INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE ON COVID-19

Lori Wilkinson, PhD, is Professor of Sociology at the University of Manitoba. She holds a Canada Research Chair in Future Migration (2021–2028). Her research program focuses on the integration experiences of newcomers to Canada, with a particular interest in refugee families. She recently received the Dr. and Mrs. Ralph Campbell Award for Community Engagement from the University of Manitoba (2019) and the Metropolis Canada Award for Research Excellence (2021).

Despite numerous declarations that the coronavirus pandemic is finally "over", illnesses, hospitalizations, and deaths continue. In early June of 2023, the USA was reporting 103,436,829 cases of COVID-19, with 1,131,439 deaths in the United States[1] (WHO, 2023). In Canada, the government reported a total case count of 4,684,456 and 52,751 deaths as of June 2023 (Government of Canada, 2023). In Mexico, the number of lab-confirmed cases of COVID-19 is 7,621,062 (WHO, 2023b), though we believe this is a significant undercount (see Latapi and Cruz, 2023).

Like most respiratory illnesses, COVID-19 is seasonal and geographic, with cases generally declining in the warm summer months and increasing in the cold winter months. We already know that coronavirus is not an equal opportunity killer and that people living in low-income neighbourhoods, crowded houses, are members of racialized groups, and who are Indigenous persons or immigrants experienced much higher rates of COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and mortality (Government of Canada, 2022; Karmakar, 2021; McDaniel & Gaszo, 2021; Millan-Guerrero, 2020). As I prepare this introduction, media stories, government press releases and tourism ads proclaim that our countries have reopened, and the world is "back to normal". Yet are we really "back to normal"? International borders closed and migration worldwide all but ceased for approximately 18 months. Several international airports and air carriers worldwide have reported systemic computer failures, staff shortages, striking pilots, and disgruntled customers (Prisco, 2023; CBC, 2023). On the economic side, supply chain disruptions, shortage of qualified workers, rising inflation, and scarce housing have plagued most nations (Macklem, 2023; U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2023; Trading Economics, 2023). In healthcare settings, there are reports of burnout, stress, and labour shortages abound (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2023). More broadly, the much-anticipated mass retirements of the "Baby Boomers" predicted decades ago happened swiftly once the reality of the pandemic set in (Hertz, 2022). Amongst the younger generations, disruptions to school and steep increases in the cost of living meant many decided to prolong their post-secondary schooling or upended their career and family planning in ways that may never be recoverable (Layton, 2022). Newcomers and Indigenous peoples from all over the continent suffered disproportionately from the effects of the pandemic, and we will learn more about their experiences in this special issue.

Indigenous peoples in all three countries were extraordinarily affected socially, economically and physically by the pandemic and its related restrictions. The Navajo Nation, for instance, was significantly affected by the pandemic early on,

1 Note that the CDC stopped tracking cases on May 11, 2023 (CDC 2023).

with large numbers of hospitalizations and deaths among its members. In Canada, First Nations communities, especially those in remote northern regions, found themselves without adequate PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) and had to wait for vaccinations, even though the government promised to prioritize them. The Premier of Manitoba, Brian Pallister, indicated that prioritizing vaccines for Indigenous peoples was tantamount to putting Manitoban citizens in second place (Broadbeck, 2020) waiting for the vaccine.

In this special issue of *Canadian Diversity*, researchers address some of these questions in a North American context. As we are all painfully aware, the pandemic did not obey international borders. Despite nearly ending international movement for many months, the pandemic spread like wildfire over great distances. Our countries had similar, yet different approaches to the pandemic. While the experiences of Canada and the United States are often compared, Mexico is very often ignored. In fact, unlike other continents, Mexicans, Americans and Canadians tend not to see themselves as members of a single entity. Our governments, until very recently, rarely considered our three countries in contexts other than economic trade and international borders.

The papers collected in this special issue are the result of a CIHR-funded[2] three country examination of the socioeconomic and mental health outcomes of Indigenous peoples, newcomers and racialized persons in Canada, USA and Mexico. Our goal was to understand the long-term impact of the pandemic on our three countries together. Just as the pandemic disregarded borders, so did we. As we learned more from one another, we understood how interconnected our communities really are. Together, we have a deeper appreciation of how similar our experiences have been, despite our geography.

