



REPORT

Mental Health Impact of COVID-19 in Alberta

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), Alberta Division administered a survey between April and May, 2020 to understand the mental health and wellbeing impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on Albertans across rural and urban areas. The survey results are intended to inform future mental health priorities and activities across the province. This report was prepared by the Rural Mental Health Project and describes the findings of the survey. The survey was adapted from *MQ: Transforming Mental Health* and the UK Academy of Medical Sciences' consultation of stakeholders and the general population in the United Kingdom. [1]

Method

CMHA administered the survey to Albertans electronically. The online survey was formatted to learn about Albertans' COVID-19 concerns, mental health support availability and additional challenges or opportunities. Responses were collected between April 21 to May 21, 2020. CMHA, Alberta Division and the Rural Mental Health Project promoted the survey to their networks over email and social media channels.

The survey asked:

- 1. What are your top two concerns or questions about the mental health and wellbeing aspect of the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic for you and your community?**
- 2. We are keen to understand what people are doing to support their mental wellbeing during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. What do you think has been helping your mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic? Please tell us about it.**
- 3. The pandemic has caused our lives to change in many ways due to physical distancing. As we transition into the next phases of this pandemic, what future challenge do you anticipate regarding mental health and mental illness over the next six months? What potential opportunities may emerge due to the changes we are experiencing?**

Results

In total, 1,740 people took part in the survey. Respondents were evenly dispersed between urban and rural areas, with 51.8 per cent of respondents residing in an urban centre, 47.7 per cent living in a rural area and 0.5 per cent living outside of Alberta.

Priority Concerns about Mental Health and Wellbeing

Respondents had a wide variety of concerns in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most pressing concerns encompassed eight general themes: (1) Isolation, (2) Access to mental health support and services, (3) Challenges to mental health, (4) Anxiety, (5) Economic concerns, (6) Uncertainty about the future, (7) Family and relationships and (8) Education. The first three themes were the most prevalent concerns and were mentioned by at least 30 per cent of study respondents. Isolation was the top concern, mentioned by 42 per cent of respondents.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Supports

Results indicated that while the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant challenges, there is a broad range of coping mechanisms and supports to help individuals, families and communities manage throughout the pandemic. The most popular coping mechanisms and supports were summed up in eight general themes: (1) Staying connected, (2) Physical activity and health, (3) Self-Care, (4) Benefit of the outdoors and changing environments, (5) Maintaining routine, (6) Increased support and shared learning, (7) Information intake and (8) Acceptance of the situation. The first three themes were the most prevalent responses, and almost half of respondents said their coping mechanisms included staying connected, routines and self-care.

Future Challenges and Opportunities

Respondents had a wide variety of concerns as they faced an unknown future during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most pressing future concerns encompassed six general themes: (1) Ongoing, increased mental illness and mental health problems, (2) Human contact, (3) Fear and searching for a new normal, (4) Economic challenges, (5) COVID Concerns and (6) Mental health supports and resources. Of these six concerns, the first three were the most commonly cited and mentioned by almost one-third of the participants.

Respondents also shared their perspectives on what they anticipated would become future opportunities. These responses encompassed four main themes: (1) Social connectedness, (2) Self-development, (3) Workplaces adapting to remote work and (4) Online service delivery. The first two themes were most commonly cited and mentioned by almost one-fifth of participants.

It is worth noting that, unsurprisingly, respondents who answered this question still reported that they experienced more concerns about the future (64 per cent) than opportunities. However, over one-third (36 per cent) of responses highlighted opportunities or potential positive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. These results underscore the significant concerns the pandemic has placed on individuals and families in Alberta but also point to our population's strength and resilience.

INTRODUCTION

CMHA, Alberta Division administered a survey to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all Albertans' mental health and wellbeing across rural and urban areas. The results of this research will inform future mental health priorities and activities across the province. This report was prepared by the Rural Mental Health Project and describes the findings of a survey that took place in April and May 2020. This survey was adapted from *MQ: Transforming Mental Health* and the UK Academy of Medical Sciences' consultation of stakeholders and the general population in the United Kingdom. [1]

METHOD

An online survey of the general population was hosted on the *SurveyMonkey* platform. Responses were collected from April 21 to May 21, 2020. CMHA, Alberta Division and the Rural Mental Health Project promoted the survey to their networks over email and social media channels.

