

Pandemic Perspectives on Long-Term Care: Insights from Canadians in Light of COVID-19



National Institute on Ageing

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About the National Institute on Ageing

The National Institute on Ageing (NIA) is a public policy and research centre based at Ryerson University in Toronto. The NIA is dedicated to enhancing successful ageing across the life course. It is unique in its mandate to consider ageing issues from a broad range of perspectives, including those of financial, physical, psychological, and social well-being.

The NIA is focused on leading cross-disciplinary, evidence-based, and actionable research to provide a blueprint for better public policy and practices needed to address the multiple challenges and opportunities presented by Canada's ageing population. The NIA is committed to providing national leadership and public education to productively and collaboratively work with all levels of government, private and public sector partners, academic institutions, ageing-related organizations, and Canadians.

About the Canadian Medical Association

The Canadian Medical Association is the national voice of Canada's medical profession. We work with physicians, residents and medical students on issues that matter to the profession and the health of Canadians. We advocate for policy and programs that drive meaningful change for physicians and their patients.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact in Canada's long-term care (LTC) settings. In June 2020, the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), in partnership with the National Institute on Ageing (NIA), reported that 81% of Canada's deaths from COVID-19 during the first wave occurred in LTC and other congregate settings — nearly twice the international average of 38% in member nations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).¹ NIA researchers further determined that there were 74 times more deaths among older Canadians living in LTC and retirement homes than among community-dwelling older Canadians — 3 times higher than the OECD average.²

The survey was conducted by Ipsos online with **2,005 Canadians** aged 18 years and older and was completed between Nov. 27 and Dec. 1, 2020. The findings have a margin of error of $\pm 2.5\%$, 19 times out of 20.

The high proportion of COVID-19 deaths occurring in LTC settings has brought widespread public attention to Canada's systems of LTC. The pandemic has exposed the persistent gaps in funding, capacity and expertise across Canada's LTC systems and their inability to protect residents.

In response to the June 2020 CIHI report and prior reports from the Canadian Armed Forces, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated on June 25, 2020, "We will

continue to work with the premiers on ensuring that our long-term care centres are properly supported, whether that's by bringing in national standards, whether that's by extra funding, or whether that's by looking at the Canada Health Act."³ In the Speech from the Throne on Sept. 23, 2020, the federal government announced that it would work with provincial governments to introduce national standards for long-term care.⁴ On Nov. 30, 2020, in its Fall Economic Statement, the federal government announced that it would allocate an additional \$1 billion to Canada's provinces and territories via a Safe Long-term Care Fund to help implement infection prevention and control measures across LTC settings. It also reiterated its desire to set new national standards for long-term care.⁵

This *Pandemic Perspectives Survey*, produced by the NIA in collaboration with the Canadian Medical Association and IPSOS, provides insights on Canadians' views in light of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and its continued negative impacts on Canadians living in LTC and retirement home settings. It is based on the results of an Ipsos survey conducted in late 2020 to understand the perspectives and concerns of Canadians on the state of Canada's LTC systems, where they want to live as they age and how the pandemic has affected the state of Canada's LTC systems, as well as their views on the causes of and solutions to the challenges faced by Canada's LTC systems.

COVID-19 has led to widespread concern about the state of long-term care across Canada

The disproportionate number of COVID-19 deaths in Canadian LTC and retirement homes has led to widespread concerns about the overall state of Canada's LTC systems. These concerns are more prominent among older Canadians who are nearing or already at the stage of life when they must consider LTC options for themselves. Canadian women are more concerned about the state of Canada's LTC systems than men.

The survey found that:

- **86%** of Canadians surveyed, and **97%** of those aged 65 years and older, reported that they are concerned about the challenges faced by Canada's LTC systems.
- **90%** of the Canadian women who participated in the survey reported being concerned about the challenges faced by Canada's LTC system, compared with only **81%** of Canadian men.

Respondents who know someone residing in an LTC home worry about how the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in these settings will affect the health and safety of their loved one.

- Approximately **1 in 5 (22%)** respondents reported having a parent or loved one in an LTC home. Among these respondents, **81%** are worried their loved one will contract COVID-19 and **85%** are worried about their loved one's mental health.



COVID-19 has shifted Canadians' views on ageing in their own homes rather than in retirement or long-term care homes

Given widespread concerns about the state of LTC homes, it is not surprising that most Canadians want to avoid living in these facilities. It is even less surprising that these preferences are more pronounced among older Canadians and in regions highly affected by the second wave of COVID-19.

The survey found that:

- **85%** of Canadians of all ages who participated in the survey, and **96%** of Canadians aged 65 years and older, report that as they get older, they will do everything they can to avoid moving into an LTC home.
- Older Canadians in provinces that have been particularly devastated by the second wave of COVID-19 express a greater reluctance to live in LTC homes.
- In Ontario (**97%**), Alberta (**100%**), Quebec (**98%**) and Saskatchewan and Manitoba (**97%**), almost all respondents aged 65 years and older report that they will do everything they can to avoid moving into an LTC home, compared with **93%** in British Columbia and **87%** in Atlantic Canada.



