COVID-19, A WAKE-UP CALL

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The programs and badges were printed, the speakers all confirmed. The Association for Canadian Studies-Metropolis Institute was in the final stages of preparation for its annual event – the largest national gathering of experts, practitioners and policy makers in the immigration field, who come together every year for a massive exercise in cross-pollination, sharing studies, strategies and best practices. Set to take place in Winnipeg, the 2020 edition of the Metropolis Conference, promised to be bigger than ever and was getting ready to welcome over 1,000 participants when the World Health Organization declared a world-wide pandemic and the subsequent global lockdown brought everything to an abrupt and drastic halt.

Within a week of cancellation, the COVID-19 Social Impacts Network was born, the brainchild of ACS-Metropolis President and CEO Jack Jedwab. Drawing on the elaborate multidisciplinary Metropolis network, and reaching out to new collaborating partners, the network's aim was to ensure that the social and economic dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis be kept in constant view as Canada charted an unprecedented course into untested waters. Indeed, the network has monitored perceptions and behaviours; identified issues and indicators; and generated evidence-based responses designed to help Canada navigate through the storm towards recovery and resilience.

Early on, as Canadians were riveted to the news, trying to follow the unfolding crisis, the world's focus pivoted away from the multitude of distractions that characterize life in our modern Western world. The attention turned towards more pressing vital matters, relating to health, safety and securing the basic necessities of life. As the major shift in both perceptions and priorities gradually occurred, a few truths that are too often obscured from general consciousness began to take centre stage.

As families retreated into isolation, communities turned in on themselves and countries closed off their borders, it became clear that we could no longer afford to turn a blind eye to the most vulnerable in our midst. Where proper measures to ensure their safety were not taken, those lacking the resources to protect themselves from the viral onslaught would surely become vectors for general contagion. Thus, born of necessity, a new kind of internal sense of solidarity began to emerge, creating a willingness to put energy and resources into addressing exposed vulnerabilities that, if left unchecked, could allow entry of the virus into our communities and overwhelm the system's ability to care for us all.

Where the cracks in society are a danger to the well-being of all, it is perhaps harder to indulge in the collective denial fostered within a system that encourages each of us, in the normal course of events, to fend for ourselves, and focus on our own success and survival rather than on the general good. It might be fair to say that heightened vigilance has given rise to an increased awareness of the structural fault lines that weaken the foundation of our society, along with a greater willingness to give these questions the attention they

deserve[1]. Some of these systemic challenges and the possible ways to tackle them are the focus of this special issue of *Canadian Diversity*, entitled "Immigration in a Time of Pandemic: Confronting the Challenge".

Created in collaboration with the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, one of our COVID-19 Impacts Network partners, the publication includes contributions from researchers, government and community representatives as well as service providers in the field. It draws on the rich findings generated over the last months by the COVID-19 network. The publication also considers the experiences of newcomers and recently immigrated Canadians – groups that are too often short on resources, support systems and the stability that accompanies long-term establishment. The articles consider the disproportionate burden carried by the most recently arrived residents in our country. Exposing the structural problems that contribute to the vulnerability of these groups and examining the intersectional challenges faced by those whose precariousness is compounded by multiple identity markers. The contributions also highlight the importance of data and research in getting to the root of societal challenges.

Divided into five sections, (1) Background, Concepts & Data, (2) Disproportionate Impact: Structural Problems & Solutions, (3) Health: Safety, Access & Vulnerability, (4) Fertile Ground for Racism, and (5) Community Strategies and Experiences, this special issue calls attention to problems, bringing them to the surface and points the path forward towards potential solutions.

In (1) Background, Concepts & Data, Victor Piché opens the publication with a broad overview of different types and categories of immigration and of the various factors and mechanisms that add to the increased vulnerability of this population in the present pandemic. He then makes several recommendations about how some of these systemic problems might be remedied. Apart from considering the situation of migrants residing in Canada, Piché also calls on us to broaden our vision to a sense of global responsibility and draws our attention to the dilemma created by the crisis for international migrants. With international borders closed, migrants and refugees were excluded from any growing sense of internal solidarity within our respective countries. As Piché points out, however, wars, oppression, unsafe living conditions and other drivers of forced migration do not pause in a time of pandemic, and our human responsibility towards displaced populations should not do so either.

Next, Jane Badets shares precious data and analysis, looking at some of the short-term issues faced by newcomers who, given their more precarious situations on the levels of employment, housing and support systems, have been particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of the pandemic. She also considers how this might act as an impediment to their integration into Canada, thus having more long-lasting implications requiring policy responses. Lastly, she points to the need for more data collection and analysis that will allow us as a country to take the full measure of the situation.

