

# COVID SIGNPOST 200 DAYS



## Building Resilience to Confront Deepening Urban Crises



Canadian  
Urban  
Institute

Institut  
Urbain du  
Canada

# sign-post

: a post, often at a crossroads, with signs on it to direct travellers

: something that acts as guidance or a clue to an unclear or complicated issue

## CANADIAN URBAN INSTITUTE

CUI is Canada's Urban Institute. We are a national platform where policy makers, urban professionals, civic and business leaders, community activists and academics can learn, share and collaborate with one another from coast to coast to coast. Through research, engagement and storytelling, our mission is to support vibrant, equitable, livable and resilient cities in Canada.

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

CUI is committed to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. We acknowledge and respect that our programs are delivered on the territory of many Indigenous Peoples. CUI is headquartered in the City of Toronto, the traditional territory of many Nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands.

## PARTNERS

CUI is grateful to the many partners who have contributed to this report, as listed in the final section. The survey data throughout was provided in-kind by Advanis, based on a survey of more than 90,000 Canadians during the COVID pandemic. CUI gratefully acknowledges this contribution and extends thanks to Advanis for collecting detailed urban-level, racial and ethnic data from the beginning, which is unfortunately not as common in Canada as it should be. Other research contributions are cited throughout the report.



## LETTER FROM PRESIDENT & CEO MARY W. ROWE

### Building Resilience, Block by Block



**September 28, 2020**

Dear Reader,

Our initial **COVID Signpost 100** report was released 100 days after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID a global pandemic. Our intent then was to highlight the impacts we were seeing in Canada's cities, and to hopefully provide some focus amidst the chaos that seemed to surround us all at that point.

In late June there were so many questions, so much still to be discovered about the virus, and what the cumulative impacts of the measures taken to contain it would be. That report gave us a benchmark, *a signpost*, of an early moment in the course of a global pandemic, showing too many deaths in long term care facilities, and the disproportionate impact the crisis was having on people precariously housed or living in poverty.

This next instalment, **COVID Signpost 200**, arrives at a more sober moment – 200 days 'in' to a persistently acute crisis that has dragged us into a "new normal" of vacillating uncertainty.

There continue to be bright spots: the valiant efforts of front-line workers continuing to provide the essential services that make our cities work; main street restaurants and retailers quickly adapting to provide essential products and services in new, safer ways, on-line and in-person; universities and colleges shifting courses on-line; more city dwellers walking and biking; local governments buying hotels and motels to more humanely house people with no home to return to. [Examples](#) continue to emerge every day that reflect the tremendous resilience of our public servants, practitioners, business operators, community leaders and residents to improvise their way into this new normal.

I know from the hundreds of conversations CUI has had with city builders over the last few months, that we're all anxious to learn what's been working well as we adjust to living with COVID.

**Signpost 200** clearly reinforces for me what's not.



**First, our main streets, local economies and downtowns are severely threatened.** In addition to the global recession triggered by COVID, the impact on our main streets is hitting us close to home, threatening the viability of our neighbourhoods. In the second 100 days, stages of reopening have provided some relief. But commercial activity has not returned to pre-crisis levels. Especially hard-hit are retail shops and restaurants, but so too are all the other main street amenities we rely on: neighbourhood parks, libraries, recreation facilities, schools, faith institutions, and cultural sites. There is no faster way to kill a neighbourhood than eliminating what brought people to it the first place: other people.

And while local neighbourhoods have struggled, downtowns have emptied. In Canada's largest cities, which drive the nation's economy, COVID restrictions and the shift to work-from-home has led to a hollowing out of our central business districts. The critical urban assets of downtowns, dense, vibrant, creative clusters of commercial activity, have temporarily become liabilities as we try to hold the pandemic at bay. In addition to the safety risks of potentially contracting the virus, trips downtown have been supplanted by digital transactions that can be done from anywhere: e-commerce, e-learning and e-services, as well as Zoom-driven telework.

This raises big questions. With greater numbers now able to work and shop from home, will workers ever return in as-large numbers to our urban cores? What will this mean for office towers, downtown retail shops, cultural events and transit services? How will we 'restore the core'?

**Second, systemic urban inequality is continuing to deepen.** The hardships of this crisis continue to be borne by vulnerable populations, people marginalized by poverty and racial discrimination. At day 200 the data continues to reveal that COVID infection rates, mental health distress, unemployment, household income loss and food shortage continue to manifest disproportionately in equity-seeking communities. There have been remarkable examples of civic engagement, as our city streets were populated by outraged residents calling for systemic change. But anger must inspire action. What are the tangible measures to plan, design and manage neighbourhoods more equitably and justly?

Perhaps where inequality is seen most clearly is the rising crisis in housing. Residents of urban Canada are now confronted daily by the visible impact of COVID on the homeless and street-involved, with the shuttering of shelters and the proliferation of encampments. Coupled, in our western cities in particular, with unprecedented deaths from opioid overdoses, we have got to find solutions that provide shelter, mental health supports *and* community safety. This social challenge only exacerbates the economic ones cited above: streets without commercial vibrancy – and a diverse mix of activities and people – are neither welcoming nor safe.

**Third, the finance and governance arrangements for local governments are broken.** After repeated pleas from Canada's municipalities for immediate financial relief for their COVID-battered finances, in late July the federal and provincial governments finally responded. But the federal relief package for Canada's cities – home to over 80 per cent of the population – was less than half the size of what was directed to the nation's post-secondary students. Brokered by federal and provincial governments without local officials at the table, it was a short-term fix, providing immediate relief only, with no plan to address the mounting expenses projected to accrue over the coming years.

Canada's cities are in an untenable position. Cratering transit revenues, deferred property taxes, increased COVID-related costs, and balanced budget laws all add up to a structural fiscal shortfall that cities will carry into next year and beyond. Our cities are the front-lines of these cascading health, economic, social and environmental crises, and they are without the authority and resources to solve them. Canadians should be worried. The country's eight largest cities generate 70 per cent of GDP. If they fail, the economy does too.

The current mismatch between obligations and resources imperils not only the capacity of local governments to navigate the ups and downs of the public health crisis, but also prevents needed transformations to the delivery of municipal services to meet the needs of residents as the pace of change in our cities accelerates. What do cities need? Better data, clearer decision-making authority, and capacity to raise and diversify their own resources – with direct accountability to us, as urban citizens.

### **Our Henry Ford Moment**

The legendary automaker once quipped: “if you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.” Do we have what it takes to tackle this daunting set of challenges and emerge from this crisis with economically stronger, resilient and equitable cities?

I think we do.

Cities have been through wrenching changes before, with innovations emerging from crisis. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, municipal water systems were born after an observant doctor diagnosed the cause of cholera to have been from a private well. Public health departments and immunization programs were spurred by the ravages of infectious diseases outbreaks over generations. As I witnessed up close, the Gulf Coast finally adopted a multiple lines of defence approach to protect millions of people's lives and

people's lives and livelihoods after the levee failures after Hurricane Katrina devastated an entire region.

We're already seeing groundswells of local, community-based leadership. Thousands have joined the [campaign](#) to bring back main streets. Just as Lower Manhattan was after 9/11, surely our downtowns can be reinvented by the diverse group of stakeholders who depend upon them, including large businesses, commercial landlords, cultural and academic institutions. Homelessness is now on all of our doorsteps, but leaders at every level are emerging to demand a nationally coordinated solution. People's calls for cities to be planned, designed and managed more equitably are gathering steam. City builders and placemakers must find new ways to engage with residents and make neighbourhoods work for everyone. Local government leaders – both staff and elected – are working together to re-equip municipal administrations to meet the evolving needs of their communities.

