

Experiences of Albertan Families with Young Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Short Report

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Report prepared by

Sheila McDonald, PhD | Departments of Community Health Sciences & Pediatrics, University of Calgary; Alberta Health Services

Sarah Edwards, PhD | Department of Community Health Sciences, University of Calgary

Erin Hetherington, PhD | Department of Community Health Sciences, University of Calgary

Nicole Racine, PhD | Department of Psychology, University of Calgary

Melissa Mueller, MSc | Department of Psychology, University of Calgary; Alberta Health Services

Brae Anne McArthur, PhD | Department of Psychology, University of Calgary

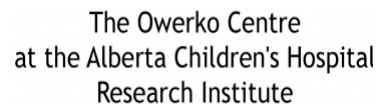
Sheri Madigan, PhD | Department of Psychology, University of Calgary

Deborah Dewey, PhD | Departments of Community Health Sciences & Pediatrics, University of Calgary

Gerald Geisbrecht, PhD | Departments of Community Health Sciences & Pediatrics, University of Calgary

Nicole Letourneau, PhD | Faculty of Nursing, University of Calgary

Suzanne Tough, PhD | Departments of Community Health Sciences & Pediatrics, University of Calgary



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Background

The psychological, economic, and social effects of the pandemic are pervasive. High quality, contemporary data on coping and recovery for families in Alberta during an unprecedented global pandemic is crucial to inform further action and resource allocation in any future waves of this pandemic and periods of lockdown. This data can also help inform resource allocation with regards to the service needs (e.g., health, mental health, financial) of Albertan children and families. 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.

This report describes data collected from on Albertan families on the COVID-19 Impact Survey implemented in May, which built 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).

Objectives

- Describe household infections of COVID-19 in Alberta among families with school-aged children.
- Describe urban Albertan family experiences of the pandemic within the first 3-4 months of the outbreak across the areas of financial impact, maternal mental health and well-being, school and daily life, and relationships in the home.
- Describe associations among key predictor variables (e.g., financial impact) and outcomes (e.g., maternal anxiety, concern for child's well-being).

Methods

The mothers and children invited to participate in the COVID-19 Impact Survey were part of two longitudinal cohorts in Alberta, AOF and APrON. The survey was developed based on existing COVID-19 surveys, previously used validated scales for the longitudinal cohorts and key content areas. The survey was circulated to content experts, subspecialists, clinical experts in infectious diseases for review prior to distribution. The COVID-19 Impact Survey was sent to 4,116 participants between May and July 2020, with a response rate of 54% (N=1,815).

Study Sample

AOF and APrON Cohort participants reflect families parenting at least one child in between the ages of 8 and 12. While the respondents represent a broad range of income, education and ethnicity, they are typified by adequate income, food and housing security and partnered marital status. For example, data collected between February 2017 through until May 2020 when children were 8 years of age in AOF indicated that 82% earned at least \$80,000 and 91% were partnered (married or common-law).

Highlighted Results

Physical Impact

At the time of data collection, over 90% of families did not have personal experience with COVID-19, either through personal infection, infection of a child, extended family member or close friend.

Vaccine Intentions

Although over 60% of mothers and their children would obtain a COVID-19 vaccine when available, almost 30% are undecided and 8% would not obtain a vaccine.

Financial Impact

In 58% of all families, at least one parent experienced job loss, loss of main income source, or reduced employment hours (i.e., in 19% of families, both parents were financially impacted, and in 39% of families, one parent was financially impacted).

1 in 5 mothers reported difficulty meeting financial needs for the household, and 5% of families were experiencing food insecurity.

Over 40% of respondents reported at least some impact on their ability to meet financial obligations, with 20% of these families reporting moderate to major impact.

Maternal Concerns, Mental Health and Wellness Impact

Approximately 20% and 30% of respondents reported a high level of concern for their own or a family member's health, respectively.

Mothers reported elevated levels of stress (21%), anxiety (25%) and depression (35%).

Approximately 26% of mothers reported having limited coping skills (e.g., feeling in control of their emotional reactions, being able to deal with difficult circumstances).

Almost 90% of mothers have undertaken more domestic tasks in the home.

