

The Narrative of Rural Canada Post-COVID-19

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
<i>Part 1: Central Themes for Rural Canada Post-COVID-19</i>	4
Aging.....	4
Economic Development.....	4
Immigration and Outmigration.....	4
Infrastructure.....	5
Technology.....	5
Truth and Reconciliation.....	6
<i>Part 2: Annotated Bibliography of Peer-Reviewed Articles</i>	7
Conclusion	12
Works Cited	13

Introduction

In January 2023, we conducted a scoping literature review focused on how COVID-19 evolved the narrative of rural Canada. The six themes that emerged were aging, economic development, immigration and outmigration, infrastructure, technology, and Truth and Reconciliation. Our search consisted primarily of peer-reviewed literature, along with government reports and gray literature for supplementary information. We focused on literature released within the past ten years, however, much of the peer-reviewed literature included in this document has a focus on COVID-19. We utilized sources published before the pandemic to act as a baseline to understand how COVID-19 has impacted and shifted the nature of rural Canada.

This document consists of two parts. First, we provide a summary of the six major themes identified during the scoping review and their implications for the changing nature of rural Canada. Second, we provide our annotated bibliography of the peer-reviewed articles identified during the scoping review.

Part 1: Central Themes for Rural Canada Post-COVID-19

Aging

For the past few decades in Canada, many rural communities have experienced high rates of aging, a process that has been occurring at a quicker pace compared to urban communities (Hall & Vinodrai, 2021; Hanlon & Skinner, 2022). Generally, seniors are more susceptible to the severe potential impacts of COVID-19, like hospitalization rates or death (Statistics Canada, 2021). Within roughly the first year of the pandemic, just over 283,000 of the 353,000 deaths linked directly or indirectly to the pandemic were seniors (Statistics Canada, 2021). Issues often specific to rural areas, like isolation, impacted seniors in rural areas amidst the pandemic (Colibaba et al., 2021).

Economic Development

Rural areas across Canada contribute to the country's GDP through industries like agriculture and mining (Hall & Vinodrai, 2021). Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, these industries in rural areas saw a 30% contribution to Canada's GDP (Hall & Vinodrai, 2021). However, the arrival of the pandemic impacted economic development staff in rural areas in varying ways, such as that their budget had to decrease (Hall & Vinodrai, 2021). The Government of Canada (2021) notes that near the beginning of the pandemic, over 329,000 jobs in rural areas were lost. Although there were nearly 300,000 small businesses in rural Canada in 2020, this number dropped by 4.1% since data from 2019 (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Immigration and Outmigration

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, rural areas in Canada experienced high rates of youth outmigration due to reasons such as the minimal presence of post-secondary education available in rural communities (Hall & Vinodrai, 2021; Bryant & Joseph, 2001). On the other hand, immigration that occurs in Canada often sees immigrants moving to urban areas rather than rural areas (Statistics Canada, 2022). However, there are still people that immigrate to Canada that live and end up working in rural areas (Helps et al., 2021). Pre-existing problems that immigrants

faced in rural areas were worsened by the pandemic, such as inequality and vulnerability (Helps et al., 2021).

Infrastructure

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, water systems like Potable Water Dispensing Units (PWDUs) were used in rural areas to accommodate for unsafe water supply or water advisories (Eger et al., 2021). However, this infrastructure used in rural areas in Newfoundland and Labrador to provide clean drinking water was impacted once the pandemic started (Eger et al., 2021). In several communities, the construction of new PDWUs was obstructed and some other communities struggled with providing supplies like masks for those who worked on PDWUs (Eger et al., 2021). Yet, many of these rural communities were able to adapt to health guidelines brought by the pandemic affecting maintenance of their PWDUs (Eger et al., 2021).

Additionally, pre-existing issues like isolation felt by workers in the healthcare system were exacerbated in rural communities due to the pandemic (Waddell-Henowitch et al., 2021). Isolation negatively impacted the mental health of rural healthcare workers, and there was often a lack of mental health support for workers during the pandemic (Waddell-Henowitch et al., 2021).

Technology

Rural areas may struggle with access and quality of technology infrastructure like the internet compared to urban areas (McMahon & Akçayır, 2022). Problems such as internet speed, reliability of internet, and more were evident in rural areas opposed to urban areas (McMahon & Akçayır, 2022). With many services, like government services, being pushed online from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the impacts of the digital divide in rural areas spread (Singh & Chobotaru, 2022). Access to high-speed internet with 50Mbps download speed and 10Mbps upload speed, the standard set by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunication Commission, is met in just below half of rural areas across Canada (Singh & Chobotaru, 2022). Programs aiming to help expand access to this download and upload speed standard can improve

access to online government and healthcare services in rural areas (Government of Canada, 2020).

