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Editorial COVID-19 and Rural Canada: Rural Impacts and Resilience

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Editorial
COVID-19 and Rural Canada:
Rural Impacts and Resilience

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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 ongoing, 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 in 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, introduce the articles, and offer a brief synthesis of key themes.

Our original intent when forming and framing this special issue was to fill important gaps in understanding the rural impacts of the pandemic. We also hope that the issue will hold legacy value as future researchers and policy makers struggle with similar crises. We strongly believe the articles in this issue provide important perspectives and information that is highly relevant *now*. As a national and global society, we 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 et al., 2019). The papers in this issue provide a much-needed rural lens 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 recognize the distinct 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 specific 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 this 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 diversity and context, several issues that are common across many rural jurisdictions exacerbate the impacts of the pandemic. 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 (Markey et al., 2015; Main et al., 2019; Rich et al., 2021). Articles in the issue speak to many of these issues in diverse rural contexts. They underscore how decades of under-investment in rural development, at all levels of government, have left many communities ill-prepared to deal with the immediate impacts of the pandemic and less resilient in response.

Rural communities and regions are, however, also endowed with considerable assets that have proven important in responding to the pandemic crisis (Rich et al., 2021). 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).

Articles in This Issue

The articles in this special issue reveal challenges faced by rural, remote, and Indigenous communities from across Canada. A common theme across the articles is that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing frailties and structural problems associated with the state of rural infrastructure and services. Systems that were already underserving rural communities and residents faced severe burdens of strain and capacity deficits when faced with the crisis. The lack of consistent and well-resourced policy attention toward rural regions is also exposed, both in terms of an inability to understand how the pandemic was impacting rural communities and how to effectively mobilize appropriate responses. The articles document such impacts for a variety of rural services, including healthcare, Indigenous infrastructure, economic development, immigrant and settlement services, water infrastructure, and digital infrastructure. A summary of each article follows.

In the paper, *The COVID-19 vulnerability landscape: Susceptibility to COVID-19 across rural versus urban health regions of Canada*, Looker conducts COVID data analysis that challenges assumptions about the health vulnerability in rural regions. The paper identifies patterns of rural vulnerability that are well documented in the literature, that a combination of socio-demographic conditions, poorer underlying health conditions, and less access to healthcare produces lower levels of health in rural regions. However, existing COVID data, in terms of cases per thousand, indicates that rural regions have fared better in terms of case counts and deaths. Looker deduces that the first outcome is likely the result of higher densities in urban areas increasing vulnerability to an airborne virus. The second finding, a lower overall death rate, requires more research, although it may be linked with overwhelmed urban health services given the load of COVID cases. The work is particularly interesting as it challenges assumptions about rural health vulnerability, specifically linked with transmissible diseases where density leads to vulnerability. Future analysis will be needed to, for example, account for the ongoing impact of vaccine rates on health outcomes in rural and urban settings.

Adegun and Thompson's article, *Higher COVID-19 rates in Manitoba's First Nations compared to non-First Nations linked to limited infrastructure on reserves*, illustrates the contextual variability of the rural experience related to COVID impacts. In this work, using a health equity lens, the authors point to decades of

health inequities for First Nations peoples living on reserves due to intentional colonial and racist policies. This history manifest in health outcomes such that First Nations total COVID cases in Manitoba are three times higher than those of non-First Nations people, two times higher for deaths, and resulted in four times as many patients requiring intensive care. Adegun and Thompson focus on the statistical connection between high COVID rates and the poor condition of infrastructure for First Nations communities, specifically housing (which had the greatest impact), hospital access, and access to roads to service centres.

In the article, *Rural healthcare workers' experiences and needs during the initial stages of COVID-19*, Waddell-Henowitch, Herron, Ramsey, Lawrence, deJager, and Newall shift the focus from health outcomes for rural communities to the impacts of COVID-19 on rural and non-metropolitan healthcare workers. Findings from their online survey indicate that rural healthcare workers are suffering mental health impacts associated with fluctuating protocols, the lack of anonymity, and stigma about expressing mental health concerns. The authors outline literature that documents mental health impacts for all health workers during the pandemic, but situate their analysis on the role of place. The rural and non-metropolitan context affects the availability of resources and influences values associated with mental health care. The COVID-19 crisis also exposed existing deficits in rural mental healthcare infrastructure. Other rural infrastructure disparities are also exposed by the research, including access to childcare and recreational activities critical for family and self-care. The authors are careful not to situate the work within a discourse of deficit framing for rural places, acknowledging the many benefits of rural conditions to mental health, while clearly acknowledging the complex interplay of rural conditions that are impacting the well-being of rural healthcare providers.