School and Daily Life Impact

Most mothers (78%) reported that parental need to supervise their child's schoolwork was somewhat or very difficult and 60% indicated managing schoolwork and other activities in the home was somewhat to very difficult.

Nearly 25% of mothers reported it was very difficult to find daytime care for children so they could go to work outside the house or complete their work-related tasks.

Most mothers felt their child would be able to keep up with schoolwork (74%) and re-adjust socially and be academically ready for the next school year (82% and 61%, respectively).

One quarter of mothers were worried about their child's behavior and depression. A third of mothers were worried that their child was anxious.

Mothers reported their child's screen time use outside of schoolwork increased by almost 2 hours per day, compared to pre-COVID-19 screen-time averages.

Relationships Inside the Home Impact

Although 47% of mothers reported some (43%) or a lot (4%) of tension in their relationship with their partner, 27% responded that the pandemic had brought them closer together.

Despite the reported tension and challenges, over 80% of mothers reported their relationship with their partner as happy to perfectly happy.

Many mothers reported that siblings were closer to one another (52%), and so were parents and children (47% of mothers, 35% of partners).

Intersecting Factors

Families who were financially impacted were more likely to report higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety.

Mothers scoring high on resiliency measures, including feeling in control and positive, were more likely to manage the child's learning environment.

Mothers who had a positive, coping-focused attitude were slightly less concerned about their child's mental health or wellbeing.

Limitations

Limitations of this survey mainly refer to the potential for selection bias and generalizability of the findings. Compared to the general Canadian population, the two Alberta cohorts have higher socioeconomic status and less ethnic diversity. Thus, findings from the current study represent the responses of a more socially advantaged urban sample.

Summary & Next Steps

What we learned:

In 58% of all families, at least one parent experienced job loss, loss of main income source, or reduced employment hours. Mothers reported increased stress (21%), anxiety (35%) and depression (25%), which is higher than pre-pandemic rates of depression in this cohort of 16%. Almost half of mothers reported tension in their relationship. Mothers also reported that their children showed increased sadness and behavioural challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound financial and mental health impact on some families. Investment in strategies to alleviate financial stress, provide parenting supports, and alleviate mental health concerns is critical.

What we know:

Our work based on the [AOF](#) and [APrON](#) cohorts and the literature show that maternal mental health strongly influences child well-being and that external and internal coping strategies can mitigate adverse effects of maternal mental illness on maternal and child outcomes. In general, social connections are protective against poor outcomes for mothers and families. When women can develop social support networks and engage in community activities, their mental health can improve. Families where women can share responsibilities and offset stress with support from partners and extended family have the greatest potential for improved mental health. In turn, improved maternal mental health can benefit mothers, children and their families.

We also know that brief and informal positive interactions in daily events, also known as 'social snacking', is important in community building and well-being. Such interactions can add to or deduct from [one's emotional currency; that is, one's well-being and ability to handle encounters](#). Relationships buffer negative experiences and social snacking improves mood, sense of connection, and well-being.

What we know in the context of COVID-19:

During this time of physical distancing, social connections are more important than ever before. In the context of COVID-19, these strategies translate into feasible social connections with physical distancing, investing in 'social bubbles', and virtual connections. For the latter, evidence suggests that online social support, peer and parenting supports, and online mental health care can be effective. Efforts to maintain

social connections in small groups and that are outdoors have the potential to improve mental health. Accessible outdoor spaces where small groups of individuals or cohort families can gather (e.g., parks, walking paths, and trails) provide opportunities to engage in social support.

Next steps:

Investing in family mental health must be prioritized as part of the COVID-19 pandemic response. Interventions should include normalizing help-seeking, ensuring ease of access to professional help (virtual or in-person), and resources that support healthy intimate relationships and remediate stress related to financial losses.

Further longitudinal research will help to better understand how pre-pandemic factors factor in families' ability to cope with the stresses experienced as a result of the pandemic. Such research will help to isolate modifiable protective factors that promote resilience amid risk. Investing in longitudinal cohorts like AOF and APrON is important to examine the effects of the pandemic over time.

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

For further information, please contact Sheila McDonald at sheila.mcdonald@albertahealthservices.ca