Truth and Reconciliation

Although much of rural lands in Canada are Indigenous territory or treaty land, the rise of settler occupation in these areas has acted as means of redefining what rural areas look like (de Finney, 2022). This has resulted in a diminished presence of Indigenous sovereignty in rural areas along with discourse surrounding rural Canada (de Finney, 2022). Issues impacting this include a rise in violence against Indigenous people, mainly Indigenous women, girls, and 2Spirit people, in rural areas (de Finney, 2022). This violence can be attributed to male workforces and man camps introduced by resource extraction projects (de Finney, 2022).

The pandemic has resulted in a rise in homesteading in rural areas by urban citizens - this may be having an impact on Indigenous sovereignty in rural spaces (de Finney, 2022).

Additionally, rural and remote Indigenous communities, such as Sucker River in Saskatchewan, have seen an uptick in addictions and suicides since the pandemic started (The Canadian Press, 2021). While suicide rates are already highest in rural areas for First Nations peoples (Kumar & Tjepkema, 2019) - a consequence attributed to several factors including colonialism and loss of culture (Government of Canada, 2022) - Covid-19 may have exacerbated existing wellbeing concerns in First Nations communities.

Part 2: Annotated Bibliography of Peer-Reviewed Articles

Bryant, C., & Joseph, A. E. (2001). Canada's rural population: Trends in space and implications in place. *Canadian Geographer*, 45(1), 132-137.

<https://doi-org.uwinnipeg.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1541-0064.2001.tb01177.x>

The findings from this paper indicate migration and population aging as two demographic processes which impact rural populations. Additionally, they found that different rural areas may have different needs that need to be acknowledged by certain democratic policies which impact rural areas. They suggest that provincial and federal governments have considerable roles to play in the future of rural areas, including understanding the role that local leadership has in rural areas and supporting the capacity that rural areas have for handling change. The article highlights that future rural Canada will vary between places due to factors like varying populations.

Colibaba, A., Skinner, M. W., & Russell, E. (2021). Rural aging during COVID-19: A case study of older voluntarism. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 40(4), 581-590.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0714980821000386>

This article looks at results from interviews conducted with administrators and volunteers within three different volunteer programs in an area in rural Ontario known as Selwyn Township. The case study that included these interviews took results from 34 volunteers, whose programs were either centered in fire services, libraries, or housing. This article highlighted the resiliency of volunteers in rural areas during the first wave of COVID-19 in Canada. They noted the adaptability of both these volunteer programs and the volunteers was important during the pandemic, specifically for the shift of many services, like the library, being moved online.

de Finney, S. (2022). Rekinning the homeland: Rurality, gender-based genocide, and Indigenous sovereignty in colonial Canada. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 95, 475-481.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2022.09.026>

The findings from this article indicate that, even though the majority of rural areas reside on treaty land or Indigenous homeland, much of its citizens are white. The displacement or gradual decrease of Indigenous peoples from these areas can be attributed to factors like pipeline and road construction, along with resource extraction. Additionally, rural areas see violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2Spirit people often as a result of the introduction of male workforces and man camps for resource extraction and production. Lastly, Indigenous sovereignty was found to be negatively impacted by increasing rural homesteading by urban citizens, “back to the land” movements, and more. The only mention of COVID-19 in this article was related to homesteading, and how the pandemic may have influenced this movement to pick up speed. It may be argued that the pandemic may cause harm to Indigenous sovereignty, as some urban citizens plan to homestead in rural areas.

Eger, S., Minnes, S., Vodden, K., Hudson, A., Parewick, K., & Walsh, D. (2021). COVID-19 and drinking water security in rural, remote and Indigenous communities: The role of collaboration among diverse actors in responding to a global pandemic. *Journal of Rural & Community Development*, 16(4), 112–140.
<https://journals.brandonu.ca/jrcd/article/view/2056>

The results from this article found that there were concerns regarding factors like the quality and operation of Potable Water Dispensing Units (PDWUs) during the pandemic. Some of the key concerns surrounding utilizing PDWUs during a pandemic were that the pandemic acted as a barrier obstructing creation of PDWUs, inability to adapt to new procedures related to PDWUs, and more. However, many communities with PDWUs were able to adapt to challenges brought by the pandemic which affected their water systems.

Hall, H., & Vinodrai, T. (2021). COVID-19 and rural economic development in Canada: Insights on impacts, responses, and recovery. *Journal of Rural & Community Development*, 16(4), 141–158. <https://journals.brandonu.ca/jrcd/article/view/2089/538>

Overall, the authors divided their results amongst three categories, which were the economic impacts of the pandemic, economic development responses to the pandemic, and resources

required for recovery from the pandemic. For the first category, the main finding from rural areas' responses to COVID-19 was that the majority found economic losses, such as a surge in expenses due to the pandemic. Of the responses in this category, most of them were negative. For the second category, it was found that there was an overall response that organizations were somewhat prepared to respond to the economic development issues from the pandemic. For the third category, it was found that respondents felt the most confident about recovery in the future, supporting the idea of rural resilience.