CUI is in the connective-tissue business, linking practitioners and policymakers together from coast to coast, to fail better and learn faster. We're always aiming to strike the right balance between amplifying what's working and highlighting what's not. With the input and support of our many partners, we hope the COVID Signpost series will continue to show us both.

We know there is no quick fix for any of this, and it will require focus, discipline, collaboration. We know there is no one-size-fits-all for urban Canada – whether we're assessing the impacts of COVID or developing solutions. **But our cities, by virtue of their density and diversity, can marshal our collective capacity to turn the next corner in what appears will be an extended journey.**

Resilience is as much a process as an outcome. It must be built locally, block by block. Fundamentally it comes down to each of us working to make things right.

We're the ones we've been waiting for.

Sincerely,



**Mary W. Rowe (she/her)**

President & CEO

Canadian Urban Institute

@rowemw



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# Introduction

We are now 200 days from the official World Health Organization (WHO) declaration of COVID as a global pandemic, and the impacts on urban Canada continue to be profound. To mark this 200th day, Sunday, September 27th, 2020, the Canadian Urban Institute (CUI) is releasing its second **Signpost** report. Guiding travellers on a journey with an uncertain destination, these signposts present an evidence-informed picture of life in Canada's cities with COVID—and guidance about the hazards urban Canada faces, and paths forward.

[\*\*COVID Signpost 100\*\*](#) examined in broad terms how life in Canada's cities had changed during the first 100 days of COVID. It was a starting point—a benchmark—of the potential impact the pandemic may have in ushering in fundamental changes to how we live, move, work, care and manage in our cities.

It found that **our initial experiences with COVID depended largely on who we are and where we live.** The largest 20 cities in Canada, accounting for 42 per cent of the country's population, reported 67 per cent of total cases and 75 per cent of deaths. Some cities fared much worse than others: at the 100 day mark, Montreal had more than 25 times the cases per capita as Edmonton. Data cited in that report also confirmed that the impact on different population groups had been uneven, disproportionately affecting already vulnerable and equity-seeking communities and deepening urban inequalities. Across domains from housing to mobility, the impacts of COVID proved to be worse for women, older people, Indigenous peoples, and Black and other racialized groups.

**COVID Signpost 100** also pointed to a number of looming challenges to the governance and finances of urban Canada. It called for accurate, race-based and hyper-local city-level data to inform decision-making; a greater role for local leaders, whose on-the-ground experience in responding to COVID has proved crucial and will

continue to be through recovery; and for the federal and provincial governments to immediately address the acute financial crisis large municipalities were facing because of COVID.

## 100 DAYS LATER

**COVID Signpost 200** takes a fresh look at these trends and findings 100 days later, exploring how COVID's impacts in urban Canada have progressed, highlighting what's changed and what new issues have emerged. This report is informed by research and analysis including public health data, surveys of over 90,000 Canadians by research partner Advanis, and insights generated through CUI's COVID-related CityWatch, CityShare, CityTalk and Bring Back Main Street initiatives. This report is also complemented by a series of Regional Profiles: seven short briefs, written by CUI's Regional Leads from across Canada, which offer perspectives on the last 100 days in the country's major provinces and regions.

The next section of the report assesses how the second 100 days of the COVID pandemic have unfolded in urban Canada, both in public health terms and around the response and recovery efforts through governments, business, civil society and residents. The section that follows then examines the "signs"—a selection of indicators that, taken together, present a picture of what the residents of urban Canada are experiencing 200 days into the pandemic.

This second **Signpost** report also offers an opportunity to focus our attention on the big, urgent issues in our cities and communities that must be clearly on our radar in the weeks and months ahead. In the Letter from CUI's President & CEO Mary W. Rowe that prefaces the report, she sees three clear warning signs: the threats to local economies, main streets and downtowns; the continued deepening of systematic urban inequalities; and the failing finance and governance arrangements for cities. These are cornerstone issues for urban Canada, and failing to respond to these signs poses a grave threat to the sustainability and recovery of our cities, and therefore the country, coming through this pandemic.

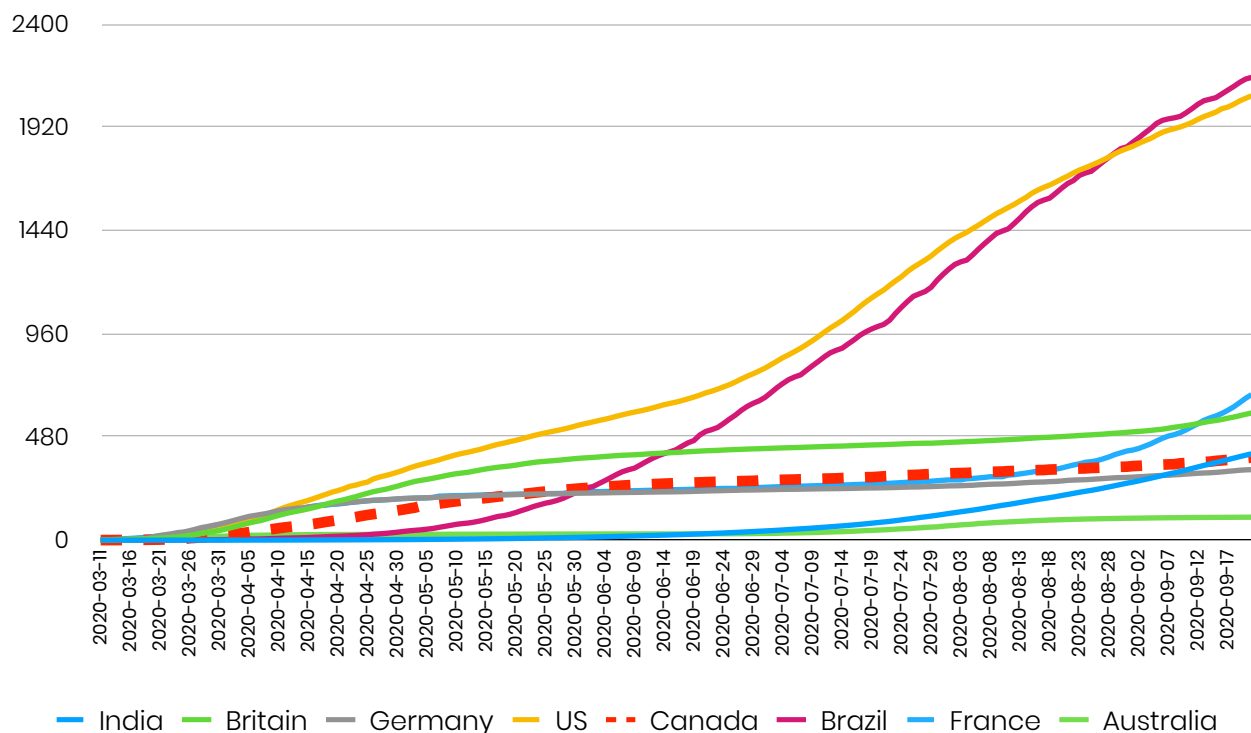


Still, she concludes on a hopeful, emphatic, and forward-looking note. We've seen great resilience and ingenuity in urban Canada, and we'll need more of it to continue managing through the uncertain "new normal" of living with COVID. This moment is demanding from us fresh thinking for a longer horizon—to collectively reimagine and plan for the cities we will need going forward. And to consider how we can use this opportunity for an agenda of re-localization, empowering and equipping local governments, communities and residents to resourcefully innovate local, place-based solutions to what must come next.