Survey

Respondents were provided with the survey's purpose in the introduction and were given links to view the survey's final results when available. Participation was voluntary and respondents' answers were collected anonymously.

The dataset was downloaded, cleaned and uploaded onto the *Dedoose* platform for coding and analysis. The analysis followed an inductive approach, and the coding themes were developed as a result of the survey responses. After the research team coded 70 responses, the team identified the data's themes and coded the remaining responses according to these themes.

This survey sought to examine possible variations in responses from respondents of various demographics. Given Alberta's context and the Rural Mental Health Project's strategic aims, **particular importance was placed on the exploration of potential differences between rural and urban residents.** The post-survey analysis revealed that urban and rural residents had, on average, very similar responses to most questions. Variations between the groups' responses are noted on several sub-themes, and the proportional breakdown is discussed in the thematic analysis when relevant.

The survey asked:

1. **What type of area do you live in Alberta?**
 - a. **An Urban Center – Edmonton, Calgary, Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray, Red Deer, Medicine Hat or Lethbridge**
 - b. **A Rural area – An area outside of the 7 urban-centers**
 - c. **Currently living outside of the Alberta**

2. **What are your top two concerns or questions about the mental health and wellbeing aspect of the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic for you and your community?**

3. **We are keen to understand what people are doing to support their mental wellbeing during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. What do you think has been helping your mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic? Please tell us about it.**

4. **The pandemic has caused our lives to change in many ways due to physical distancing. As we transition into the next phases of this pandemic, over the next 6 months, what future challenge do you anticipate regarding mental health and mental illness? What potential opportunities may emerge due to the changes we are experiencing? (e.g., more comfort with online meetings)**

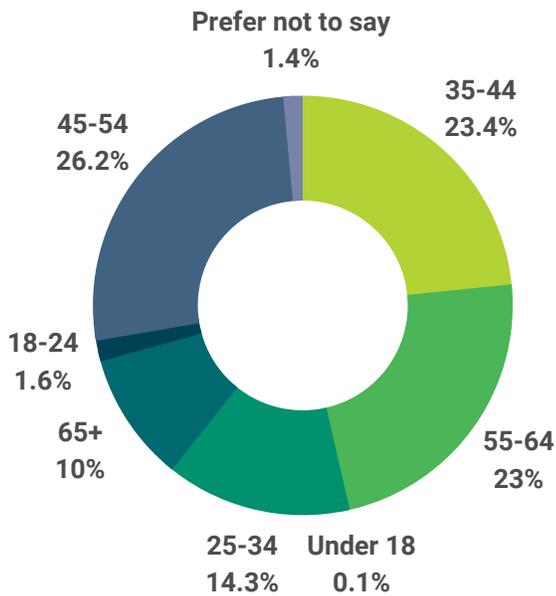
5. **What stakeholder groups do you identify with? Check all that apply.**
 - a. **A member of the public with an interest in mental health**
 - b. **A person with lived experience of mental illness**
 - c. **A caregiver of someone experiencing a mental illness**
 - d. **A health or social care professional**
 - e. **Prefer not to say**
 - f. **Other (please specify)**

RESULTS

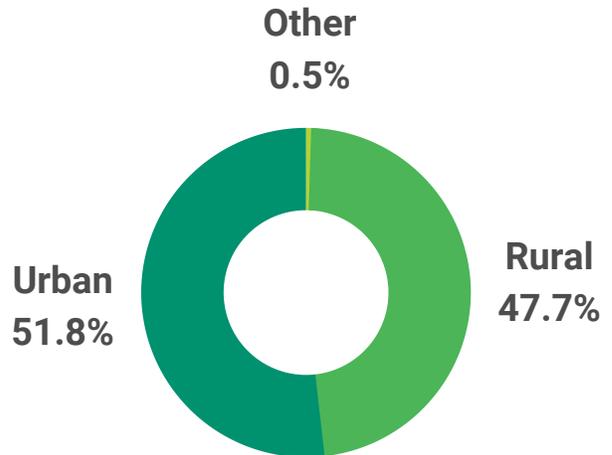
Survey Respondents

In total, **1,740 people** completed the survey. A breakdown of respondent types is as follows:

