

Rural Communities & Small Cities



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Progressing Beyond COVID-19

LED BY THE SOCIAL RESEARCH & PLANNING COUNCIL'S
RESEARCH DATA ADVISORY CONSORTIUM

PROCESS

In the spring of 2022, the Research and Data Advisory Consortium through the Social Research and Planning Council reviewed the past three years of the realities faced by small/rural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. After further exploration of experiences, and a focus on the causes of these disruptions, it is imperative that local opportunities for progress are recognized and there is a shift toward looking at a future state.

A panel – including, Mike Moffat, Canadian Economist and Professor of International Trade, Eddie Matthews, Stratford and District Chamber of Commerce, as well as Ellen Sinclair and Danielle Letang from the Rural Ontario Institute – spoke to these realities. The panel offered insights into how small/rural communities have an unprecedented chance to thrive in a post-COVID Canada.



RURAL IS NOT MONOLITHIC

Empirical data and resident experiences highlight that Canada's small towns are diverse and dynamic, home to people of all races and ethnicities. In fact, 17% of people living in rural areas in Ontario are of diverse ethnicities. According to the 2021 national census, this cohort has experienced growth of 1.7% since the 2016 census¹. In the rural counties of Perth and Huron, the 2016 census highlighted that 2.8% of people identified as Indigenous and 5.1% as a visible minority².

THE EVOLVING RURAL IDENTITY

For some people, small/rural communities conjure images of sleepy farms, rolling foothills and picturesque main streets. For other people, these communities are forgotten places with shuttered factories requiring government support and subsidies to maintain them. There is a need to reconcile these two viewpoints and evolve the perception of rural/small communities to reflect their rich historic, cultural, and human assets, as well as their ability to offer economic and social opportunities contributing to community well-being³.

Rural communities are not homogenous nor are they static. Nonetheless, the perception of rural/small communities as dominantly white persists – a misconception that is inaccurate and harmful. These negative stereotypes of rural Canada erase the experiences of rural people of colour, exclude rural communities from participation in policy development, analysis and critical conversations about inclusion and 'true participation'.

¹ Statistics Canada, 2019. Diversity of the Black population in Canada: An overview. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-657-x/89-657-x2019002-eng.htm>

² Ontario Trillium Foundation. OTF Community Profile Dashboard. 2021. https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/stacey.mcdonald/viz/OTFCommunityProfileDashboard/Welcompage?mc_cid=be45815810&mc_eid=be1357db26w

³ Jordan Tidey, In Search of Urban/Rural Economic Prosperity. October 2019. <https://blog.mdbinsight.com/wednesdayswithmdbinsight-in-search-of-urban/rural-economic-prosperity>



EARLY THEMES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Research conducted as part of a Canada 2020 project, “A Sustainable, Inclusive, and Digital Future of Rural Canada”⁴ highlights several themes where governments and communities must accelerate and deepen their work to deliver an inclusive and sustainable economic future for those living in rural communities.

Outlined below, these themes align with the federal and provincial government’s rural economic development strategies. Critically, these themes focus on areas where the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted new needs or opportunities, and where effective execution of rural economic strategies will be particularly challenging. Accelerating connectivity is an enabling condition to make progress on many of the highlighted issues.⁵

⁴ Matthew Mendelsohn, Jamie Van Ymeren, Noah Zon and Jasmine Irwin. 2020. A Sustainable, Inclusive, and Digital Future for Rural Canada. <https://canada2020.ca/a-sustainable-inclusive-and-digital-future-for-rural-canada/>

⁵ Matthew Mendelsohn, Jamie Van Ymeren, Noah Zon And Jasmine Irwin. January 2022. Rural communities have an unprecedented chance to thrive in a post-COVID Canada <https://policyresponse.ca/rural-communities-have-an-unprecedented-chance-to-thrive-in-a-post-covid-canada/>

Theme 1: Supporting investment in businesses

There are many thriving businesses in small/rural communities. However, the historical and systemic neglect of these communities by all levels of government has created a myriad of hurdles. According to the Business Development Bank of Canada, 40% of small business owners are planning to exit their business in the next five years.⁶ In small/rural communities, close to half of businesses do not have a formal business plan or succession plan. The lack of planning could make many ownership transitions very difficult and potentially lead to business closures, bankruptcy, employment loss and other negative effects for the economy and vitality of rural communities⁷. Other rural businesses have difficulty connecting with large markets and customer bases. The pandemic hit small- to mid-size enterprises hard⁸, especially in rural/small communities. Business support programs were typically delivered by regional development agencies that played a key role in helping many businesses survive.

CONSIDERATION:

How do we overcome the challenges to business succession? Further opportunities to invest in the areas of co-operatives, newcomer attraction and youth enterprises could be considered.

