

COVID-19 Pandemic and its Socio-Economic Implications on Canada

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Summary

This paper dwells into the means and mechanisms adopted by the Canadian government in the fight against COVID-19. The paper also sheds light on the challenges faced by the government as well as the steps to overcome them. Furthermore, it talks about the status of vaccine research and the future course of action by the country.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Canada from the middle of March 2020 affected the Canadian population with unexpected disruptions in almost all spheres of life that drastically altered the lifestyle in most of the provinces in Canada. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau requested Canadians to stay at home and self-isolate. Each province in Canada implemented its measures and plans to fight COVID-19. The provinces like British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island declared a state of emergency. Alberta, Northwest Territories, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador have issued public health emergencies. Similar warnings have been applied at the municipal levels as well. Most Canadians trust their government institutions; hence, people obey and follow the instructions given by government bodies to ensure that the health-care system can work properly and does not become overwhelmed. However, the disruptions in normal life became evident as borders were shut down, supply chains were broken, consumer demand collapsed, educational institutions were closed, almost all the sectors of the economy closed. Canadians became worried about paying for their groceries and their bills. The situation became especially grim for a vulnerable population like homeless, who were not able to self-isolate themselves and avoid getting affected by the pandemic.

The rapid spread of this virus in Canada demonstrated how much interconnected the global systems have become. This pandemic made Canadians change their daily routine. It seems, in a short period the threat of COVID-19 became more dangerous than the threats posed by terrorism or even by climate change. The COVID-19 virus killed

a huge number of people in a few weeks and affected long-term care facilities and retirement homes. Unfortunately, in Canada, around 80 percent of all COVID-19 deaths reported were in the senior homes.¹

As the effects of the COVID-19 virus rippled through the Canadian system, this crisis has dented many other sectors. It has deepened the economic crisis of the country thus, pushing the innumerable population into poverty to meet their basic demands. However, the community response was applaudable, where many came together to protect the elderly and other vulnerable populations of the communities. Policy options were declared by the federal government, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced financial support plans to help the population of Canada in this difficult time.

The federal government declared to provide economic assistance in various ways. The low or zero interest business loans were announced, tax payment deferrals were declared, payroll tax holidays were given, expanded access to employment insurance (EI), boosted the Canada Child Benefit (CCB) and GST rebates and announced plans to ensure bank liquidity along with various stimulus spending proposals. Working-age people who relied on employment or self-employment as their primary source of income were badly affected by widespread business closures. Many who fall in the lower end of the income distribution were severely impacted. Looking into these challenges, the federal government also implemented the provision of a monthly income of CAD 1,000 to all individual working-age Canadians who had employment or self-employment income in 2019. The federal government also announced the “Canada Emergency Students Benefit”, as students were significantly concerned about paying their tuition fees and student loans and handling their regular expenses due to the loss of part-time jobs.

Prime Minister Trudeau also announced that people who qualify for old age security would be eligible for a one-time, tax-free payment of CAD 300 to help offset increased costs due to the pandemic and people eligible for the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) will get an extra CAD 200.²

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, digitalization, in Canada got a major boost within a few weeks of the lockdown. Digital cafes, Google meet-ups, zoom meetings and other virtual remote work arrangements enabled Canadians to continue with their work and educational activities from home. COVID-19 disrupted the education system in Canadian Schools, Colleges and Universities, as all were closed following March break and it is expected to remain closed till June. The country has adopted the online education system. Though online learning cannot fully replace the classroom experience, the main aim is to help students continue their education and the learning process. There have been challenges adjusting to these changes for students and teachers both. Yet, the educators and officials continuously tried to deliver messages of positivity. There were both live and pre-recorded lessons delivered online. For the special needs students, the online classes are tough to adjust, but teachers are supporting these students through online meetings and with extra consultations. Teachers also address the queries of parents of young students who are struggling to learn how to navigate the online tools and assist their children. Every academic institution before starting the online classes crafted a plan to address the needs of students who may not have access to the internet, computers or tablets. Ministry of Education collaborated with tech-companies to provide technological support for the ‘learn at home’, programs to help meet the educational needs of students and teachers. Devices were distributed to students who did not have them along with

a fast internet facility. Educational Institutions provided these facilities at no cost and will keep these facilities intact until 30 June 2020. During the online teaching, students and teachers are maintaining continuous communication with one another, especially, through email or video communications. Pandemic has made people more considerate and understanding regarding the expectations of both teachers and students.

In Canada, the restrictions on international and domestic travel continued leading to clear skies and lower levels of pollution which was probably not seen in decades. Clear skies and no traffic is a rare phenomenon in big cities in Canada. During the lockdown, people started cooking and entertaining themselves at home, as all outdoor activities like professional sports, theatres, restaurants, clubs and bars have been closed to avoid the spread of the virus.

Canada has been able to manage the coronavirus crisis so far. However, Canada's ability to continue to keep people safe from the pandemic while successfully rescuing the economy would be a challenging task. This pandemic has made one thing clear that no one is safe unless the basic safety measures are followed effectively until an effective medical solution is in place. In fact, many have started re-thinking the whole idea of globalization and many opine that it may lose its significance and nations may favour the idea of local self-sufficiency.

In all likelihood, this pandemic will stay for long until a vaccine is invented. A Chinese and Canadian research team conducting clinical trials on a COVID-19 vaccine and China has asked to test the vaccine in Canada. The National Research Council is scaling up its vaccine production capacity in anticipation that Health Canada will approve the trial. On 13 May, Health Canada released a statement

mentioning that blood tests, known as serological tests, will be used in Canadian laboratories to detect antibodies specific to COVID-19. ³

This pandemic has taught Canadians that access to health care, medication, housing, and basic income is the most essential. Additionally, it is time to fundamentally restructure the societies around the ideals of local self-sufficiency and environmental sustainability. Perhaps, now it is also the time to empower international institutions to establish the rule of law globally.

Another very important thing that this crisis has changed, is the decades old belief, that the best institution to guarantee people's security and safety is the military institutions. It was advocated that the main threat to citizens security emanates from other states and maintaining powerful military institutions of their own would assure peace and security of the nation and its people. However, the larger lesson taught during this pandemic is that there is a need to allocate a large budget for the health care sectors. The federal government needs to inject more funds in health care research, focus on increasing medical supplies, provide support to health care personnel's, as viruses like COVID-19, SARS, Spanish flu, threatens human health security directly and pushes a countless number of population to endure difficult situations. It is hoped that this tough time will provide everyone with the opportunity to practice and learn adaptability, patience, resilience to overcome any such future challenges and hardships.

Author shared personal views and experiences during the Covid -19 Pandemic crisis and lockdown in Canada from March - May 2020.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Globe and Mail Data
- ² Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Outbreak update, Government of Canada, <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html>
- ³ Ontario Ministry of Health Report, 14 May 2020