## DAY 200 UPDATE: THE PANDEMIC IN URBAN CANADA

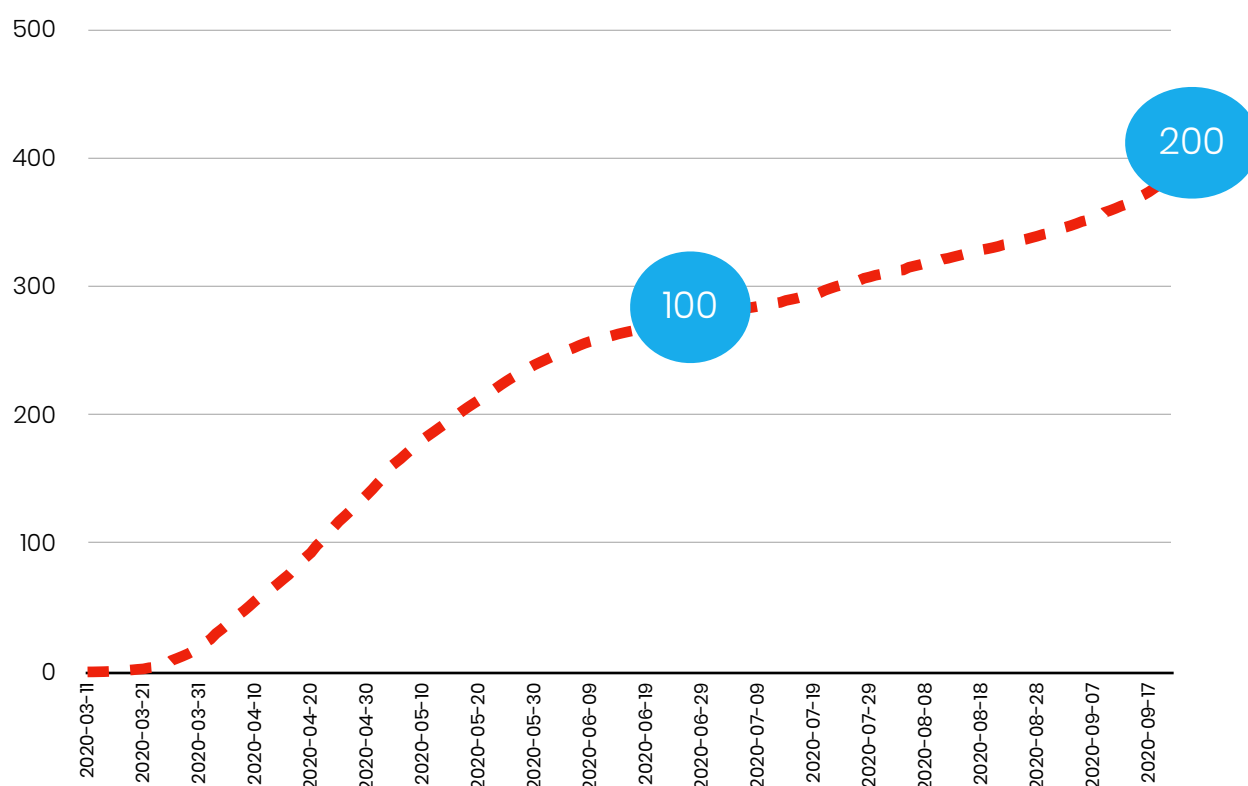
At the time of CUI's **COVID Signpost 100** report (released June 19, 2020), the pandemic had a global death count exceeding 450,000 and more than 8.4 million confirmed cases worldwide. As the first report noted, COVID, like past pandemics, has primarily affected urban areas, and been most devastating in poor and densely populated areas that lacked adequate housing, sanitation and public health capacity.

Chart 1: COVID Cases Per 100,000 Population, by Country



It has now been 200 days since the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV2 (“COVID” in this report) was initially declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. During the last 100 days, the pandemic’s worldwide impacts have rapidly accelerated. Globally, numbers of deaths now approach one million with more than 30 million confirmed cases—both figures significantly undercounting the true totals.<sup>1</sup> While initial hotspots such as China, Northern Italy and New York City have calmed, COVID infections and deaths have surged across many major countries and regions. The United States, Brazil and India have been among the epicentres of this phase, with many of these nations lagging in their commitment to coordination of public health responses.

Chart 2: Canada’s COVID Cases Per 100,000 Population



<sup>1</sup> Global epidemiological data are sourced from the John’s Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Centre (data as of September 23, 2020).

The virus is no longer principally confined to cities; rural communities have been stricken as well. Although there has been substantial progress in the development and testing of vaccines, it is highly uncertain when this global public health crisis will end, or how much worse it will get before it gets any better.

The story in Canada has been much different. At the 100-day mark, the curve had largely flattened across the country. In the next 100 days, more modest levels of community transmission were a concern with isolated flare ups in some cities and communities, but death and case counts were much lower. At **COVID Signpost 100**, there were more than 100,000 confirmed cases and more than 8,250 deaths in Canada, the vast majority of these in cities. By comparison, after 200 days, the country's totals have reached only 147,000 cases and 9,300 deaths, a substantial deceleration of the rate of growth.<sup>2</sup> While comparatively, the pandemic has been managed reasonably well in Canada by **Signpost 200**, the recent rise of infection numbers presents a significant cause for alarm about a potential second wave.

The impacts of COVID continue to be concentrated in urban Canada. Per Table 1,<sup>3</sup> the largest 20 cities by population, accounting for 42 per cent of Canada's population, reported 64 per cent of total cases and 75 per cent of total deaths, virtually unchanged from the first **Signpost** report. Home to less than a quarter (23 per cent) of Canada's population, Québec continues to represent a disproportionate share of the impact, with nearly half (47 per cent) of confirmed cases and nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of deaths. Ontario has also had large numbers of cases and deaths, though at less than half the population-adjusted rate of Québec. British Columbia,

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<sup>2</sup> Canada-wide epidemiological data, including cases and death by age group and gender, are based on the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) Daily Epidemiology Update (data as of September 23, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> List is based on Statistics Canada's census subdivisions, 2016 census, by population. Case and death data is based on locally reported public health and municipal reports, as of September 23, 2020. In provinces where city data is not reported directly (marked with an asterisk on the chart), and city cases and death counts are reported at a larger geography, the city's share has been calculated according to the city's share of the overall population of the larger unit. For example, Surrey is a part of the Fraser Health Authority.



