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DANGEROUS DISRUPTIONS TO ESSENTIALS FOR DAILY LIVING

The COVID-Related Experiences of
People Living with Poverty in Rural
and Small Urban Communities in
Southern Ontario



A University of Guelph COVID Catalyst Research Project

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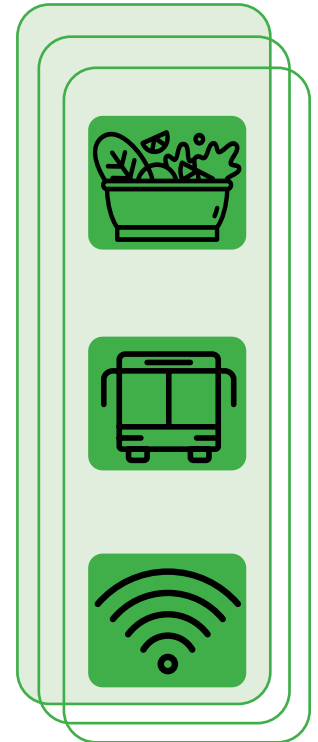
DANGEROUS DISRUPTIONS TO ESSENTIALS: TRANSPORTATION AND FOOD ACCESS

The COVID-Related Experiences of People Living with Poverty in Rural and Small Urban Communities in Southern Ontario

People living with poverty are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic in complex and interconnected ways.¹ This factsheet shares what people living with poverty have to say about how disrupted access to food, healthcare, social supports and other essentials have impacted their everyday lives during the pandemic.

Key Takeaways

- People living with poverty in rural and small urban communities have struggled to access transportation and technology during the pandemic.²
- Limited access to transportation and technology has contributed to food insecurity.
- The movement of support services to online delivery has sometimes left out people living with poverty in rural and remote communities.



COVID-19 and People Living with Poverty: An Intersectional Livelihoods Approach

Living with poverty makes everyday life difficult. The concept of “livelihoods” helps capture this. Livelihoods are the means to secure the necessities of living for individuals, families and communities.³ Together with an intersectional policy analysis,⁴ this research examines how COVID-19 has impacted the livelihoods of people living with poverty, while also considering that:

- living with poverty often coincides with conditions that increase health risks like inadequate housing; experiences of disability; and unsafe working conditions;
- the consequences of poverty compound for people in unsafe situations, such as those experiencing domestic violence; and
- social policy and public health responses to the pandemic have sometimes made the impacts of the pandemic worse for people living with poverty.

¹ Milam, A.J., Furr-Holden, D., Edwards-Johnson, J., Webb, B., Patton II, J.W., Ezekwemba, N.C., Porter, L., Davis, T., Chukwurah, M., Webb, A.J., Simon, K., Franck, G., Anthony, J., Onuoha II, G., Brown, I.M., Carson, J.T., & Stephens, B.C. (2020). Are clinicians contributing to excess African American COVID-19 deaths? Unbeknownst to them, they may be, *Health Equity*, (4)1, 139–141; Wang, Z., & Tang, K. (2020). Combating COVID-19: health equity matters. *Nat Med*, 46, 458.

² Access to transportation and technology are salient issues in small urban and rural communities, but these barriers also exist in cities. For example, low-income people in large urban centres may be unable to afford public transit or internet service.

³ Stienstra, D., & Lee, T. (2019). Disabilities and livelihoods: Rethinking a conceptual framework. *Societies*, 9(4), 67. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc9040067>.

⁴ Hankivsky, O., Grace, D., Hunting, G., Giesbrecht, M., Fridkin, A., Rudrum, S., ... & Clark, N. (2014). An intersectionality-based policy analysis framework: critical reflections on a methodology for advancing equity. *International journal for equity in health*, 13(1), 119.

Transportation Access and Food Access

During the pandemic, pre-existing challenges such as limited transportation options further isolated people living in rural and small urban communities. Options to reduce transportation costs like ridesharing or getting a lift from friends disappeared because of COVID. Ellen,⁵ an older woman with a disability living on a fixed income, explained, *“I’m having to rely on taxi whenever I need to go somewhere and that’s really hard. I don’t like to be in the backseat of a taxi because it’s hard to get in and I like to be able to see where I’m going because of the anxiety. And how do I know my taxi driver’s not carrying [COVID]?”*

Sometimes, lack of transportation exacerbated other vulnerabilities like food insecurity. Maria, a woman who supplemented her social assistance by working at a food program, explained *“I think the supports that are missing are transportation. When we give away produce...people can’t get [it]”*. Another participant Michael, shared the following:



I can’t carry a week’s worth of groceries home for four people... I’m not out buying fifty pounds of flour because it’s on sale because I can’t hump all that back.

