 can be expected to last for some time and will place an added burden on Canada's already overwhelmed mental health system. Young people aged 15 to 24 are more likely to experience mental illness and/or substance abuse disorders than any other age group.¹⁰

The pandemic is straining health care resources and placing frontline workers at high levels of risk and stress. Ontario's acute shortage of health care workers is adding more stress to long-term care homes and hospitals.¹¹

Health care providers are leveraging virtual care as much as possible to provide care for patients without putting them at risk, putting staff at risk, or over-extending available personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies.



SAFETY

COVID-19 lockdowns contributed to a 9% decrease in property crime in 2020. Residential break-ins and thefts were minimized with businesses being closed or restricted, and with more people being at home during the day.¹²

Combating fraud is an ongoing issue. With 89 reports of fraud in 2020, losses to members of the community were just less than \$300,000. It is estimated that only 5% of frauds are reported. *Project Safe Trade* was established at the PEC OPP office in August 2020 to provide a neutral spot where people can safely conduct transactions that they arranged online.¹³

The pandemic heightened risks for victims of domestic violence and child abuse. Social and physical distancing measures as well as “stay at home” lockdowns to curtail transmission of COVID-19 are reducing women’s access to supports and increasing their exposure to potential abuse. PEC domestic violence police reports are down 24% compared to the previous year¹⁴ and the number of calls to Alternatives for Women dropped by 63% in the first five months of 2020.¹⁵

Throughout the summer, higher than normal volumes of tourism traffic led to safety problems such as speeding, traffic congestion and illegal parking. Tragically, four people drowned at Provincial Parks in Prince Edward County. Increased trespassing incidents created anxiety for residents and detracted from the police attending to other matters.¹⁶



EMPLOYMENT and INCOME

COVID-19 and the measures necessary to contain the virus resulted in a 5.8% job loss in Eastern Ontario in 2020. The unemployment rate jumped to 7.7%, up from 4.9% in 2019.¹⁷ Long-term unemployment has increased.¹⁸

Ontario’s decline in employment affected PEC’s top industries: accommodation and food services (-24.7%), wholesale and retail trade (-5.6%), construction (-4.7%), and agriculture (-4.3%).¹⁸

23.7% of micro businesses (1-4 employees), which comprise almost half of PEC’s businesses, reported an annual revenue decrease of at least 40%.²⁰ Non-profit organizations that depend on earned and fundraising income were particularly hard hit.²¹

Physical distancing measures are changing the world of work. In addition to decreases in revenue, small businesses are facing challenges such as disrupted supply sources, inflexible fixed costs, increased technology requirements and employee retention.²²

The pandemic accelerated existing trends in remote work, e-commerce and automation. An estimated 40% of the global workforce requires partial reskilling to continue with their current occupations.²³ Many low-wage jobs have been lost while there has been a surge in high-wage jobs – Canada’s income gap is growing rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁴ Meanwhile, a lack of reliable internet access for rural residents and businesses across Eastern Ontario has been exposed by COVID-19.

As the crisis continues, the pandemic is deepening societal inequalities, widening the gap between those who are doing well, and those who are not. Low-income workers are being driven further into poverty and insecurity.



FOOD INSECURITY

The food insecurity rate among Canadians has grown during COVID-19. Almost one in seven (14.6%) people live in a household where there is food insecurity.²⁵ In PEC, that translates to approximately 3,700 people.²⁶

Food insecurity is most often found in households with low incomes. Especially vulnerable are households that rent their accommodation and those that are led by female single parents.²⁷ 65% of food-insecure households report their main source of income as wages or salaries from employment.²⁸

Feed Ontario lists the top three drivers of food bank usage as a growth in precarious employment, lack of affordable housing and insufficient social assistance programs.²⁹ Only about 25% of food insecure households use food banks.³⁰

Surging food prices are amplifying the risk of food insecurity. The pandemic is affecting the entire agri-food chain from farm gate to consumers. Forecasted food cost increases of 3 to 5% in 2021³¹ will have a greater impact on low-income households, and on people who have fixed incomes.

Starting in March 2020, the PEC community quickly mobilized to support food access during COVID-19. While emergency and supplementary food is being provided, the Food Collective projects and research are focused on transitioning from a charity to an empowerment model. This includes advocating for system and policy changes that address the root causes of food insecurity.



HOUSING – RENTING and OWNING

COVID-19 is intensifying housing instability in Prince Edward County. Job and income losses are making it difficult to manage household costs. Workers with less secure, lower-paying jobs were more affected by COVID-19 employment losses.³²

22.8% of PEC households were financially burdened before COVID-19, spending more than 30% (CMHC affordability threshold) of household income on housing. 48.9% of rented households were most affected by lack of affordability.³³

The housing shortage is worsening. PEC has the 4th lowest rental vacancy rate in Ontario at .4%. The competition is short term vacation rentals.³⁴ There is a wait list of 4 to 6 years for Rent-Geared-To-Income housing.³⁵ Ongoing work to increase the supply of affordable housing in PEC saw several projects make notable progress in 2020.

Rapidly rising rental prices are magnifying the problem of affordability. Rent in PEC increased 31% in the last year.³⁶ More people are in danger of becoming homeless.

With COVID-19 shutdowns, PEC's housing market felt the impact of increased homeowner demand. People from areas surrounding Toronto are purchasing local properties where they can work remotely and live more affordably. In 2020, about 75% of people relocating to PEC are from the GTA. This is increasing prices and reducing availability.³⁷



EDUCATION

The pandemic is particularly difficult for students, parents and educators. School closures, social and physical distancing requirements are intensifying academic challenges and the shift to remote learning has not served everyone equally.