Hanlon, N., & Skinner, M. W. (2022). On older person/place transformations: Towards a more-than-representational geography of aging in rural Canada. *Canadian Geographer*, 66(1), 145–155. <https://doi-org.uwinnipeg.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/cag.12737>

The authors found that both aging people and rural places are shaped by one another, and due to this, there needs to be additional research and policy considerations to consider this finding. Under a geographic viewpoint, the authors suggest that fluidity, normativity, performativity, and relationality should be considered when discussing rural aging. For example, fluidity suggests that the identity of aging rural people should not be considered fixed, but rather fluid—and not only using factors like age or occupation to define them.

Helps, L., Silviu, R., & Gibson, R. (2021). Vulnerable, inequitable, and precarious: Impacts of COVID-19 on newcomers, immigrants, and migrant workers in rural Canada. *Journal of Rural & Community Development*, 16(4), 159–177. <https://journals.brandonu.ca/jrcd/article/view/2102/540>

Findings from this article indicate that there are problems with getting immigrant support services in rural areas compared to urban areas. Additionally, the perception that immigration strictly affects urban areas contributes to less awareness and funding for immigration issues for those living in rural areas. The authors found that it was most important for there to be support specific to newcomers living in rural areas, based with a rural perspective in mind. Regarding COVID-19, newcomers working in agriculture and agri-food sectors were susceptible to illness and outbreaks due to poor working conditions.

McMahon, R., & Akçayır, M. (2022). Investigating concentrated exclusion in telecommunications development: Engaging rural voices from Northern Canada. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 95, 183-194. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2022.09.004>

The baseline results from this article indicated six areas of struggles that those in rural areas face, including affordability, internet service providers, reliability, consequences/outcomes, internet speed, and access and availability to service. The top challenges that were found were high internet prices, slow internet speed, and unreliable internet. It was suggested that telecommunications consultations to those in rural areas broaden their efforts to be tailored to rural areas.

COVID-19 highlighted how the digital divide impacts rural areas in contrast to urban areas, which tend to have better, faster internet connection and more. It is important to add that this survey utilized information submitted by 248 people—yet most of these submissions were not from people in rural areas—which may be due to problems from COVID-19, internet issues, or a lack of trust from the surveyed individuals.

Singh, V., & Chobotaru, J. (2022). Digital divide: Barriers to accessing online government services in Canada. *Administrative Sciences*, 12(3), 1-12. <https://doi-org.uwinnipeg.idm.oclc.org/10.3390/admsci12030112>

This article compares the impacts of the digital divide between Canada and Scandinavia prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, then looks at how the pandemic played a role in the digital divide in these areas. Lastly, the authors look at the deeper influence of the digital divide when considering access to digital government services, specifically for people who were susceptible to the impacts of the pandemic. The authors found that those living in rural areas had greater disadvantages in accessing and using digital government services compared to urban areas. Rural areas are typically linked to the digital divide, and often have issues with internet speed, costs, and access to high-speed broadband internet. Less than 50% of rural households in Canada have access to the internet upload and download speed standard set by the Canadian Radio-television

and Telecommunication Commission, which is 50Mbps for download speed and 10Mbps for upload speed.

Waddell-Henowitch, C., Herron, R., Ramsey, D., Lawrence, B., deJager, M., & Newall, N. (2021). Rural healthcare workers' experiences and needs during the initial stages of COVID-19. *Journal of Rural & Community Development*, 16(4), 53–75.
<https://journals.brandonu.ca/jrcd/article/view/2107/533>

The authors found that healthcare workers in rural areas in Canada faced complications for getting support for their mental health amidst the pandemic, along with experiencing other health issues like anxiety. It was also found that many health care workers felt that they had to put their mental health aside to care for their patients. Another finding was that there was a lack of support for mental health services for healthcare workers in rural areas compared to urban areas.

Conclusion

This scoping review reveals that issues that were being experienced in rural areas prior to the pandemic have been exacerbated by the onset of COVID-19 across rural Canada. The pandemic highlighted issues that are often specific to rural areas, such as isolation and the digital divide. It also demonstrated the resiliency and adaptability of those living in the rural areas to face many of the challenges brought on by the pandemic.

At the time this review was conducted, there were few articles focused on the topic of Truth and Reconciliation. Further peer-reviewed literature under Truth and Reconciliation must be published in the future to provide a more accurate picture of this subject in the context of COVID-19 and its impact on the narrative of rural Canada. There is also limited literature on the impacts of COVID-19 on mental health - we predict that more literature will emerge on how the pandemic has impacted the health and wellbeing of rural residents.

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