Table 1: COVID Cases &amp; Deaths in Canada's 20 Largest Cities, at 200 Days

	Cases	Cases Per 100,000	Deaths	Deaths Per 100,000	Avg. Daily Cases, 1st 100 Days	Avg. Daily Cases, 2nd 100 Days
Toronto	17,712	<b>648.4</b>	1178	<b>43.1</b>	121	47
Montréal	31,670	<b>1,533.2</b>	3,476	<b>168.3</b>	261	44
Calgary	7,098	<b>572.8</b>	109	<b>8.8</b>	40	28
Ottawa	3,372	<b>360.9</b>	279	<b>29.9</b>	20	14
Edmonton	4,044	<b>433.7</b>	67	<b>7.2</b>	4	31
Mississauga	3,491	<b>483.8</b>	229	<b>31.7</b>	28	5
Winnipeg	708	<b>100.4</b>	5	<b>0.7</b>	2	4
Vancouver*	1,819	<b>288.1</b>	77	<b>12.2</b>	5	10
Brampton	5,200	<b>876.0</b>	94	<b>15.8</b>	25	24
Hamilton	1,089	<b>202.8</b>	46	<b>8.6</b>	7	4
Québec City	3,153	<b>592.8</b>	206	<b>38.7</b>	17	10
Surrey*	1,270	<b>245.2</b>	26	<b>5.0</b>	4	9
Laval	6,738	<b>1,592.9</b>	681	<b>161</b>	56	10
Halifax*	865	<b>214.6</b>	57	<b>14.1</b>	9	<1
London	752	<b>195.9</b>	57	<b>14.9</b>	5	3
Markham	902	<b>274.2</b>	52	<b>15.8</b>	4	4
Vaughan	1,689	<b>551.5</b>	115	<b>37.6</b>	9	7
Gatineau *	848	<b>306.8</b>	25	<b>8.9</b>	4	4
Saskatoon *	258	<b>104.8</b>	1	<b>0.6</b>	1	1
Longueuil *	1,797	<b>749.6</b>	109	<b>45.6</b>	13	3

Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba have continued to report low rates of COVID-related deaths though average daily cases have been increasing, notably in cities such as Vancouver, Edmonton and Winnipeg. COVID has barely touched many other parts of the country, including most of Atlantic Canada and the territories. Prince Edward Island, Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut continue to report zero COVID deaths.

The impacts of COVID continue to be highly concentrated within certain populations. Women account for more than half (54 per cent) of total cases and had higher numbers in most age categories.<sup>4</sup> For instance, women represent 69 per cent of cases among those 80+ years.<sup>5</sup> The most severely afflicted group, in terms of total deaths, remains older Canadians. Those aged 60+ represent 70 percent of hospitalizations, 59 per cent of cases admitted to the intensive care unit, and 97 per cent of deaths.<sup>6</sup>

These figures represent little change from the 100 day marker, despite the reduced number of outbreaks within long-term care homes over the summer months. Canada continues to lack case or death counts by racial or ethnic group, although a commitment was made during the Speech from the Throne on September 23, 2020 to implement a “whole-of-government” approach to collect disaggregated data.

## WHAT'S HAPPENED IN URBAN CANADA OVER THE LAST 100 DAYS

If the story of *Signpost 100* was the arrival of pandemic and the unprecedented emergency measures and societal lockdown in response, **Signpost 200** has been a very different phase—the pivot to gradual, cautious reopening of the economy and social interactions, and acclimatization to a “new normal” living with COVID.

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada. (20 September 2020). “Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): Epidemiology Update.”

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Over the past 100 days, the warm summer weather provided a balm for pandemic-fatigued Canadians, eager to get outside. In most parts of Canada, the economy was reopened by the end of July. Cities quickly rolled out tactical urbanism measures to expand patios, bike lanes and other community infrastructure to support socially distanced interactions and mobility. Artists and musicians moved from the stage to the screen, bringing moments of solace and joy to the homebound. Daycares and schools have cautiously reopened. Through the Safe Restart Agreement, over \$4 billion of federal funding, to be cost-matched by provinces and territories, was committed to municipalities to help meet operating and transit funding shortfalls.<sup>7</sup> There was also progress in vaccine science and pre-ordering by the Government of Canada.<sup>8</sup> The Throne Speech on September 23, 2020 aimed to steady the ship through the crisis with a commitment to “do whatever it takes” including extending the wage subsidy through to Summer 2021 and introducing a variety of new supports.

Dark clouds also emerged, especially as **Signpost 200** neared. Far from the hoped-for economic rebound, the recovery has been muted with high levels of continuing unemployment.<sup>9</sup> The latest data suggests retail sales have largely rebounded.<sup>10</sup> Yet, for restaurants and local retailers, relief about summer patio weather has turned to trepidation about what fall and winter will mean. Canadians—as workers, commuters and consumers—continue to be anxious about safety from virus exposure. The hospitality sector, which anchors main streets and downtowns across the country, is in peril. In August, a quarter of a million fewer Canadians were working in accommodation and food service compared with pre-COVID,<sup>11</sup> and 60 per cent of

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<sup>7</sup> The Safe Restart Agreement was announced on July 16, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> As recently as September 22nd, the Government of Canada has announced agreements with major pharmaceutical companies including Sanofi, GlaxoSmithKline and Pfizer to secure access to millions of doses of COVID-19 vaccines that are under development. While no vaccines have yet been approved by Health Canada, medical research and clinical trials are reportedly advancing rapidly. See Government of Canada (22 September 2020). “Government of Canada signs new agreements to secure additional vaccine candidate and treatment for COVID-19,” News Release.

<sup>9</sup> See *How We Work* section.

<sup>10</sup> Statistics Canada (18 September 2020). “Retail Trade, July 2020,” *The Daily*.

<sup>11</sup> Statistics Canada (4 September 2020). “Labour Force Survey, August 2020,” *The Daily*.



restaurants reported that they could permanently close by November.<sup>12</sup> The unprecedented shift to work-from-home, primarily among workers in big cities, has emptied office buildings, transit vehicles and central business districts.<sup>13</sup> Unclear messaging from federal and provincial governments about further commercial rental assistance<sup>14</sup> and other emergency aid has increased uncertainty for small businesses and local economies.

Troubling issues of social equity and care have persisted over the last 100 days. Evidence continues to show that racialized, Indigenous and low-income Canadians are suffering a disproportionate share of the hardship in this crisis.<sup>15</sup> Abhorrent non-pandemic events, including instances of violence against Black and Indigenous peoples, and a mass shooting in Nova Scotia, stirred national trauma and protests in cities for social justice and policing reform. Further marginalized and displaced from shelters by the threat of COVID, encampments of the homeless in communities across the country have sparked bitter confrontations with local officials and residents.<sup>16</sup> For children, youth and their families, the fall return to schools and post-secondary campuses prompted substantial concerns in many regions. Across the country, Canadians are reporting mental health impacts from the crisis.<sup>17</sup>

Amidst all of this, local governments have continued to enforce public health dictates to contain the spread of the virus, with radically altered operations and service delivery to support residents. If the first 100 days of COVID demanded unprecedented, immediate and large scale government responses, the last 100 days required more

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<sup>12</sup> Based upon Statistics Canada data from the Canadian Survey on Business Conditions, for the Canadian Business Resilience Network. Chamber of Commerce (26 August 2020). "60 Percent of Restaurants Could Close Permanently in the Next Three Months, Warns the Chamber," Press Release.

<sup>13</sup> See *How We Work* section.

<sup>14</sup> The Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance (CECRA) program, initially slated to wind-down in June, has been abruptly extended in each of July, August and September. Temporary commercial eviction bans put in place by some provinces have also been expiring.

<sup>15</sup> See *How We Live* and *How We Manage* sections.

<sup>16</sup> There are news reports of homeless encampments and tent cities in a number of urban communities, including Vancouver, Victoria, Montréal, Toronto, Hamilton and Windsor.

