



Indigenous experiences with COVID-19 in Canada

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Abstract:

First Nations, Inuit and Métis are the Indigenous peoples in Canada and formally recognized by the Canadian constitution. In the last census (2016), close to 1.7M people self-identified as Indigenous, within a broader population of close to 34.5M people. The majority self-identify as First Nation (2/3), 30% as Métis and 4% as Inuit. There are over 600 First Nation communities (aka reserves), 100 or so Métis Settlements and communities, and some 50 Inuit communities. Most Indigenous communities are small; Indigenous people have become quite urbanized (49% live in cities) but most maintain strong connections to their home community, lands and cultures. We are a diverse people, speaking over 70 Indigenous languages, and given that Indigenous knowledge is derived from the surrounding natural world, each community has its unique culture and ways of knowing, being and doing. Indigenous people are a young population, with average and median ages of 32.1 and 29.1 years, compared with their non-Indigenous counterparts at 40.5 and 40.7, respectively.

Indigenous peoples in Canada mobilized quickly in response to COVID-19. Their leadership, spanning Indigenous governmental bodies as well as within each community, exercised Indigenous self-determination and implemented their own COVID-19 counter-measures – often earlier and bolder than those of the provincial governments. We will explore some of the innovative Indigenous solutions, spanning public health, food security, housing, spirituality and more.

Indigenous peoples have been more generally successful than Canada in terms of significantly fewer COVID-19 infections. However, if and when COVID-19 enters a community, poor underlying Indigenous health determinants, including colonially caused lower socioeconomic status, overcrowded housing, and generally inadequate healthcare resources, often result in micro-outbreaks. Indigenous peoples were prioritized for vaccine deployment, initially because many were in more rural/remote areas, but later because of Canada's commitment to Indigenous peoples. Uptake has been variable, but generally better than in the broader population. We will explore Indigenous experiences of COVID-19 as it has unfolded throughout the first three waves in Canada.

For Indigenous peoples in Canada, our stories and our telling of our own stories are critically important. We will also explore how this is unfolding, and how existing and developing evidence bases support this.

Keywords:

Indigenous people, Canada, First Nations, Inuit, Métis, self-determination, COVID-19, health determinants