Compared to Ontario, Hastings Prince Edward students historically have lower academic attainment. Reading, writing and particularly math scores for Grades 3 to 6 students are lower than and have declined in tandem with the Province.³⁸ Grade 12 graduation rates of 76.4% are significantly lower than the provincial average of 87.2%.³⁹

The sudden shift to online learning was challenging for educational institutions and many students, especially for low income and rural students with limited internet access. Social isolation, lack of structure and uncertainty were difficult adjustments for students. Parents were unexpectedly forced to juggle full-time childcare, work, supporting online learning and keeping their families safe. This was especially problematic for single parents and those who could not work from home.

Support for learning continued in many forms, including online schools and innovative educational programs created by local community organizations.

In terms of post-secondary education, 57% of post-secondary students reported that their courses and work placements were either delayed, postponed or cancelled in 2020.⁴⁰ Loyalist College offered students applied learning experiences in 65% of their programs with remote learning and creative scheduling of small classes, labs and workshops. Loyalist also launched more than 20 new programs including *Emergency Management* and *Incident Response* and an accelerated *Personal Support Worker* program.⁴¹



TRANSPORTATION

In August 2020, after years of fundraising and community efforts, County Transit non-profit public transportation was launched. During this three-year pilot project, routes are being adjusted based on uptake and feedback.

County Transit provides on-demand and fixed routes with 4 return trips to Belleville from Monday to Friday, and connections to key locations. Specialized transit service remained in full operation throughout 2020.⁴²

Lack of public transportation has been cited as an obstacle to accessing fresh food, obtaining employment, completing education and maintaining connections with the community.

COVID-19 interrupted volunteer driver services that provide escorted travel services. However, delivery of groceries and essential supplies continues for seniors and people confined at home, and local taxis are providing transportation with COVID-19 protocols in place.

The Cycling and Transportation Master Plan, to be completed in 2021, “imagines a future for Prince Edward County where trails and cycling routes are well connected, and where cycling provides a viable transportation option for residents and visitors alike”.⁴³



ENVIRONMENT

Pandemic lockdowns drew an unprecedented number of visitors, especially day-trippers from urban areas to outdoor spaces throughout Prince Edward County. In summer 2020, PEC beaches and natural areas were overwhelmed with visitors due to the closure of many Ontario beaches and parks.

Overcrowding at beaches and trash left behind by visitors was an ongoing problem. Concerns about safety, property abuse and non-permitted activities resulted in Little Bluff Conservation Area being closed in August for the remainder of 2020.⁴⁴

Reliance on single-use plastics increased with use of PPE disposable plastic gloves and masks, take-out food containers and non-reusable grocery bags.⁴⁵

Some provincial water quality monitoring network activities did not happen because Ministry labs were closed; there was no place to test water samples.⁴⁶

Planning ramped up to protect Prince Edward County's natural heritage. In early 2021, at a time when pressure to develop lands is greater than ever, Council adopted a new Official Plan. The County's Official Plan guides how the municipality will grow and develop over the next 25 years and includes protection of rural habitats and the natural environment.

Ontario began the process to designate Ostrander Point Crown Land Block and Point Petre Provincial Wildlife Area, two ecologically significant areas within the Prince Edward County South Shore Important Bird and Biodiversity Area, as a Conservation Reserve.⁴⁷



CRISIS as a CATALYST for CHANGE

It is evident that the pandemic will continue to fundamentally transform the economy, health care, workplaces, education, travel and recreation, societal norms and more.

Accelerated technology adoption is enabling more online services. However, an increased dependence on technology combined with limited access to reliable high-speed internet is widening the digital divide here in Prince Edward County.

Remote work increased to 40% in late March 2020, up from 13% in 2018.⁴⁸ The flexibility to work from any location is inspiring people to relocate from heavily populated urban areas to rural areas.

Community leaders continue to respond with adaptability and innovation. New and innovative approaches were launched, many of which will become permanent.

Perceptions, beliefs and social norms are shifting. Views about personal safety, human connections, inequities, essential workers, mental health and engagement with nature are changing.

The pandemic has inspired collaboration and common goals as well as broken down organizational barriers within the non-profit sector. Non-profits and businesses alike are creatively adapting and using technology to increase the efficiency of their service delivery and operations.

Great crises tend to trigger societal shifts and provide unique opportunities for renewal. Widespread momentum to “build back better” includes economic recovery and attending to long-standing social challenges such as inequality, mental health and inclusion. It is possible to emerge in a better place.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 continues to challenge and change everything. As this report is published, 23,002 Canadians have died as a result of COVID-19.⁴⁹ According to current statistics, 25,464 people live in Prince Edward County.⁵⁰ The number of deaths across Canada is almost equivalent to the entire population of our community.

Within Hastings Prince Edward, 6 lives have been lost and 514 cases of COVID-19 have been recorded.⁵¹ The promising news is that more than one year into the pandemic, people are now receiving vaccines.

As the pandemic disrupts lives and livelihoods, the social impact continues. Throughout Prince Edward County, individuals, groups and organizations are responding with resilience, creativity and reinvention. While many aspects of life may normalize once “herd immunity” is reached, we are all heading towards a very different future than what we envisioned at the start of 2020.

New ways of defining our individual and collective goals, objectives and values will help us discover and drive solutions to “build back better”. As we continue to learn from this unprecedented experience, thoughtful planning can help our community prepare for the challenges that lie ahead.

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