

# COVID SIGNPOST 200 DAYS



## REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE Ontario



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## INTRODUCTION

The **COVID Signpost 200** report presents a high level picture of how COVID is changing life in Canada's cities as of September 27, 2020, the 200-day mark. It draws on public health and survey data, research and thought-leader insights, building on the findings of **Signpost 100** released in June 2020.

This **Regional Perspective** is one of seven that dives deeper into how the trends and changes revealed in **Signpost 200** are playing out in different parts of the country, and what it means as we look ahead in a time of uncertainty and anxiety, but also of collective purpose in urban Canada.

### ONTARIO

**38.7%**  
OF CANADA'S  
POPULATION

**32.6%**  
OF CANADA'S  
COVID CASES

## COVID DASHBOARD

Table 1: COVID Cases & Deaths, Region and Largest Cities<sup>1</sup>

	Cases	Cases Per 100,000	Deaths	Deaths Per 100,000	Avg. Daily Cases, 1st 100 Days	Avg. Daily Cases, 2nd 100 Days
Canada	146,663	<b>390.2</b>	9,234	<b>24.6</b>	1,002	464
Ontario	47,752	<b>327.7</b>	2,832	<b>19.4</b>	329	148
Toronto	17,712	<b>648.4</b>	1,178	<b>43.1</b>	1,212	47
Ottawa	3,372	<b>360.9</b>	279	<b>29.9</b>	20	14

<sup>1</sup> Case and death data is based on locally reported public health and municipal reports, as of September 23, 2020. In cases where 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.



## A SELECTION OF KEY SIGNS

Table 2: Indicators of COVID Impacts<sup>2</sup>

	All expressed as %	Canada	Ontario	Toronto	Ottawa
How We Live	Household member has experienced COVID symptoms	11	9	10	11
	COVID has had a “major impact” on the household	22	24	26	24
	Rent / mortgage payments have been impacted	18	19	25	14
How We Move	Decline in transit ridership from pre-COVID	-62	-	-64	-70
	Transit users that would shift to cars if service is reduced/unavailable*	42	43	42	52
	People “strictly practicing” social distancing	38	43	46	41
How We Work	Unemployment rates (August)	10.9	12.4	14.7	9.2
	People reporting having experienced the loss of a job	17	18	20	17
	People reporting an impact on their personal earnings	23	25	28	18
How We Care	Households reporting a high impact on access to healthcare*	30	34	31	39
	“Very concerned” with children going back to school*	26	32	32	28
	Households reporting high mental health impacts	38	42	45	38
How We Manage	COVID has caused household financial hardship	25	26	30	22
	A positive outlook on Canada’s economic recovery	24	26	27	28
	Local/municipal government performing well in protecting against health risks	60	65	71	70

<sup>2</sup> Sources: Advanis survey of 90,000 Canadians during the COVID pandemic (with those marked with an asterisk reflecting survey data from June 2020); Statistics Canada data; and, TransitApp. City unemployment rates are for StatsCan CMA, with figures from the August Labour Force Survey (released September 4).

## A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE, AT 200 DAYS

By **Selena Zhang**, Director of Strategy & Special Projects, Canadian Urban Institute

When the pandemic first hit in late March, an anonymous young artist called Dreeem rode their bike around downtown Toronto passing out copies of [a poster](#) to local businesses emblazoned with the phrase: “We’re all in this together!” A ubiquitous glimmer of hope in the silent city, lettered in the iconic font of Toronto’s famous now-raised Honest Ed’s department store, the poster peered out from behind the city’s shuttered shop windows—a reminder that despite our emptied squares and thoroughfares, we were all still here, and in our own ways striving to still be here for each other.

But the experience in the last 100 days of the crisis—and what the COVID Signpost series has demonstrated across the country—is that our experiences of the pandemic have varied greatly both between and within our cities and communities.

In the aggregate, compared to the national average, Ontarians in the last 100 days have been managing higher rates of unemployment and lost hours, reduced incomes, and greater impacts on household finances and ability to pay mortgages or rents. Even by early September, transit ridership remained down by up to 70 per cent in large urban centres, with work-from-home still way up. This has resulted in major challenges for central business districts like Ottawa-Gatineau’s public sector-driven downtown core. The surge in new COVID infections—[rising](#) from under 100 per day during the summer to over 400 per day by late September—and localized outbreaks at schools, long-term care centres and university campuses have reinforced how challenging operating safely in this new environment will be.