<sup>17</sup> See *How We Care* section.

finely calibrated interventions to reopen and restart cities. As CUI's CityWatch data shows, the gradual reversal of emergency restrictions, public service closures (e.g. libraries, community centres, government buildings), and tax and fee deferrals has varied across Canada's cities, reflecting the complexity of the task and the fluidity of conditions on the ground.<sup>18</sup> For the largest urban centres, the continued collapse of transit ridership is among the foremost challenges, both operationally and financially. For just Canada's five biggest cities, the combined fiscal shortfall to fund municipal services is estimated for 2020 to total over \$3 billion, with COVID's impacts to result in structural fiscal crises in the years ahead.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, the picture for urban Canada at *Signpost 200* is decidedly mixed. The containment of the pandemic had been relatively effective over the last 100 days, allowing the return of some normality in cities and communities. Yet, COVID has surfaced or accelerated a number of challenges in urban Canada, for local economies, urban residents and communities, and local governments. **The recent spike in COVID infections, if not contained, poses both a grave immediate threat to public health and safety, and will amplify economic, social and governmental pressures if further lockdowns and isolation are required.**

Beyond the major trends and developments around the pandemic and response, COVID continues to have profound impacts on Canada's urban residents. The next section examines a selection of key indicators—the “signs”—to help provide a clearer picture of the lived experience with COVID at ***Signpost 200***.

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<sup>18</sup> See *How We Manage* section.

<sup>19</sup> The fiscal shortfall estimate is based upon publicly reported figures from the cities of Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto and Montreal as of July 2020. Some cities have provided longer-term estimates as well.



## Surveying the Signs

**COVID Signpost 100** was organized by five broad themes in order to study the impacts of COVID on Canadian urban life. This second **Signpost** report presents a short update on that analysis, highlighting a series of key indicators<sup>20</sup> in each section—*How We Live*, *How We Move*, *How We Work*, *How We Care*, and *How We Manage*—that explore both what has continued over the past 100 days and what is new or changed. The analysis incorporates Advanis’ extensive public opinion survey data, public datasets through Statistics Canada and other sources, and data collected through CUI’s CityWatch platform about the COVID response in dozens of Canadian cities, among other sources. The analysis is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather to tell a story about a series of key developments in urban Canada using data analysis.

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<sup>20</sup> Unless otherwise cited, the data in the following sections is provided courtesy of Advanis based on a survey of more than 90,000 Canadians conducted during the COVID pandemic.





**HOW WE  
LIVE**



**HOW WE  
MOVE**



**HOW WE  
WORK**



**HOW WE  
CARE**



**HOW WE  
MANAGE**

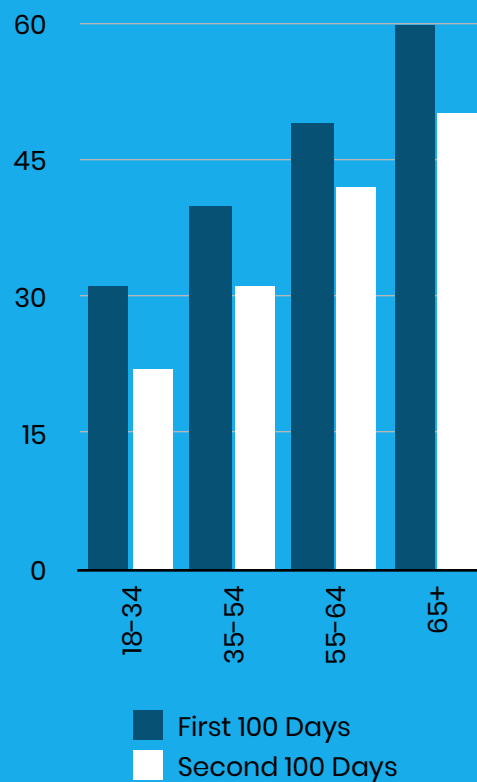
**AT DAY  
200**

# HOW WE LIVE

The pandemic has had significant impacts on the lives of Canadians. The use of outdoor public spaces, including parks, beaches and public gardens, has exploded.<sup>21</sup> Virtually all Canadians report that they are social distancing, though adherence varies across cities and regions. For instance, fewer report “strictly practicing” social distancing in some higher transmission communities such as Québec City, whereas a higher share are in lower risk cities including St. John’s. Overall, rates of strict social distancing have declined across all age groups during the last 100 days.

Within cities and communities, COVID appears to be reinforcing inequities. Over half of Canadian households report that the pandemic is having a significant impact on their households. Higher rates of Black, Indigenous and non-white households report experiencing food shortages, impacts on rent payments, and discrimination. Workers in women’s shelters and transition houses identified an increase in the prevalence and severity of gender-based violence.<sup>22</sup>

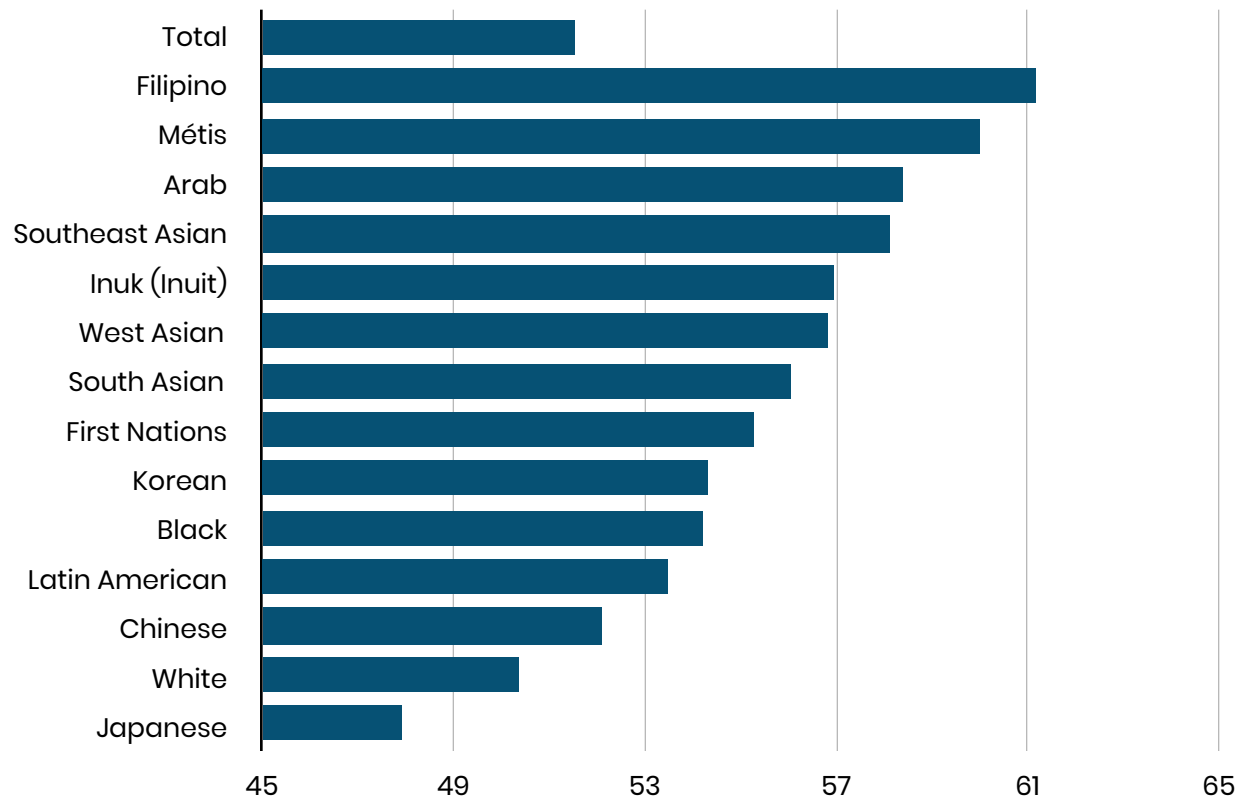
Chart 3  
**Percentage of  
Canadians, by age,  
“strictly practicing”  
physical distancing**



<sup>21</sup> As of late August, Google mobility data found a 159 per cent increase in parks usage across Canada from a pre-COVID baseline. Google (28 August 2020). “COVID-19 Community Mobility Report.”