⁶ Bank of Canada. 2021. Business Outlook Survey. <https://www.bankofcanada.ca/2021/04/business-outlook-survey-spring-2021/>

⁷ Business Development Bank of Canada 2022. The Bank for Canadian Entrepreneurs <https://www.bdc.ca/en>

⁸ John Shell, March 10, 2022. Economic Policy, Business Support Entrepreneurs need a fair approach to COVID-19 bankruptcies. <https://policyresponse.ca/entrepreneurs-need-a-fair-approach-to-covid-19-bankruptcies/>



Theme 2: Making the right investments in physical, digital and social infrastructure

Employing an inclusive, place-based approach requires investing in traditional and digital infrastructure. These investments can be leveraged to create a society that supports equitable and inclusive benefits whether for social, community, health, economic or environmental prosperity.

Digital connectivity is a critical enabling pre-condition for many of the issues in communities. While the federal government has invested in connectivity and broadband for rural regions⁹, these are effectively catch-up and more work must be done.

CONSIDERATION:

How do we ensure the next wave of technological change includes connectivity and inclusion in rural areas and these areas will not be left behind?

What other investments must federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments make to ensure an inclusive quality of life in rural Canada?

⁹ Nour Abdelaal and Sam Andrey. April 15, 2021. IMPLEMENTATION + GOVERNANCE, TECHNOLOGY + DIGITAL POLICY Indigenous and remote communities can't wait any longer for high-speed internet <https://policyresponse.ca/indigenous-and-remote-communities-cant-wait-any-longer-for-high-speed-internet/>

Theme 3: Advancing reconciliation

Place-based economic strategies should align with Canada's commitment to reconciliation, self-government, re-building of relationships and Indigenous economic self-determination.

Discussions of inclusive economic growth and place-based economic strategies for rural Canada cannot be complete without an understanding of how these strategies implicate and intersect with Indigenous self-determination and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which has now been incorporated into Canadian law.

Indigenous people represent a high proportion of the population in rural areas across Canada. Nearly 60% of Indigenous people in Canada¹⁰ live in rural areas or small population centres. Therefore, it is critical to understand that when decision-makers and policy advocates talk about rural economic development, they are including Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

CONSIDERATION:

How do we ensure that Canada's rural policies help deliver on the promises of reconciliation in practice rather than just in theory?

¹⁰ Statistics Canada 2016 Census <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-CAN-Eng.cfm?TOPIC=9&LANG=Eng&GK=CAN&GC=01>





Theme 4: Ensuring access to high-quality public services

Access to high-quality health, education, childcare and social services is crucial for the well-being and quality of life of rural residents and communities. Accessible public services make it easier to live, work and raise a family in smaller communities. Ensuring rural residents can access education, health and medical care, and other human services in their communities in a culturally appropriate fashion matters for individual well-being and broader economic prosperity, making it easier to attract and retain people and capital.

CONSIDERATION:

How can federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments best support well-being in rural regions now and into the future?

Theme 5: Make decisions, devolution, capacity and governance

Governments have struggled with 'rural proofing'; ensuring policy decisions apply to rural and remote areas equitably and align with rural needs and realities that encourage local innovation and experimentation.

Historically, the federal government has struggled to engage rural communities effectively in its priorities with new approaches, developing resources or assigning decision-making authority.¹¹ Nevertheless, the value of place-based economic strategies lie in their ability to leverage community knowledge from the ground up. The ability to execute rural strategies effectively based on the government's capacity to address problems with humility, reliable local resources and stakeholders is imperative.

CONSIDERATION:

How do we encourage democratic engagement in rural and remote communities?

¹¹ Federation of Canadian Municipalities (Rural Development Institute at Brandon University) 2020. Rural challenges, national opportunity Shaping the future of rural Canada <https://fcm.ca/sites/default/files/documents/resources/report/rural-challenges-national-opportunities.pdf>





SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY: AN UNPRECEDENTED CHANCE TO THRIVE

Small/rural communities have less than 1,000 people and a population density of fewer than 400 persons per square kilometre.¹² Over 17% of the population lives in rural and remote areas today. Canada's rural population increased by 26,609 people (+0.4%) from 2016 to reach 6.6 million in 2021. However, the rural population growth rate was fifteen times slower compared with urban areas in Canada (+6.3%). Because of these differences in population growth, the share of the population living in rural areas decreased from 18.7% in 2016 to 17.8% in 2021.¹³

The combination of strong immigration levels and the fact that most immigrants settle in large urban areas explains why the population of Canada's urban areas is increasing at a faster pace than rural areas.¹⁴ By 2030, the rural and remote population in Huron and Perth is predicted to increase by 7.7%. Community leaders must act quickly to plan for growth and provide basic services and infrastructure – including affordable housing – that their expanding populations need.

However, the speed and scale of this population increase brings challenges, especially to rural and small city environments. There must be a focus on including the demand for affordable housing, well-connected transport systems and basic services, as well as economic opportunities. This is particularly true for the 9% and 10% of people in Perth and Huron respectively who live in low-income as defined by 2019 tax filer data.