COVID-19 has highlighted long-standing problems in Canada's long-term care systems

While the impact on LTC home residents and staff has been especially acute during the pandemic, Canadians harbour no illusions that the challenges facing LTC homes are the result of COVID-19. In fact, most Canadians believe the challenges facing Canada's LTC systems predate the pandemic and that COVID-19 only exacerbated them.

The survey found that:

- **81%** of all Canadians surveyed agree that the challenges facing LTC homes were evident before the pandemic, and COVID-19 only made them worse. This figure jumps to **92%** for Canadians aged 65 years and older.
- Only around **1 in 4 (26%)** respondents believe that LTC homes were safe and operated at high standards before the pandemic. This figure drops to **13%** among Canadians aged 65 years and older.

- **83%** of respondents believe that LTC homes are understaffed, and **78%** believe that people who work in LTC are underpaid for the work they do. These numbers increase significantly with age. Among respondents aged 65 years and older, **91%** believe that LTC homes are understaffed and **86%** believe that staff are underpaid.



A call for a stronger government response moving forward — most Canadians believe governments failed to adequately manage LTC settings during the pandemic

Most Canadians believe that government inaction and failures both before and during the pandemic are to blame for negative outcomes in LTC settings. The pandemic has also led many Canadians to lose faith in the ability of the federal, provincial and territorial governments to adequately address the state of Canada's LTC systems moving forward. The survey found that fewer than half of Canadians trust their governments to ensure the health and safety of residents in LTC homes.

The survey found that:

- Three-quarters (**73%**) of Canadians surveyed believe that the high number of deaths in LTC homes related to COVID-19 could have been reduced if governments had acted sooner.
- Only **35%** of respondents rate the federal government's performance in managing the COVID-19 pandemic as good (**29%**) or excellent (**6%**), and **39%** report having trust in the federal government to ensure the health and safety of LTC residents, despite the fact that the provision of long-term care is the responsibility of provincial and territorial governments.

- Only **40%** of respondents believe their provincial or territorial government has done a good (**31%**) or excellent (**8%**) job of managing the COVID-19 pandemic, and only **43%** have trust in the provincial and territorial governments to ensure the health and safety of LTC residents.
- Less than half (**45%**) of Canadians surveyed believe that federal, provincial and territorial governments have learned from the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and will work to ensure minimal loss of life moving forward.

Canadians have roundly questioned the ability of federal, provincial and territorial governments to protect LTC home residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has prompted Canadians to believe that strong government response and action is needed to improve the state of Canada's health care systems. In particular, LTC has become a priority issue for Canadians. In response, the federal government announced in the Speech from the Throne on Sept. 23, 2020, that it would work with provincial governments to introduce national standards for long-term care.⁶

Following further devastation during the second wave, it's not surprising that Canadians are expressing strong support for improving LTC home standards across Canada and better integrating LTC into the health care system.

The survey further found that:

- The majority of Canadians **(86%)** believe that long-term care should be considered an integrated part of our health system and funded and administered accordingly.
- **47%** rank improving the standards of LTC homes across Canada as one of their top 5 priorities for Canadian leaders, behind preparing to distribute a COVID-19 vaccine **(63%)**, reducing the spread of COVID-19 by enforcing restrictions **(57%)** and ensuring Canada's health system is prepared for future pandemics **(49%)**, and ahead of eliminating backlog in health care **(44%)**.

- This sentiment increases as Canadians age. In fact, two-thirds **(63%)** of Canadians aged 65 years and older rank improving the standards of LTC homes as their most important priority after reducing the spread of COVID-19 by enforcing restrictions **(63%)** and preparing to distribute a COVID-19 vaccine **(72%)**.



Conclusion

This *Pandemic Perspectives Survey* shows that Canadians will do whatever is necessary to avoid going into an LTC home. It also highlights ongoing public concern about the state and safety of Canada's LTC homes — both before and during the pandemic.

Negative perceptions about Canada's LTC system were stronger among populations most likely to enter LTC settings, namely Canadians aged 65 years and older. The same was true in the regions where LTC settings were hit the hardest by COVID-19, such as Ontario, Quebec and Alberta.

This survey has also highlighted concerns about the ability of federal, provincial and territorial governments to protect LTC residents. Only 39% of Canadians trust the federal government to protect LTC residents, and 43% feel this way about their provincial and territorial governments. Despite apprehensions about the ability of governments to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, Canadians still believe that solutions to fixing Canada's LTC systems lie in government action. Specifically, Canadians believe that developing national standards for LTC and better integrating LTC homes into the health care system will be critical steps to restoring trust.

The findings of the *Pandemic Perspectives Survey* show that Canadians, and especially older Canadians, say they will do whatever is necessary to avoid going into an LTC home. They also highlight both ongoing and growing public concerns about the state and safety of Canada's LTC homes — both before and during the pandemic. Indeed, both waves of the COVID-19 pandemic have further prompted Canadians to reconsider their perspectives on the state of LTC, while Canada's older population clearly regard the state of the nation's LTC systems as an increasingly pressing issue that can no longer be ignored.

References

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