

Experiences of Albertan Families with Young Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Executive Summary

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The issue

The psychological, economic and social effects of the pandemic are pervasive. Contemporary quality data on family coping during this unprecedented global pandemic is crucial to inform strategies and resource allocation to minimize adverse health, mental health and financial outcomes for families.

What we did

Participants were invited based on a unique collaboration across two longitudinal cohorts in Alberta: [The All Our Families study](#) (AOF) and the [Alberta Pregnancy Outcomes and Nutrition study](#) (APrON). This report describes data collected from approximately 2,000 Albertan families from a COVID-19 Impact Survey implemented in May 2020. Results from this cross-sectional survey, coupled with longitudinal follow-ups can identify opportunities for prevention and intervention to promote well-being and resilience during a pandemic in Alberta.

What we found

Urban Alberta families parenting at least one child in elementary school during the COVID-19 pandemic have described their experiences during a time when home schooling, working from home and access to typical services such as childcare and domestic services has been disrupted. **In over half (58%) of all families, at least one parent experienced job loss, loss of main income source, or reduction in employment hours. Up to 35% of mothers reported elevated stress, anxiety and depression. Over 40% reported tension in their partner relationship. Almost 30% of mothers are concerned about their child's behavior and mood. Families experiencing a high number of stresses may reach a 'tipping point' in coping and require services and supports to minimize long-term threats to health and well-being.** The combination of financial volatility, mental health concerns and increased undertaking of domestic tasks place many families at a tipping point for coping. The failure to address these concerns could have long-term negative outcomes on society through persistent mental health challenges in adults, which could threaten future capacity to contribute to society. In addition, the failure to ensure that children are able to achieve their cognitive, social and emotional potential could threaten their ability to contribute to a knowledge based civil society.

What we know (contextualizing the findings)

1. **Financial Impact:** In families where income and financial supports become precarious, parents need readily available non-stigmatizing avenues to meet basic needs. Job losses and reduced incomes affect the financial and mental health of all family members and can strain relationships, which can lead to family strife, poor coping strategies and escalated tension or abuse. Cumulative impacts of these stressors is related to adverse individual and family functioning with long-term impacts to families and increased costs to the health, social services and other systems.
2. **Mental Health and Relationship Impact:** In families where women experience mental health concerns and partnership tension, addressing these concerns improves adult functioning that in turn can improve child behavior and self-regulation. Children who can regulate emotions and behavior are better able to learn, make friends and direct resources to typical activities of childhood such as schoolwork, peer relationships, and skill development. Pre-pandemic rankings from the Canadian chapter of UNICEF place Canada at 31 out of 39 countries of comparable wealth in terms of children's well-being. Although the impacts from COVID-19 on children will take time to unravel, strategies that support child well-being and family functioning are critically urgent now and will continue to be throughout the pandemic.

What we can do

COVID-19 has threatened the financial and emotional well-being of citizens and investments are required to ensure families are able to thrive. Coordination from local, provincial and federal jurisdictions is required to ensure food and housing security for families. Public Health strategies that mobilize existing evidence about the value of healthy lifestyle choices including routines related to sleep, exercise and recreation, as well as the value of a healthy diet, health literacy and strong social relationships will be important. The emphasis on routines and habitual activities like game night or reading books together can help families cope in times of stress. These Public Health approaches can normalize help seeking behaviour and empower families during uncertain times. Existing investments in mental health and addiction support can be leveraged to ensure ease of access to services for all families, minimizing financial barriers to interventions and treatments for those most in need. Further, public investments in approaches that enhance natural supports and naturally supportive environments will improve well-being, sense of belonging and purpose among citizens (connectionsfirst.ca), and may alleviate stress associated with COVID-19 related restrictions on usual activities. The fundamental need to belong is an undercurrent for optimal development across the lifecourse, and innovative strategies to foster connections during a pandemic are imperative. These strategies align with Government of Alberta documents, including the Well-Being and Resiliency Framework (March 2019).

Addressing both economic needs and relational poverty during a pandemic is crucial. Communities and families can focus resources to ensure children and youth experience safety, physical and emotional well-being, sense of purpose and belonging, and skill acquisition with the recognition that these are core elements for healthy development. Public Health resources that focus on strategies for coping, conflict resolution and enhancing mental health are important for adult well-being. Collective efforts across jurisdictions, including health, education, children's services, labour, economy and innovation will be required to mitigate adverse outcomes consequent to this global pandemic. Collaborative efforts from individual to family to community and across service and government sectors will ensure that the best possible outcomes are achieved for all Albertans.

The full descriptive report can be found at: allourfamiliesstudy.com and apronstudy.ca

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