In the last article of (1), John Biles gives us a fascinating and detailed inside look into the way the (Re)settlement service network in Canada turned on a dime to tackle the crisis, respond, recover and thrive. He also emphasizes that, as Canada continues to diversify, immigration resettlement and integration must become the purview not of one department or programme, but rather a more generalized societal endeavour that concerns us all.

(2) Disproportionate Impact: Structural Problems & Solutions, zeroes in on the very structural problems that resulted in newcomers, and particularly racialized Canadians, bearing the brunt of the pandemic. Wendy Cukier, Miki Itano-Boase & Akalya Atputharajah point to the way in which immigrant entrepreneurs, many of whom are women, were impacted by the upheaval of the crisis. The measures required to give them the support they need, explain the authors, serve more than just a human purpose – the success of these immigrant entrepreneurs is a vital element towards our collective recovery. June Francis and Kristina Henriksson, for their part, also view the pandemic as a time to come to terms with longstanding problems the better to tackle them head on: "The way in which the pandemic has laid bare these disproportionate negative impacts at the same time provides an unprecedented opportunity to address these issues systemically and for the long term" giving us a unique opportunity "to reimagine more resilient policy responses" by employing a race and gender lens.

Intersectionality also provides the backdrop of Ilene Hyman and Bilkis Vissandjée's article, which considers how COVID-19 has exacerbated social and economic inequalities in Canada. The authors show how "migration trajectories intersect with sex, gender and other social determinants of health to increase immigrant women's vulnerability to health inequalities" and particularly to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). They argue for the need to incorporate these variables, along with the complexities of migration trajectories, into our research so as to remain vigilant in ensuring that vulnerable women do not slip through the cracks. This article provides a bridge to the next section in which health is the focus.

(3) Health: Safety, Access & Vulnerability, raises several specific COVID-19 health challenges experienced by both practitioners and patients. Joan Atlin focuses on the front-line

1 Might this go some way to explaining the groundswell of support for the protest movements that spread so rapidly across the world in the wake of the murder of George Floyd?

workers in long-term care centres, who she identifies as largely female, immigrant and racialized. These workers, whose lives are often precarious, have put themselves at greater risk. To make matters worse, in many instances, their skills have been underutilized. Apart from frustrating their own professional development, this has hampered our ability to fully exploit the potential they offer in fighting the virus to greater effect. Looking for the lessons that COVID-19 might teach us, Atlin states: "This is the time to reignite a national conversation about how to continue to advance systemic changes that will move more IEHPs [Internationally Educated Health Professionals] to licensure and into the health care workforce – where they want to be, and where Canada needs them".

Graham Hudson, Chloé Cébron and Rachel Laberge Mallette shift the focus from those providing care to those needing access to it. They expose the weaknesses in a health care system that claims universality but actually excludes groups whose precariousness and devotion made headlines during the pandemic. Our governments went part way to addressing these problems but the authors claim that much more needs to be done: "While the lifting of formal legal barriers to (some) health services is valuable, and should become a national model, non-status and precarious-status migrants continue to face prohibitive structural, linguistic, ideological, and legal impediments that governments can, should, and must do away with".

Bronwyn Bragg also studies the interplay between health and vulnerability but this time in a specific context, the meatpacking plants of Alberta. Once again, COVID-19 revealed fault lines that were ignored and neglected. Workers, who already had the highest chances of suffering a disabling injury of all manufacturing employees, were sitting ducks for the virus because the system failed to put the safety and well-being of these workers, whose jobs are vital to Alberta's economy, at the forefront of considerations.

(4) Fertile Ground for Racism, contains two articles that look at the tendency to scapegoat in times of crisis. Lori Wilkinson draws an interesting comparison between the 2003 SARS-1 and the 2020 COVID-19 epidemics and shows that, in both instances, Chinese and other Asian Canadians suffered increased racial slurs and discrimination. "The similarities in terms of conspiracy theories, the racist labels used by politicians to *nickname* the virus, and the increase in racism against Asians, particularly those of Chinese descent, show several important similarities not only between SARS-1 and COVID-19, but highlight that racism displays similar characteristics in Canada and the United States". Cary Wu, Rima Wilkes, Yue Qian and Eric B. Kennedy also address the anti-Asian racism that has been fostered by the pandemic, considering in particular the heavy toll these attacks take on the mental health of the victims and the need to assist the targeted populations in coping with the additional distress they have been exposed to.

The final section, (5) Community Strategies and Experiences, narrows the focus down to the community level, demonstrating the strength, creativity, and resilience exhibited by service providers and the public alike. Fariborz Birjandian and Karen O'Leary give an extremely impressive account of how one Calgary community organization turned around with lightning speed to tackle the enormous problems created by the pandemic so as to address specific needs while fostering a sense of community. The publication closes with community stories shared by Don Boddy, highlighting that newcomers and recent immigrants are not only worthy of our particular attention and care but are purveyors of a resilience and wisdom that continues to help Canada grow and thrive.