

COVID SIGNPOST 200 DAYS



REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE Alberta



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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.

ALBERTA

11.6%
OF CANADA'S
POPULATION

11.5%
OF CANADA'S
COVID CASES

COVID DASHBOARD

Table 1: COVID Cases & Deaths, Region and Largest Cities¹

	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	390.2	9,234	24.6	1,002	464
Alberta	16,889	386.4	258	5.9	76	91
Calgary	7098	572.8	109	8.8	40	28
Edmonton	4044	433.7	67	7.2	4	31

¹ 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 Impacts²

	All expressed as %	Canada	Alberta	Calgary	Edmonton
How We Live	Household member has experienced COVID symptoms	11	13	13	12
	COVID has had a “major impact” on the household	22	25	24	24
	Rent / mortgage payments have been impacted	18	25	24	24
How We Move	Decline in transit ridership from pre-COVID	-62	-	-40	-56
	Transit users that would shift to cars if service is reduced/unavailable*	42	53	45	56
	People “strictly practicing” social distancing	38	31	33	32
How We Work	Unemployment rates (August)	10.9	13.4	14.4	13.6
	People reporting having experienced the loss of a job	17	21	21	20
	People reporting an impact on their personal earnings	23	32	32	30
How We Care	Households reporting a high impact on access to healthcare*	30	37	33	38
	“Very concerned” with children going back to school*	26	23	25	22
	Households reporting high mental health impacts	38	44	44	45
How We Manage	COVID has caused household financial hardship	25	29	30	28
	A positive outlook on Canada’s economic recovery	24	18	18	21
	Local/municipal government performing well in protecting against health risks	60	59	61	59

² 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 **Robert Plitt**, CUI Regional Lead for Alberta

Praise for the Local

If urban resilience is the capacity of cities to survive, adapt and thrive in the face of the chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience, then it is safe to say that for the past 200 days the 81 per cent of Albertans who call the province's cities and communities home are being tested to their limits. The pandemic, the global economic shut down and the collapse of energy prices add up to a perfect storm.

For readers who don't live in the province, please be aware of this: Alberta, now a have-not province, is in for a rough recovery. For us Albertans, perhaps it's a good time to take stock and reflect on the competency of our local governments and civic institutions. While not perfect by any means, in the face of this historic challenge and with the support of a robust if imperfect federal and provincial government response, Alberta's cities, institutions and communities are proving to be remarkably resilient, competent and compassionate.

Successfully shutting down a city is no small feat. From early on, alerted to the seriousness of the virus, local governments were quick to act. Calgary's Mayor Nenshi declared a public health emergency four days prior to federal government actions. The City of Edmonton quickly announced the closure of its community centres, arenas and libraries and, by March 20th, public transit was made free. Cities from Red Deer to Medicine Hat took similar measures to alleviate the economic burden of the shutdown, including deferring utility and property tax payments. By mid-May, Calgary City Council approved \$8 million in enhanced funding for programs and services of Calgary non-profit social service organizations.

Reopening a city – a slower process, both physically and psychologically – was perhaps an even greater

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challenge. On June 15th, with a sense that the public health crisis was at manageable levels, the provincial state of emergency was lifted and, by July 20th, municipalities had begun to ease restrictions. Libraries re-opened, followed soon after by community centres and families tentatively returning to parks and sports fields. Public Schools restarted on September 1st (not without significant concerns). Longer term measures to prepare for future shocks got underway. Alberta Innovates, in partnership with the Canadian Institute of Health Research, leveraged federal funding to support the testing and scale-up of promising public health solutions – from vaccines and diagnostics to health system and policy interventions.

While all of this could not prevent the deaths of over 250 people, we should recognize these achievements for what they are. Tireless, innovative and caring. Through all of this government and our civil institutions have been responsive, agile and remarkably coordinated, acting as they should to advance the public good.

That's the good news. However, for Albertans this 'new normal' is accompanied by troubling signs. A substantial [decline](#) in overall mental health and [increasing](#) incidents of domestic violence. Unemployment is well above the national average, with Albertans reporting higher than average impacts on rent and mortgage payments, on household financial hardship, and a much lower [outlook](#) on national economic recovery. One in four Alberta CEOs are [uncertain](#) if their business will survive and over one million Albertans sought [relief](#) from the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit. With all of this, [anxieties](#) are running high.

Whatever the future holds, it seems clear that the road to recovery for Alberta's cities and communities will be long and arduous. What is less clear is what, if any, collective takeaways there will be from these first 200 days. Does the goodwill continue? Will municipal governments, local institutions and community organizations get the resources they need to build back better. Will we collectively address climate justice and the structural inequalities that resulted in the greatest suffering experienced by those most marginalized? And, might traditionally small-government Albertans think differently about the role of government as a positive force? Here's hoping we've learned a thing or two about the critical importance and capacity of our governments and civil institutions as instruments for public good.

Bright Spots

- The O'Brien Institute for Public Health [is connecting](#) healthcare providers with industry and entrepreneurs to find technical solutions that will help continuing care

facilities prepare for the expected next wave of COVID-19 and other potential future outbreaks.

- The Mental Health Foundation and its partners are supporting a new evidence-based tool called [Text4Hope](#) – a free service providing three months of daily Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)-based text messages written by local mental health therapists.
- The non-profit organization Horizon Housing has [purchased](#) the Elan Hotel in Calgary for conversion to affordable housing units. The downturn in travel and hotel bookings represent potential adaptive reuse solutions for cities to scale the development of housing solutions.
- [Nisa Homes](#), a shelter run by the National Zakat Foundation, is providing food and emergency assistance to Muslim women who have left the shelter or who cannot move.
- The City of Edmonton's [Economic Recovery Grant](#) is available to help Edmonton businesses recover from COVID-19. It provides local businesses and business organizations with flexible funding in order to relaunch and strengthen their business models.
- The Edmonton and Calgary Community Foundations [quickly mobilized](#) millions of dollars of funding for local organizations to address homelessness, domestic violence and food insecurity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Plitt has the pleasure of being Executive and Regional Lead with [Evergreen](#) and [CUI](#) respectively .



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CUI is Canada's Urban Institute. We are the national platform that houses the best in Canadian city building – where policymakers, urban professionals, civic and business leaders, community activists and academics can learn, share and collaborate with one another from coast to coast to coast.