For Michael, limited transportation options led to more expensive grocery shopping. Participants who lacked stable, permanent housing, experienced intersecting food insecurity. Katherine, a domestic abuse survivor living at a motel, explained: *“I can’t afford two weeks of food. But even the size of the fridge in here is only a mini bar fridge... it’s so tiny. I mean, you could only fit a couple of things for a day.”*

Changes to Social Service Provision and Internet Access

Some participants shared stories of social service providers going above and beyond to help with new vulnerabilities related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sam, a younger woman on the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), experienced an increase in food insecurity during the pandemic. She told us that her caseworker would *“have the foodbank deliver hampers directly to my house or authorize a gift card so I could get what I needed”*.

Despite some positive stories, many participants discussed significant challenges. The move to the online delivery of services disrupted care for some participants. Doreen, an older woman with a disability, who was unhoused during part of the pandemic, told us:

It’s been very challenging... all the meetings are closed so they went to Zoom and when I moved up here, suddenly I don’t have any Wi-Fi.



Another woman, Daria, had difficulty finding someone to repair her mobility device: *“I called health support services a while ago and said my walker is broken and they said well we can’t help you take it back to the store. I was really upset about that because I wanted them to help me”*. Eventually, Daria was able to have an occupational therapist visit to assist with her broken device, but only through dedicated self advocacy and after a long wait.

⁵ All names used in this report are pseudonyms. In addition, the names of people and places have been removed from quotes to further protect participant anonymity.

Social Isolation

Shutdowns and closures during the pandemic have also affected social connections, particularly for people who live alone. Summing up a common concern, Eliza, a woman living alone on a fixed income, explained, *“I don’t have family really. I have my daughter and that’s about it for family. So, you know, there, it was very difficult. You’re, you’re just kind of much more alone”*. Many participants connected their experiences of isolation to declines in their overall health and wellbeing. As Katherine related, *“with my mental illness, being isolated indefinitely, even knowing that [isolation] would be a duration, was very difficult”*. Reflecting these findings, researchers have raised concerns that prolonged social isolation and loneliness have and will continue to negatively impact people’s mental health, especially if they are also struggling financially.⁶

What Now?

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted key divides in transportation and technology access that disproportionately affect low-income residents in small urban and rural communities. In the context of the pandemic, the absence of transportation options, suitable technology, and support services, are making it difficult for people living with poverty to get the essentials they need for daily living and thriving, and increasing social isolation. This emphasizes the importance of targeted digital equity and transportation initiatives that reach people living with poverty in small-urban and rural areas.

⁶ Dozois, D. J. (2020). Anxiety and depression in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic: A national survey. Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cap0000251>

⁷ This research was funded by a University of Guelph COVID-19 Catalyst Grant and conducted in partnership with A Way Home Canada (<https://awayhome.ca>), the Guelph-Wellington Taskforce for Poverty Elimination (<https://www.gwpoverity.ca>), and Services and Housing in the Province (<https://shipshey.ca>). We received REB approval from the University of Guelph (Certificate # 20-06-031). Other research findings from this project are available at: <https://liveworkwell.ca>. For more details about the research contact liveworkwell@uoguelph.ca.

About the Research⁷

This research summary is part of a series highlighting key findings and policy recommendations that emerged from a project aimed at:

- better understanding the impacts of COVID-19 on the day-to-day lives of people living with poverty in small urban and rural communities; and
- identifying and responding to policy gaps in government responses to the pandemic.

The results are based on five scoping interviews with service providers; interviews and focus groups with 23 unique participants who self-identified as living with poverty; an intersectional policy analysis of measures taken by the federal, provincial and local governments to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic; and a scan of relevant literature.

About the Participants

From July to September 2020, the research team conducted in-depth focus groups and interviews with people who self-identified as living with poverty in the City of Guelph, Wellington County, Dufferin County, and Peel Region. Of the participants, 73% identified as women, 78% discussed receiving social assistance, and 45% referred to having a disability. Some of the participants were youth, and some were seniors. Some lived in their own homes, while others lived with friends or family, or in shelters or motels. Qualitative research, as presented here, helps illuminate the depth and breadth of experiences among a group of people facing a particular challenge – in this case, coping with the COVID-19 pandemic while experiencing poverty.