

COVID SIGNPOST 200 DAYS



REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE British Columbia



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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.

BRITISH COLUMBIA

13.5%
OF CANADA'S
POPULATION

5.6%
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
BC	8,304	163.8	227	4.5	28	55
Vancouver	1819	288.1	77	12.2	5	10
Victoria	20	23.3	1	1	<1	<1

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 not reported at a city level, the city's share has been approximated 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	BC	Vancouver	Victoria
How We Live	Household member has experienced COVID symptoms	11	12	13	16
	COVID has had a “major impact” on the household	22	21	21	19
	Rent / mortgage payments have been impacted	18	22	24	17
How We Move	Decline in transit ridership from pre-COVID	-62	-	-57	-65
	Transit users that would shift to cars if service is reduced/unavailable*	42	42	46	15
	People “strictly practicing” social distancing	38	35	34	29
How We Work	Unemployment rates (August)	10.9	11.6	12.8	10.3
	People reporting having experienced the loss of a job	17	19	18	16
	People reporting an impact on their personal earnings	23	25	27	17
How We Care	Households reporting a high impact on access to healthcare*	30	33	20	49
	“Very concerned” with children going back to school*	26	23	14	23
	Households reporting high mental health impacts	38	38	42	35
How We Manage	COVID has caused household financial hardship	25	28	28	31
	A positive outlook on Canada’s economic recovery	24	26	26	27
	Local/municipal government performing well in protecting against health risks	60	59	65	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 **Allison Ashcroft**, CUI Regional Lead for British Columbia

On the same day that the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a global pandemic, volunteers in Greater Victoria hit the streets to conduct the [2020 Point-In-Time Homeless Count](#), identifying 1,523 individuals experiencing homelessness, the majority of whom 'live rough' in the neighbourhood of North Park where I live and am securely housed. Of Victoria's unhoused residents, 90 per cent have at least one health challenge, 55 per cent have experience with foster care, 44 per cent are women, 35 per cent are Indigenous and only 12 per cent have lived in the region for less than a year.

In swift response to the public health emergency and the closure of all shelters, the City of Victoria, the Coalition to End Homelessness, Island Health and BC Housing created an agile task force to support unhoused individuals. Bylaws are set aside to allow 24/7 sheltering in City parks and in parked vehicles or RVs on public streets. Camping equipment is donated, sanitized and distributed. Topaz Park, established as the official outdoor shelter with food services, health care, harm reduction and other supports grows to 300 tents. A list of names is created to begin housing people once indoor sheltering options become available.

Weeks later, a Provincial order comes down to 'decamp' the outdoor shelter at Topaz. The City and its partners have one month to repurpose the local arena and other publicly-owned facilities while BC Housing begins purchasing old motels and buildings for conversion to supportive housing. To date, 340 individuals have been provided with indoor accommodation and wrap around supports. While these acquisitions represent unprecedented collaboration between local and provincial government and non-profit agencies, those who found their name on that favoured list represent only a portion of those in need, and want, of housing.

Today, 200 days into the COVID pandemic, there are approximately 210 individuals living in City of Victoria parks. While there are undoubtedly many more experiencing tenuous housing situations, couch surfing, motel accommodations, and living in shelters, Victoria has never been closer to "solving" homelessness.

And yet, the loudest voice in Victoria is not advocating for the housing of these 200 plus individuals as winter rains and a second wave of COVID looms. Instead, it's a growing cry to "take our parks back" and the excuses given by neighbouring

municipalities to deny supportive housing during this public health crisis. At some point during the last 100 days of the pandemic, there was a palpable shift away from community support at all costs to conditional support. The criticism of the city's 24/7 camping rule, and of Victoria's mayor, council, and staff has become vitriolic. Homelessness is a complex, national issue that is easily mistaken for a local one.

As indoor options dwindle and neighbourhoods and neighbouring municipalities generate barriers to camping in their parks or occupying their buildings, the majority of the individuals seeking shelter are concentrated in the three acres of Central Park a few blocks from my house. 100 days into COVID, the number of tents in Central Park averaged 12; today, 200 days in, the tally now sits at 102.

Prior to the pandemic, Central Park served as the unofficial backyard for rental apartment residents comprising 70 per cent of the neighbourhood. Now, most families with the option to use a different park, or spend time comfortably in their own home, have stopped coming. Use of the outdoor gym, the children's playground, and the sports fields has been drastically reduced. Parents from the mosque across the street, and children from the many subsidized housing complexes in the surrounding area, are opting not to play in the park.

But, in recent days, we are witnessing a turning point rather than a tipping point. Relationships are forming between housed and unhoused residents, and a community is emerging in the encampment. The neighbourhood association initiates a sandwich-making rotation and connection with the camp residents. Service providers and nearby-housed community members stop by regularly with supplies and donations of food, blankets and masks. Community meetings are scheduled and promoted, both housed and unhoused residents are invited. The residents living in the park group themselves into sub-communities, appointing a safety committee to patrol the park in shifts while another individual self-appoints as head of sanitation.

One park resident sets up an information tent where he greets park users who have questions, keeps the donations tidy, and makes sure the harm reduction supplies remain stocked. He says that for the first time in thirty years, he feels like he's not alone

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in pushing this giant snowball uphill. He feels like this time it's different. He's hopeful. The City's bylaw department is asking for his input on where the tents should be located in other parks. The City's engagement department is working with him to put together an information document on the new bylaws. New bylaws have been adopted, but enforcement is not taking place until there has been thoughtful, deliberate consultation with those impacted.

The park's residents are finally being recognized as the experts on homelessness, and they are being invited to sit at the table where decisions are made. For once, "nothing about us, without us" is in effect. The encampment's residents are strong advocates for a housing first strategy. They explain that the lack of stability and security that comes along with tenuous housing and homelessness is a barrier to every single aspect of their lives. They advocate for truly affordable rental accommodations that they can access on the monthly \$375 shelter support.

And in the interim, while we await federal funding for supportive housing, they advocate for short-term solutions to homelessness that take into consideration basic necessities, offering dignity, self-determination and support. Individuals experiencing homelessness have been telling us for decades what they need. It is our job to amplify these calls to action.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allison Ashcroft is Managing Director of the Canadian Urban Sustainability Practitioners and a long-time resident and neighbourhood association board member of North Park, which is situated in the urban core of Victoria, BC on the unceded territory of the Lekwungen peoples.



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