¹² Statistics Canada. 2016 to 2020. [https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/98-200-x/2021002/98-200-x2021002-eng.cfm#:~:text=Canada's%20rural%20population%20increased,in%20Canada%20\(%2B6.3%25\)](https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/98-200-x/2021002/98-200-x2021002-eng.cfm#:~:text=Canada's%20rural%20population%20increased,in%20Canada%20(%2B6.3%25))

¹³ Statistics Canada. 2016 to 2020.

¹⁴ Statistics Canada. 2016 to 2020.



Rural and remote communities are at a pivotal moment. Throughout much of the last half century, there has been compelling evidence the future belonged to large cities. This is a moment to re-think that narrative and ensure sustainable and inclusive economic growth builds community well-being for people living in communities of all sizes.¹⁵

Post-pandemic, there is an opportunity to advance new economic and community development approaches in smaller communities. New connectivity and inclusive infrastructure, digital delivery of services and the cost of affordable housing are all impacting how people and businesses think about where to work, live and invest in the future.

Policymakers must reflect on recent data and [re]imagine the tools they use for economic and community development, and question whether the assumptions and goals that underpin many of these existing tools are still relevant and appropriate. Effective policy development requires governments ensure they have locally collected data supporting their understanding of what is happening and how to respond within and across rural communities.

The resilience, dynamism and adaptability built by rural communities may make these places uniquely equipped to flourish.

¹⁵ Matthew Mendelsohn, Jamie Van Ymeren, Noah Zon & Jasmine Irwin. December 2021. Policies to support sustainable, inclusive, and digital economic development in rural and smaller communities in Canada. https://canada2020.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Policies_to_support_sustainable_inclusive_and_digital_economic_development_in_rural_and_smaller_communities_in_Canada-2.pdf



CONCLUSION

Communities are on the frontline of combating epidemics and have been pushed to the extreme by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted not only public health but also their economic and social fabric. Simultaneously a health crisis, social crisis and economic crisis, COVID-19 has exposed the systemic neglect communities have faced and the impact this is having on the extent to which each community is able to function – or not – especially during times of crisis.

Many of the most important issues we face – climate change, economic inclusion, reconciliation and building successful businesses – must be critically examined from a local and community perspective, inclusive of local voices and insights. Critically, it must be recognized that the challenges presented manifest themselves differently within and across rural communities.

Building inclusive, healthy, resilient and sustainable communities that “work” requires intensive policy coordination and investment choices. To harness new possibilities, decision makers at all levels of governments must trust in the knowledge of local communities and engage expertise in policy-making processes to shape the future and create opportunities for all.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH DATA ADVISORY CONSORTIUM

About Us

Reports To: Social Research and Planning Council (SRPC)

Purpose: The primary role of the Research and Data Advisory Consortium (RDAC) is to support the identification and development of research priorities, create linkages to other data sources, and offer sector specific insights.

Membership: RDAC is comprised of representatives from multiple service organizations, reflecting the composition of our community and encompassing a broad range of community perspectives, geography, organizations, sectors, working groups, tables and networks

Overview: Research and Data Advisory Consortium (RDAC) are knowledge brokers with an objective to act as a conduit between producers and users of knowledge and work towards action-oriented outcomes. As knowledge brokers, RDAC will explore data and research, coalesce relevant information and experiences, and influence, engage, and encourage stakeholders towards action-oriented outcomes.

Knowledge Broker: We facilitate, educate, and disrupt. In our community consultations we directly engage with stakeholders to address challenges. We explore partnerships to transform industry practices and lead events to share expert thinking and promote discussion on a variety of relevant and locally driven issues.

Action: We collaborate on complex social, community challenges. We discuss practical responses to challenges confronting communities and share actions with relevant stakeholders in cross-disciplinary conversations and network dialogue. Through collaborative efforts representing diverse interest groups and relevant and respected expertise, we seek to inspire holistic problem solving. We design our work to provide communities and stakeholders with a clear path forward.

Outcome: The goal of the Research and Data Advisory Committee event aims to achieve three levels of impact:

Individual Level: As knowledge brokers utilizing the information to inform decisions within individual organizations and in community interactions.

Partnership, Collaborative and Relationship Level: Working together for collective impact where objectives align is important in achieving better outcomes for everyone.

Policy, System Level: Sharing knowledge and information brings new ideas and actions to the table to enable change and social justice



Social Research & Planning Council
Operated by United Way Perth-Huron

About the SRPC

The Social Research and Planning Council (SRPC), operated by United Way Perth-Huron, is comprised of community representatives who are dedicated to the collection, analysis and distribution of information relating to social trends and issues in Perth and Huron Counties. The SRPC approaches its work in two ways:

- a. Commissioning research into specific social issues.
- b. Developing recommendations for community improvement based on local findings and working collaboratively with community members to implement change.



Social Research & Planning Council

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