Monkman and his team (2023) discuss the important, but often ignored issue of Indigenous sovereignty and health. In their article, the team discusses how various Indigenous communities across Canada not only responded to the pandemic but used the experience to strengthen their local health authorities. In Clifford and her colleagues' paper (2023), they describe the influence that trust in state government, Indigenous community government, and faith leaders had on vaccine uptake among Indigenous peoples in Canada and the USA.

Jack Jedwab and Min Zhou (2023) conduct a different analysis regarding trust and the pandemic. Their paper examines the connection between declining trust and increasing rates of discrimination in Canada and the USA. Both countries experienced increases in various types of perceived discrimination coupled with plummeting rates of trust, particularly in government entities. Contrary to previous research, it is not diversity that decreases trust but rather experiences of discrimination that cause communities to mistrust one another.

Jedwab and Zhou's second contribution examines the relationship between vaccine status and political ideology between Canada and the USA. While fewer Americans overall have been vaccinated, when political ideologies are introduced, the differences become much smaller. They find that although persons who indicated their politics were 'very right' were less likely to be vaccinated in both countries, vaccination rates among right leaning voters in Canada were about 5% higher than in the USA. Among voters indicating they were centrist politically, the difference in vaccination rates was higher, with 92% of centrists in Canada indicating they have taken the COVID-19 vaccination compared with 75% of Americans with similar political ideologies.

Differences in vaccination status between Americans and Canadians who indicate they are left leaning ideologically are small, at a five percent difference between the two countries. In summary, political ideologies matter in terms of vaccination uptake.

Financial vulnerability among Canadians is the topic of Shrestha and Holley's (2023) article. With the widespread closure of borders and businesses, it was not surprising to find Canadians who were financially insufficient. Although the Canadian government introduced several income supports during this time, this confirmed that financial instability is a long-term problem, particularly among racialized groups. Using data collected from our CIHR-funded survey, this team reveals that racialized newcomers, especially those who are young and living in the western provinces, had the worst economic outcomes during the pandemic. Our data allows us to look at the United States and Mexico using similar measures, and we look forward to conducting this research in the future.

Looking to Mexico, colleagues Latapi and Cruz (2023) examine the health system's response to COVID-19. One interesting, though perhaps not surprising finding, is that official reports of COVID-19 cases in Mexico varied drastically from individual reports of the illness. According to official statistics from Mexico, the case rates of COVID-19 were significantly lower than rates in the USA and Canada (Latapi and Cruz, 2023). Anecdotal reports and results from our survey suggest that the incidence of the illness is much higher. They suspect that government reports undercount disease incidence of

2 CIHR grants received: 2020-448105 and VS2-175571. Other funding (including in-kind) Mitacs, University of Manitoba Vice President Research and International, Leger Marketing and the Canada Research Chairs Fund (Migration Futures and Miyo we'citowin, Indigenous Governance and Digital Sovereignties).

marginalized communities – exactly the population of concern in our study. Mexico's "broken" health care system is also cited as another reason for differing report rates.

In Jedwab's (2023) article, he compares the public opinions among Americans and Canadians regarding immigration amid the pandemic. His findings reveal that both Americans and Canadians remain relatively strong and similar in their regard towards migration, even during the pandemic. Compared with other similar countries, the USA and Canada had higher levels of support for migration. It seems that both countries have rather robust and long-term support for immigration, but recent events remind us that the support is fragile.

Finally, Pinero and Ibarra (2023) examine a unique group of people, refugees along the US/Mexico border. Through their interviews with a variety of would-be asylum seekers, Pinero and Ibarra find that the psychological experience of waiting in indefinite limbo due to US border restrictions instituted under Title 42 led to significant stress among the refugees. When interviewed, gaining entry to the USA was a priority for most refugees. They would worry about the pandemic later. This meant that large numbers of refugees went unvaccinated, living in cramped and sometimes unsanitary quarters. From an individual perspective, the pandemic became just another border they needed to cross before making their dreams come true.