<sup>22</sup> A.L. Trudell and E. Whitmore. (July 2020). “Pandemic meets Pandemic: Understanding the Impacts of COVID-19 on Gender-Based Violence Services and Survivors in Canada.” Ottawa & London, ON: Ending Violence Association of Canada & Anova.

Chart 4: Percentage of Canadians reporting a “major impact” from COVID on their household, by ethnic group



**Black Canadians** are

**2.6x**

more likely than the overall population to report experiencing **food shortages** during COVID

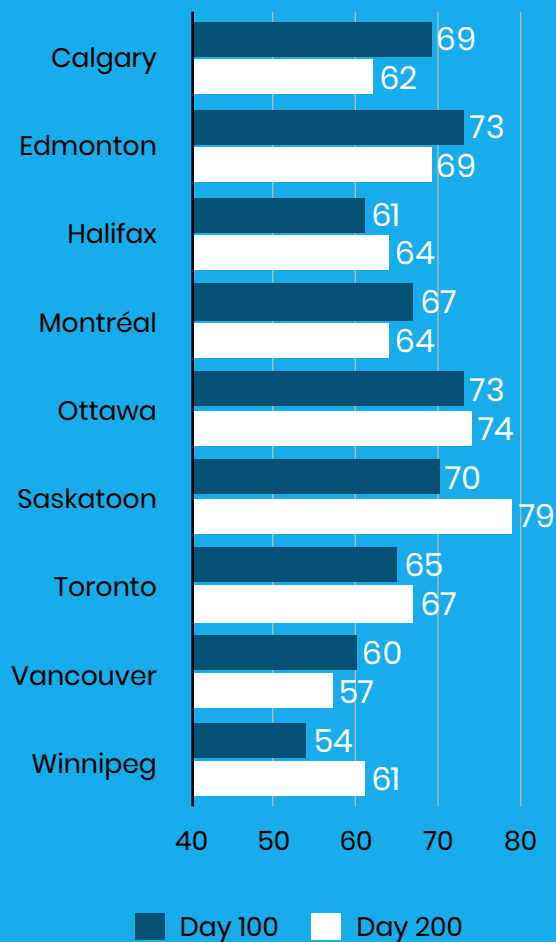
**Black Canadians and Indigenous Peoples** are

**1.9x**

more likely than the overall population to report **impacts on ability to pay rent** during COVID

# HOW WE MOVE

Chart 5  
**Percentage decline in transit ridership at Day 100 and Day 200, by city**



The impacts on the mobility of Canadians has largely been experienced in big cities. By June, the share of all workers commuting by private vehicle was 67 per cent, a decline from the pre-COVID rate of 75 per cent. Yet, more than four in five car commuters continued to drive with declines resulting from the shift to work-from-home, suggesting little change in car use.<sup>23</sup> The dramatic mode shift has been with public transit use in large cities.

Transit ridership, which collapsed early in the pandemic, remains around 60 per cent below pre-COVID levels into September.<sup>24</sup> Many pre-COVID riders report that they would shift to walking or cycling for their commute if transit service was unavailable, but the evidence from early summer suggests mode shift was largely to private car use or telework. Most who are using transit now report wearing face masks, but discomfort with returning to transit remained high for many commuters, and a primary barrier to return to physical office spaces.

<sup>23</sup> Statistics Canada (10 August 2020). "More commuters now walk or bike to work than take transit," *The Daily*.

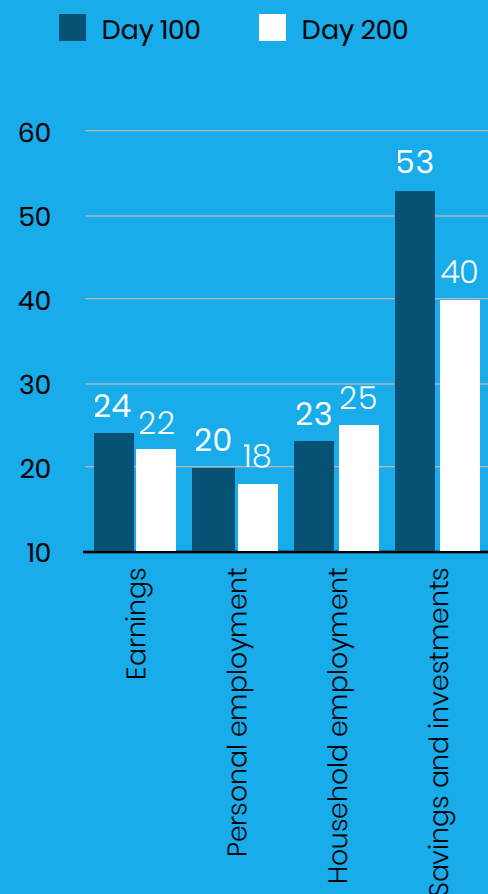
<sup>24</sup> Chart source: TransitApp.



# HOW WE **WORK**

Despite the gradual lifting of COVID restrictions on the economy, unemployment rates across Canada's cities remained well above pre-COVID levels based on the latest Labour Force Survey.<sup>25</sup> The workforce recovery has been slower for women, visible minorities, and in particular for low-wage workers and youth. Households report substantial impacts on earnings, employment and savings, with little change from the first to the second 100 days. The pandemic has also spurred fundamental changes in work and the economy. In August as compared with pre-COVID, an additional 2.5 million *more* workers (14 per cent of all employment) were working from home, down from a peak of 3.4 million in the first 100 days. E-commerce sales have surged with store closures shifting activity online (peaking at 11.4 per cent in April), though they remain small as a total share of sales.<sup>26</sup> Workers across all industries must adjust to workplace safety measures and use of personal protective equipment, including masks, cleaning products and gloves.<sup>27</sup>

Chart 6  
Percentage of Canadians reporting **COVID-related economic impacts**



<sup>25</sup> Statistics Canada (4 September 2020). "Labour Force Survey, August 2020," *The Daily*.

<sup>26</sup> Jason Aston, Owen Vipond, Kyle Virgin and Omar Youssouf (24 July 2020). "Retail e-commerce and COVID-19: How online shopping opened doors while many were closing," *StatsCan COVID-19: Data to Insights for a Better Canada*.

<sup>27</sup> Statistics Canada (July 2020). "Canadian Survey on Business Conditions," for the Canadian Chamber of Commerce's Canadian Business Resilience Network.

Chart 7: Monthly Unemployment Rates, by City, %<sup>28</sup><sup>28</sup> Statistics Canada.