Banack's article, *The COVID-19 pandemic and social cohesion in rural Canadian communities: Letter-to-the-editor forums as a window into community discord*, bridges from the strains of the pandemic on mental health to how the impacts of COVID, and our policy responses, are impacting levels of social cohesion in rural communities. The analysis of five rural community newspapers in Western Canada reveals interesting findings. Three examples include that, 1) there was an almost equal division of opinion related to the necessity of public health measures, 2) that misinformation is present – but not to a large degree, and 3) that the divisions being fostered, exacerbated by the pandemic may lead to more serious levels of social discord in the future. Banack's findings suggest that one of the critical assets of rural community living— a strong sense of community and reciprocity among residents— could therefore be threatened by the pandemic. It also shows how divisions within rural Canada, as a departure from more traditional analysis documenting rural-urban divides, may lead to more pronounced social discourse defined by “us” versus “them” polarization.

The Bollman article, *COVID-19 and the differential impacts on the rural and urban economies*, provides an essential statistical analysis of pandemic economic impacts. Bollman notes how the economic impacts of the pandemic must be understood as a disaster, rather than a typical recession given the scale of disruption and needed policy responses. Findings from the article indicate that overall, rural workers were impacted by COVID-19 (slightly) less than urban workers in the early phase of the pandemic (March 2020 – May 2021), but (slightly) greater from June to December 2021. The study also notes that the employment rates for rural females have

rebounded more quickly than for males in the COVID-19 months, suggesting an end of the rural SHE-cession that characterized early rural impacts. The statistics are framed within an understanding of how COVID-19 has had differential impacts on “essential” vs. “non-essential” services and sectors. The study provides data for different dimensions of rural, while also acknowledging that generalizations about rural Canada miss the diversity of impacts as experienced by different groups and communities.

In their piece, *COVID-19 and rural economic development in Canada: Insights on impacts, responses, and recovery*, Hall and Vinodrai complement Bollman’s study by underscoring the importance of a place-based lens when seeking to understand the impacts of the pandemic and prospects for recovery. Their survey of rural economic development officials and administrators in non-metropolitan communities highlights the geographic unevenness of impacts and responses and the availability of resources to address the challenges of the pandemic. Hall and Vinodrai focus their findings on two areas. First, survey results reveal how existing levels of professional and administrative capacity impacted the ability of communities to respond to the economic crisis. Communities without any economic development function, for example, were unprepared, which then leads to questions regarding their ability to plan for recovery. Second, underscoring the importance of place, the study notes differences in community response related to socio-economic context. Findings indicate that some communities were better prepared for managing downturns given recent experience with recession impacts and climate-related emergencies. Overall, the study provides critical insights for future crisis planning, preparedness, and the likely unevenness we will witness across rural space in recovery.

Helps, Silvius, and Gibson, in their article, *Vulnerable, inequitable, and precarious: Impacts of COVID-19 on newcomers, immigrants, and migrant workers in rural Canada*, reveal weaknesses in rural systems and policy that are again being severely exposed by the pressures of the pandemic. Their work indicates that rural immigrants have faced considerable, and unique to rural challenges, including increased social isolation, economic marginalization, and increased vulnerability to illness. The lack of appropriate rural services and policy attention represent structural barriers impacting the immigrant experience. More troubling has been an increase in acts of violence and discrimination against racial and cultural minority groups in Canada. Simply put, the crucible of the pandemic has exacerbated the effects of structural racism, which has disproportionately impacted migrants. As with other articles in this issue, Help, Silvius, and Gibson seek to learn from the pandemic experience to inform and envision a post-pandemic reality in which migrant workers and newcomers to Canada experience long-term residency, security, and employment satisfaction—which will ultimately enhance the vibrancy and economic security of rural regions.

In the article, *Enterprise Hubs: A path to reignite collaboration networks in rural Newfoundland*, Perez, Mendis, and Newell offer insights into the pandemic struggles of entrepreneurs in Labrador’s Great Northern Peninsula (GNP). They note that the pandemic exacerbated challenges associated with other recent struggles and a long history as a province and region facing economic difficulties. Drawing from literature that speaks to the pros and cons of local embeddedness for businesses, they note how entrepreneurs in the GNP have in many ways become over-embedded in their local communities. Levels of social capital associated with a local connection

can have many positive features for businesses. Still, within the context of a pandemic that served to weaken local ties, the lack of connectivity with more external networks left local businesses more exposed to the economic downturn. The article notes how digital enterprise hubs, which refer to physical or virtual spaces that bring together resources and diverse networks for collaboration, may be used to support rural businesses. Critical to these hubs being an effective networking tool is the necessity of adequate digital connectivity, which the authors highlight as an additional barrier (as we will see below in greater detail in the article by Weeden and Kelly).