We hope that this collection of research articles piques your interest and addresses some of the major gaps in our knowledge about COVID-19 and inequalities in Canada, the USA and Mexico.

REFERENCES

Broadbeck, T. (2020, December 7). Pallister strays into racism with vaccine comments. *Winnipeg Free Press*. www.winnipegfreepress.com/breakingnews/2020/12/07/pallister-strays-into-racism-with-vaccine-comments

CBC News. (2023, May 19). *WestJet, pilots avert strike with 11th hour deal, but more than 100 Friday flights cancelled.* www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/wetsjet-pilots-eleventh-hour-deal-1.6848875

CDC. (2023). *Weekly update for the United States*. https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home

Google Scholar. (2023). *Results of search of Google Scholar. Search conducted June 13, 2023*. Scholar.google.com

Government of Canada. (2022, August 26). *Highlights from 2020 and early 2021*. https://health-infobase.canada.ca/covid-19/inequalities-deaths/

Government of Canada. (2023, June 13). *COVID-19 epidemiology update: Summary*. https://health-infobase.canada.ca/covid-19/

Hertz, S. (2022, February 25). Millions of baby boomers have left the workplace since 2020. Are they coming back? *Washington Post*. www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/02/25/great-resignation-older-workers/

Karmakar, M., Lantz, P.M., & Tipirneni, R. (2021). Association of social and demographic factors with COVID-19 incidence and death rates in the US. *JAMA Network Open, 4*(1). 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.36462

Layton, J. (2022, October 18). *The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Proportion of Youth not in Employment, Education or Training: A Regional Analysis and International Perspective*. Statistics Canada. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/81-599-x/81-599-x2022001-eng.htm

Macklem, T. (2023, May 4). *Getting inflation back to 2%*. Bank of Canada. www.bankofcanada.ca/2023/05/getting-inflation-back-to-2/

McDaniel, S.A., & Gazso, A. (2021). COVID-19 in the wake of the great recession in Canada and the US: Reflections on social reproduction and life courses. *Canadian Review of Sociology, 58*(4): 1–10. https://doi-org.uml.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/cars.12360

Millan-Guerrero, R.O., Caballero-Hoyos, R., & Monarrez-Espino, J. (2020). Poverty and survival from COVID-19 in Mexico. *Journal of Public Health, 43*(3): 437–444. org.uml.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdaa228

Prisco, J. (2023, June 13). *Ancient computers, too few pilots and air traffic controller shortages. US air travel could be a rough ride this summer. CNN*. https://edition.cnn.com/travel/us-aviation-meltdown-fixes/index.html

The Economics Daily. (2023, May 15). *Consumer prices up 4.9 percent from April 2022 to April 2023*. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2023/consumer-prices-up-4-9-percent-from-april-2022-to-april-2023.htm

Trading Economics (2023). *Mexico Inflation Rate*. https://tradingeconomics.com/mexico/inflation-cpi

US Chamber of Commerce. (2023, June 9). *Understanding America's Labour Shortage: The Most Impacted Industries*. Washington: U.S. Chamber of Commerce. www.uschamber.com/workforce/understanding-americas-labor-shortage-the-most-impacted-industries

World Health Organization. (2023). *United States of Americ Situation*. https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/us

World Health organization. (2023b). Mexico situation. https://covid19.who.int/region/amro/country/mx

EXTRA

Readers are likely asking themselves, "who needs to read (yet another) series of articles on the pandemic of 2020?" This is not a casual question, since March 2020, over 5,340,000 academic articles have been written on various aspects related to COVID-19 worldwide. Most of these articles have been published in Canada and the United States. In Canada, 2,810,000 articles have been published (or published by researchers in Canada). In the USA, 2,660,000 articles have been published. In Mexico, over 418,000 academic articles have been published (Google Scholar, 2023)[3]. Despite the rapid proliferation of academic research on all aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are left with more questions than answers.

3 Search terms were: COVID-19 and "Canada", "United States" and "Mexico". A fourth, single term search, was conducted using only the term "COVID-19".