

Introduction: Special Issue on Rural Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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***NOTE:** This introduction is intended to support the soft launch of the special issue. Once all of the articles have been produced – and posted under the special issue banner – we will expand this piece to include short summaries of all of the articles and some summative, synthesis findings drawn from the full collection. Stay tuned...*

The COVID pandemic was, and remains, a cataclysmic event impacting every dimension of society in Canada and around the world. With the emergence of new variants, and ongoing challenges associated with vaccination levels, both domestically and internationally, we remain mired in the crisis. Despite the continuing—and potentially perpetual—challenges of COVID, we have learned much about how to mitigate impacts, keep people and communities safe, and economies functioning—despite disproportional impacts at individual, place, and sectoral levels. The purpose of this special issue is to provide insights into the *rural* dimensions of the pandemic. The research documented in the papers of this issue span from the very early days of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 to the fall of 2021. The purpose of this introduction is to frame the pandemic from a rural perspective. A full summary of the articles and our summative thoughts on the findings will follow upon full issue completion.

Our original intent when forming and framing the special issue was to fill important gaps in understanding the rural impacts of the pandemic. We hope that this issue will hold legacy value as future researchers and policy makers struggle with similar crises. We also strongly believe the articles in this issue provide important perspectives and information that is highly relevant *now*. We, as a national and global society, continue to struggle with pandemic impacts and appropriate responses. Well-known challenges associated with the quality of rural data and levels of attention afforded to rural issues continue to hinder timely and appropriate responses at local, national, and international levels (Main H., et al, 2019). The papers in this issue provide a much-needed rural lens with which to view the pandemic and community resilience now and in the future.

We have adopted a broad understanding of what constitutes “rural.” Defining rural is a consistently challenging task in both research and policy. From a policy perspective, rural boundaries carry political implications in terms of defining population levels and allocating jurisdictional capacities and responsibilities—which is obviously of critical importance when responding to a crisis. At a broader level, population estimates affect decisions regarding a wide range of issues,

including service delivery, the division of electoral boundaries, and overall political influence, which may impact political and programmatic attention. We also note the specific social/political circumstances that have shaped impacts and processes for Indigenous Communities/Governments. All of these factors matter during the pandemic in terms of pressing rural-specific impacts and needs within a highly competitive landscape for political, service, and funding attention.

Beyond strict statistical interpretations of rural, researchers have presented a variety of definitions that include community characteristics and perceptions of identity. For example, Cloke (1977) describes a settlement continuum with 'rural' at one end and 'urban' at the other. Similarly, du Plessis et al. (2002) present the concept of 'degrees of rurality,' which nicely accommodates various interpretations of rural and allows for community identification as rural, even though certain communities may exceed certain population, distance, or density parameters. The editorial team for the issue is aligned with the approach of du Plessis et al. (2002, 2004) in that the definitional framework used should be selected based on the research topic, approach, and purpose. This framing of rural offers definitional flexibility that allows the special issue to capture more of the rich diversity and variability of the rural condition and accommodate divergent rural research interests.

While acknowledging the importance of rural variety, if we adopt a broad rural development perspective on the conditions in rural communities and regions in Canada, several specific challenges and assets emerge, relative to pandemic impacts. Challenges include ageing population levels; lower overall health outcomes; limited health care capacity; distance to services; variable internet, broadband access; lower levels of education; lower income levels; and a high level of essential service designations associated with rural employment, particularly in the resource and food production sectors. Articles in the issue will speak to many of these diverse rural contexts.

Rural communities and regions are, however, endowed with considerable assets that have proven important in responding to the pandemic crisis. Most notably, high levels of social capital commonly noted in rural areas have spurred innovative support responses. The strong presence and role of the voluntary sector have also clearly risen to the challenge of dynamic, flexible, and tailored interventions in communities. Aside from the immediate impacts, it is also clear—although not yet fully understood—that the comparative affordability of rural housing (when compared with urban metropolitan regions), combined with high quality of life dynamics, have spurred an in-migration of urban residents into select rural communities (although not all rural regions, as evidence to support the importance of not assuming a homogenous interpretation of rural). It is important to note that this has reverberating impacts in terms of local affordability and displacement, which we will also need to better understand as patterns emerge and become established. Finally, although noted as a challenge above, the essential service designation associated with many rural employment sectors meant employment and corresponding income levels were maintained for many rural residents (and urban residents engaged in fly-in, fly-out labour).

In closing, we would like to express our gratitude in several directions. First, our thanks to Doug Ramsey and the team at the *Journal of Rural and Community Development* for working with us to produce this important issue. Coordinating the logistics for the issue was particularly challenging given how COVID impacted everyone's schedule and capacity to deliver their important work. Second, thanks to

the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF) for helping to mobilize the call for papers—and for all of CRRF’s important work throughout the pandemic to seek to understand rural conditions, impacts—and to advocate for rural regions. Third, we would like to thank all the authors for their tremendous dedication to engaging with the research and producing their articles under such challenging conditions. Research processes have been severely impacted in terms of timelines and community access. Each article here represents a significant effort and true dedication to rural communities. Finally, on behalf of all the authors and editors of this issue, our thanks to the people and communities across the country who engaged with the research process, despite significant pressures and uncertainty. It is your knowledge of, and dedication to, your communities that inspires learning—and action—for how to respond to the pandemic, and inform future crises and pathways toward enhanced rural community resilience.

References

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