# HOW WE CARE

Over the last 100 days, rates of new COVID infections have been significantly lower, and the crisis in long-term care at **Signpost 100** has largely stabilized. However, other public health crises have emerged. Across cities in all regions of the country, about 4 in 10 report high rates of COVID-related mental health impact, with fear of being infected or infecting others weighing heavily on people's minds. Opioid overdose deaths have surged in various urban centres, with British Columbia reporting nearly as many opioid deaths in the month of July (175) as it has COVID deaths through the entire pandemic.<sup>29</sup> Through the summer, concerns about preparedness and safety for school reopening was a major issue for many households, with surveys suggesting significant numbers of parents would choose or seek remote learning over the classroom to start the year.<sup>30</sup> COVID cases and outbreaks have since been reported in schools across the country.<sup>31</sup>

47%

Percentage of Canadians **feeling helpless** about the COVID situation

34%

Percentage experiencing **loss of pleasure** in daily activities

29%

Percentage experiencing **moments of great panic or anxiety**

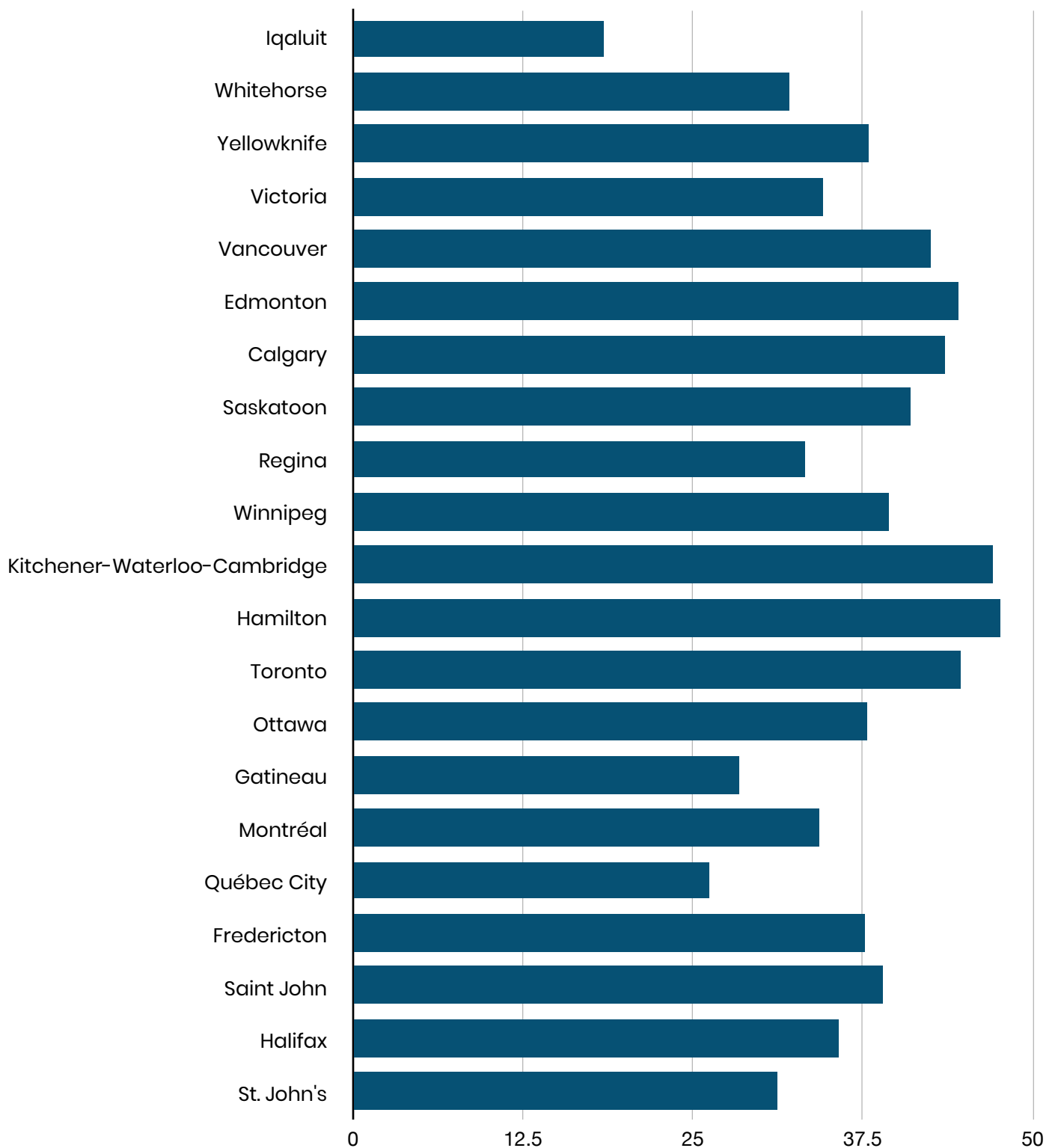
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<sup>29</sup> Holly Honderich (2 September 2020). "Opioid epidemic: The other public health crisis killing Canadians," *BBC News*.

<sup>30</sup> For example, the Ottawa, Toronto and Durham Region school boards conducted parent surveys that indicated about 20 to 30 per cent of parents would not send their kids back to school to start the year. Nicole Thompson (19 August 2020). "Coronavirus: Most students expected to return to school at Toronto, Ottawa, Durham boards," *Canadian Press*. In BC, early attendance figures suggested that 85 per cent of students went back to class in-person. Alyse Kotyk (18 September 2020). "Here's how many B.C. students attended class in person under the new COVID-19 measures," CTV News Vancouver.

<sup>31</sup> As of September 20, COVID cases have been reported in schools in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and Québec.

Chart 8: Percentage of Canadians reporting a “high impact” related to COVID on their own mental health or the mental health of a family member, by city



# HOW WE **MANAGE**

At both the level of the household and the city, the pandemic is testing our resilience. Over a third of lower-income households continued to report COVID-related financial hardship in the second 100 days, well above the rates of hardship reported by middle- and higher-income households. Income level also has a significant impact on households' outlooks of wellbeing, social relations and financial stability, though there is shared pessimism about the economy. A majority of Canadians in all regions report that their governments have performed well in protecting them from COVID health risks. Yet, local governments are perceived less well than the federal and provincial governments. This is in spite of the unprecedented operational and service delivery responses from municipalities, which continued up to **Signpost 200**.

Chart 9: Positive perceptions held by Canadians about wellbeing, relationship and the economy, by household income