Weeden and Kelly, in their piece, *Canada's (dis)connected rural broadband policies: Dealing with the digital divide and building 'digital capitals' to address the impacts of COVID-19 in Rural Canada*, offer a critical policy commentary on the state of rural digital infrastructure. They note that the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed a “total policy failure” when it comes to digital policy in Canada. As public health guidance encouraged people to move social and economic activities online, the lack of universally accessible, affordable, and reliable high-speed broadband in rural regions created considerable and variable inequities across rural space. While noting how a market-oriented approach to address digital infrastructure has been ineffective for both hard and soft digital infrastructure provision, they propose a new framework for supporting digital policy for rural Canada. Weeden and Kelly argue for a much more holistic and place-based approach to digital investments in connectivity, capacity, and culture of use.

Hambly's article, *COVID-19 and rural broadband internet access: The pandemic internet of things*, provides an excellent complement to the Weeden and Kelly paper. The article confirms many of the “wide-angle” views on connectivity in Canada, identifying critical broadband infrastructure and access gaps across rural areas. Hambly then provides a “zoomed-in” regional analysis, offering some specificity to the rural broadband experience. The regional analysis identifies three key needs, inclusive of a focus on supports for work from home strategies, the extent to which homes with children and seniors are under-serviced, and the intra-rural broadband gaps for farm households. Confirming the perspective in Weeden and Kelly, the article notes how Canada's market-oriented approach marginalizes rural regions given the high cost/low benefit in terms of capital cost recovery and shareholder gains associated with the distance and density dynamics of rural. By combining general trends with specific regional analysis, the article forwards a recommendation concerning the rationale for a needs-based analysis to policy and program development to support rural broadband expansion.

Eger, Minnes, Vodden, Hudson, Parewick, and Walsh, in their article, *COVID-19 and drinking water security in rural, remote communities and Indigenous communities: The role of collaboration among diverse actors in responding to a global pandemic*, expose the challenge of maintaining complex, critical infrastructure services during a crisis. The rural lens is prominent in their case analysis of water systems in rural Newfoundland and Labrador, including a diversity of systems, multiple actors, a variety of relevant governance agencies—many working at a distance, and variable rural capacity. Place also assumes an important role in their analysis, as the diversity of rural, remote, and Indigenous communities led to varied, and inconsistent, outcomes in ensuring continued access to safe drinking water during the pandemic. While many of these issues pre-date the pandemic, the crisis revealed particular challenges related to evolving guidance,

limited capacity to adapt to new procedures, problems with training and construction, and added stress on local jurisdictions to provide services. Their work serves as an interesting and generalizable study on the poor state of planning preparedness for critical infrastructure in rural areas. Greater levels of coordinated and place-tailored responses are needed to effectively support rural and remote communities during times of crisis.

Finally, in the article, *Addressing COVID-19 challenges through multi-sectoral collaboration: The rural rebound case studies*, Hernandez and Ragetlie focus upon similar themes witnessed in the Eger et al. piece—mainly the importance of multi-sectoral collaboration when dealing with a crisis. Drawing from examples associated with the Rural Rebound Initiative, a peer-to-peer learning project in Ontario, the article offers insights into the importance of collaboration to enhance knowledge, share solutions, and optimize capacity and resources. Coordination and collaboration have long been highlighted in the rural development literature as critical components to overcome many of the challenges of rurality. The Rural Rebound Initiative highlights examples from a broad cross-section of rural stakeholders, including citizens, local governments, businesses, and community organizations from across rural Ontario. In this way, the initiative manages to both accentuate the importance of place and place diversity, while also seeking to share generalizable lessons and responses that may be adapted to other contexts. Common across the stories is the importance of multi-sector collaboration in crisis response.

Closing Thoughts

The legacy value of this special issue is greatly enhanced by the fact that each author/authorship team has included in their analysis a consideration of insights, lessons, and stories that may help guide pandemic recovery efforts. In each paper, the authors also frame their work with an eye towards the more distant future where collective action and re-investments in rural infrastructure and capacity may yield more resilience post-pandemic rural futures. The lessons and knowledge contained within this issue will help with the ongoing, urgent pandemic crisis—and hold relevance for addressing deeper structural inequalities associated with the rural condition and experience. The articles tell us that such a future requires detailed knowledge of and engagement with rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. This serves as the essence of place-based rural development, which recognizes the unique assets and aspirations of different communities, while also connecting this diversity with core and substantive resources and policy attention from all levels of government.

In closing, we would like to express our gratitude in several directions. First, our thanks goes 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-19 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 and impacts—and to advocate for rural regions. Third, we would like to thank all the authors for their tremendous dedication 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 to enhance rural community resilience.

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