Yet through the last six months, we have also been learning about the importance of listening to the local.

When the Province first unveiled details of its plan to reopen the economy in the late Spring, many [mayors](#) and the province’s [34 medical officers of health](#) urged for a place-based approach to allow areas harder-hit to open at their own pace.

It is revealing to dive into the regions that were last to

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reopen in these last 100 days. Windsor–Essex, with the highest reported number of cases in the province per capita, was the last to enter into stage three on August 13th. Concentrated outbreaks have peppered the region's farms and greenhouses, most deeply impacting migrant farmworkers, the permanently temporary hands picking much of the nation's produce. The pandemic laid bare systemic issues that for years have made these precarious workers exceptionally vulnerable to labour abuses and unsafe working conditions. The bounded nature of employment contracts, which tie their immigration status to a single employer; the oversight gaps in the federal Seasonal Agricultural Workers' Program; inadequate labour and employment protections; and poor living conditions, on isolated farms in cramped bunkhouses—together, these factors created a perfect storm, resulting in [over a thousand cases](#) that have been linked to the region's agri-farm sector.

The second to last regions to enter stage three were Toronto and Peel Region, on July 31st. Across these large urban centres, whether you contract the virus has largely depended on who you are and where you live. Pre-pandemic research undertaken by [United Way Greater Toronto](#) (UWGT) and the [Neighbourhood Change Research Partnership](#) (NCRP) showed that there are islands of opportunity across the city, with postal code, race, immigration status, and family income among the strongest determinants for how we fare in adulthood. Overlaying [Toronto Public Health's](#) regularly updated COVID maps with the UWGT and NCRP's neighbourhood income inequality maps paints a stark picture: it is in the lowest-income neighbourhoods—those islands where opportunity is most lacking and with the highest concentrations of racialized and immigrant populations—that case counts have been highest.

It is neither surprising nor new to assert that the most vulnerable among us have been made ever more vulnerable through the pandemic. What we *have* developed in the last 100 days is a more acute recognition that our data about the crisis needs to be disaggregated by socio-demographics and at the neighbourhood level wherever possible. As of September 23, [Toronto Public Health reports](#) that Black and Southeast Asian populations make up 9 per cent and 7 per cent of the population respectively, yet a disproportionate 22 per cent and 16 per cent of COVID cases. Meanwhile, white populations make up 48 per cent of Toronto's population and just 17 per cent of COVID cases. Likewise, Torontonians in the lowest income quartile comprise 29 per cent of the population and a staggering 52 per cent of COVID cases, while those in the highest income quartile make up 21 per cent of the population and just 7 per cent of cases.

Now, as we reach the 200<sup>th</sup> day, the hopeful, can-do spirit of Dreeem's COVID poster remains as powerful as ever. While we must reaffirm that we all continue to be in this together, we must also recognize that the burden hasn't been equally shared—far from it. Let's work on that over the next 100 days.

## Bright Spots

- The City of Toronto and United Way Greater Toronto developed [a Community Coordination Plan](#) to quickly respond to the urgent neighbourhood-level and population-specific needs of vulnerable people and communities. Ten geographic clusters and three non-geographic clusters (focused on Indigenous serving agencies, Black resilience, and city-wide agencies) were established.
- [Activists in Leamington staged two marches](#) in support of the region's migrant farmworkers, underscoring the vital role that the public realm plays in a free and democratic society as a venue for advocacy and dialogue.
- Toronto Public Health, with federal funding, [opened Canada's first quarantine hotel](#), a 140-room facility for people on low-incomes who cannot self-isolate at home.
- To support small and locally owned businesses battered by the crisis, the City of Ottawa with the local business community and BIAs launched a [set of "Buy Local" initiatives](#) that blends public health guidelines with innovative, digitally-driven tools for finding deals and exploring the city.
- The City of Brampton launched a [rent relief program](#) for small business and non-profit tenants of 41 City facilities, deferring or waiving payments for tenants that were unable to access the federal government's emergency commercial rental assistance program.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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