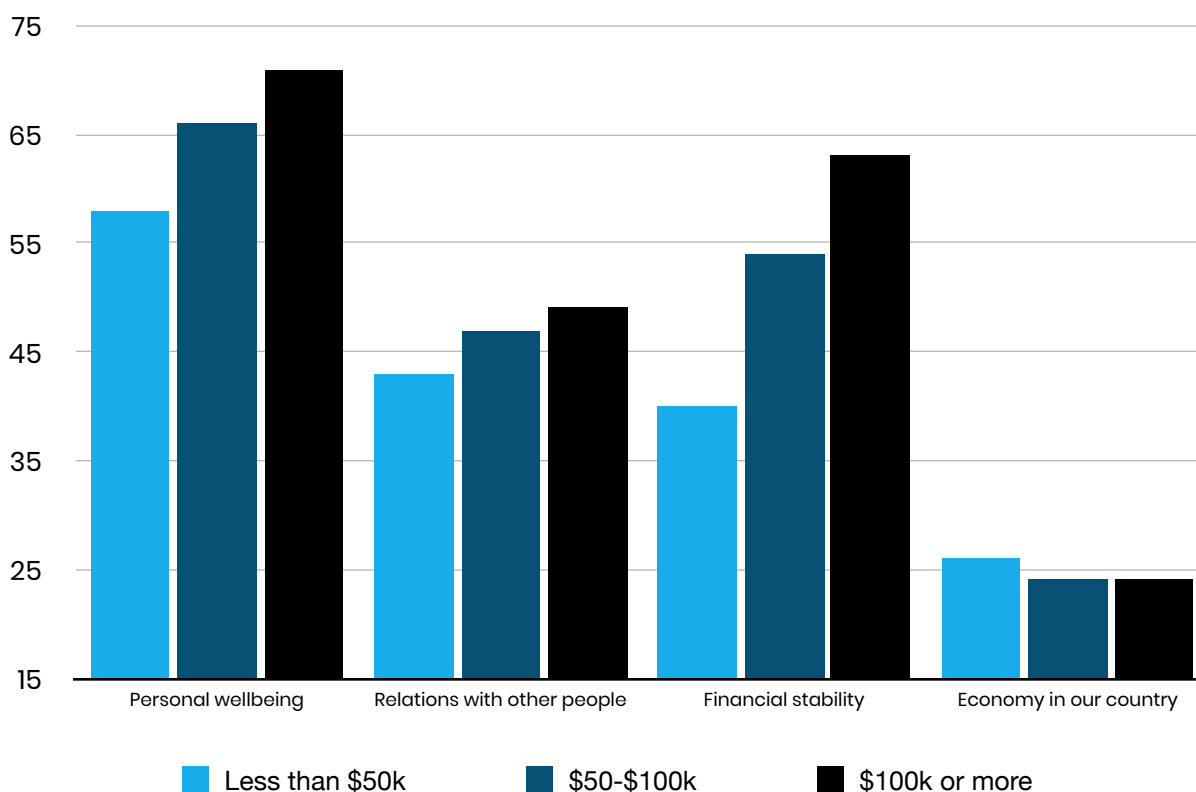











Chart 9: CUI CityWatch Data on municipal responses to COVID

	State of emergency		Face masks mandated inside		Transit fares reduced		Property taxes deferred	
	100 days	200 days	100 days	200 days	100 days	200 days	100 days	200 days
Toronto								
Montréal								
Calgary								
Ottawa								
Edmonton								
Mississauga								
Winnipeg								
Vancouver								
Brampton								
Hamilton								
Québec City								
Surrey								
Laval								
Halifax								
London								
Markham								
Vaughan								
Gatineau								
Saskatoon								
Longueuil								

## CUI's COVID Resources

### **CITYWATCHCANADA.CA**

CityWatch is an interactive, crowd-sourced resource tracking how 60+ Canadian municipalities have responded to COVID, including changes to municipal services, governance processes, financial supports for residents and businesses and more.

### **CITYSHARECANADA.CA**

CityShare is a collection of innovative, creative and resourceful solutions in communities across Canada in responding to COVID. To date, more than 700 ideas have been added to the site — as a key resource for sharing ideas between communities.

### **CITYTALKCANADA.CA**

CityTalk is a series for dialogue and discussion about COVID in cities. During the past 100 days, CityTalk has engaged more than 100 panelists in 30 conversations, drawing an audience of more than 10,000 people spanning 400 cities.

### **BRINGBACKMAINSTREET.CA**

Bring Back Main Street is a nationally- coordinated research and action campaign to ensure the people, business and organizations that call Canada's main streets home can recover and emerge from the crisis more resilient than ever.



# COVID Signpost 200

## Research Team



**André Côté** is the acting Research Director with the Canadian Urban Institute. He has worked with a range of organizations in the realms of cities and urban policy, higher education, income security and digital technology. He has also served in government, as advisor to Ontario's Deputy Premier and to the Ontario Deputy Minister of Finance.



**Madison Leisk** is a Masters of Public Policy student at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, University of Toronto. Prior to Munk, Madison received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Queen's University, where she majored in Political Studies. Her primary policy interests include the future of work and local economic development.

## CUI Board, Team and Partners

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- **Brian Gallant**, Senior Advisor at Navigator Ltd; Special Advisor to the President on Innovation, Cybersecurity, and Law at Ryerson University; and former Premier of New Brunswick
- **Janet Ecker**, former Minister of Finance for Ontario and former President and CEO of the Toronto Financial Services Alliance
- **Irfhan Rawji**, Principal, Totem Capital Corporation
- **Jay Pitter**, International Placemaker, Author, and Senior Fellow, Equity-Based Placemaking, Canadian Urban Institute
- **Jeff Fielding**, Former City Administrator & Manager (City of Toronto, City of Calgary, City of Burlington, City of London, City of Kitchener, City of Winnipeg)
- **Debra Nyczai**, Business and Performance Consultant, City of Regina
- Many Canadian researchers and organizations named in this report who contributed insights and participated in interviews

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- **Kristy Pepin**, Director of Finance and Administration
- **Lisa Cavicchia**, Program Director
- **André Côté**, Director of Research (Acting)
- **Ariana Holt**, Senior Planner
- **Juan Luis Garrido**, Communications Manager
- **Gina Lewis**, Operations Coordinator

## Fellows & Associates

- **Leilani Farha**, Senior Fellow, Housing and Homelessness
- **Kate Graham**, Senior Fellow, Municipal Leadership
- **Jay Pitter**, Senior Fellow, Equity-Based Placemaking
- **Glenn Miller**, Senior Associate, Research

## Regional Leads

- **Allison Ashcroft**, CUI Regional Lead, Victoria
- **Michael Redhead Champagne**, CUI Regional Lead, Winnipeg
- **Catherine Craig-St-Louis**, CUI Regional Lead, Gatineau
- **Robert Plitt**, CUI Regional Lead, Calgary
- **Kourosh Rad**, CUI Regional Lead, Halifax

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All of CUI's work is made possible by partners and funders across Canada. Together, we are building connective tissue across the country to connect and amplify the diverse ideas and voices across urban Canada. This paper does not necessarily reflect the views of our funders or partners.

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- Business improvement areas, districts and zones across Canada
- Economic development organizations across Canada

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The Bentway / Bloor-Yorkville BIA / Black Business and Professionals Association / Canadian Aboriginal and Minority Supplier Council / Canadian Business Resilience Network / CGLCC: Canada's LTBT+ Chamber of Commerce / Canadian Chamber of Commerce / Canadian Federation of Independent Business / Canadian Institute of Planners / Canadian Global Cities Council / Canadian Urban Sustainability Practitioners / The City Institute at York University / City of Edmonton / City of Toronto / City of Calgary / City of Vancouver / Develop Nova Scotia / Downtown Halifax Business Commission / Downtown Winnipeg BIZ / Downtown Yonge BIA / Edmonton Chamber of Commerce / Environics / Evergreen / Federation of Canadian Municipalities / Toronto Financial District BIA / First Policy Response / Future Cities Canada / Global Resilient Cities Network / Goethe-Institut / Halifax BIA / Halifax Chamber of Commerce / ICLEI Canada / Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance / Institute on Public Administration of Canada / International Downtown Association Canada / Jay Pitter / Maximum City / Maytree / McConnell Foundation / Municipal World / National Trust for Canada / Ontario Chamber of Commerce / Ontario Business Improvement Area Association / Park People / Public Sector Digest / Regina Downtown BID / Retail Council of Canada / Royal Architecture Institute of Canada / Rues principales / Ryerson University City Building Institute / Save Canadian Small Business / Simon Fraser University Centre for Dialogue / The Shift / Smart Prosperity Institute / St. Lawrence Market BIA / StrategyCorp / Toronto Entertainment District BIA / The Waterfront BIA / Trinity Centres Foundation / Taiji Brand Group / Tamarack / TD Bank / Urban Land Institute / University of Calgary School of Public Policy / University of Toronto Transportation Research Institute / University of Toronto School of Cities / University of Western Ontario Local Government Program / University of Windsor Centre for Cities / Vancity / Vancity Community Investment Bank / Vancouver Economic Commission / WSP / Youthful Cities