Respondent Age



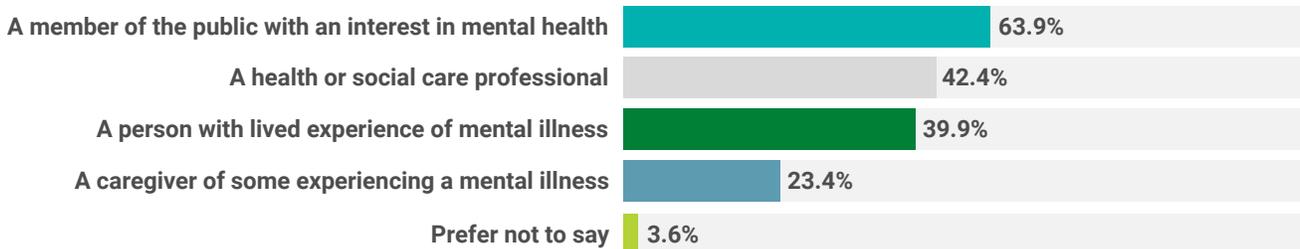
Respondent Residence



Respondent Sex



Stakeholder Group



Key Themes

The following tables **summarize the full list of themes** that emerged from the survey analysis, broken up by question. It is important to note that many responses were multifaceted and covered multiple themes.

What are your top two concerns or questions about the mental health and wellbeing aspect of the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic for you and your community?

THEME	% OF RESPONDENTS
Isolation	42.1%
Access to Mental Health Support and Services	33.4%
Challenges to Mental Health	28.7%
Anxiety	24.1%
Economic Concerns	21.8%
Uncertainty about the Future	20.7%
Family and Relationships	9.5%
Education	8.9%
No Concerns	0.6%

What do you think has been helping your mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic? Please tell us about it.

THEME	% OF RESPONDENTS
Staying Connected	56.7%
Physical Activity and Health	49.3%
Self-Care	48.3%
Outdoors and Changing Environment	34.1%
Maintaining Routine	31.5%
Increased Support and Shared Learning	15.9%
Information Intake	11.9%
Acceptance of Situation	9.9%
COVID Guidelines	2.9%

Over the next six months, what future challenge do you anticipate regarding mental health and mental illness? What potential opportunities may emerge due to the changes we are experiencing?

CHALLENGES

THEME	% OF RESPONDENTS
Ongoing/Increased Mental Health Problems	29.9%
Human Contact	28.9%
Fear and Searching for New Normal	28.4%
Economic Challenges	16.1%
COVID Concerns	15.8%
Mental Health Supports and Resources	9.4%
Education Issues	4.9%
Limited Access to/Knowledge of Technology	2.4%
Physical Health Issues	2.4%
Stigma	1.2%
Environmental Challenges	0.1%

OPPORTUNITIES

THEME	% OF RESPONDENTS
Social Connectedness	23.5%
Self-Development	19.0%
Workplaces Adapting to Online/Remote Work	14.8%
Online Service Delivery	10.1%
Increased Mental Health Awareness	4.2%
Economic Opportunities	3.6%
Healthier Environment	3.3%

Note: Themes with frequency below 5% were not included from the narrative summary in this report.

PRIORITY CONCERNS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The survey asked:

What are your top two concerns or questions about the mental health and wellbeing aspect of the current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic for you and your community?

Respondents had a wide variety of concerns in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most pressing concerns encompassed eight general themes: (1) Isolation, (2) Access to mental health support and services, (3) Challenges to mental health, (4) Anxiety, (5) Economic concerns, (6) Uncertainty about the future, (7) Family and relationships and (8) Education. The first three themes were the most prevalent concerns and were mentioned by at least 30 per cent of study respondents. Isolation was the top concern by almost 10 per cent.

Isolation

Isolation was a dominant theme in the survey. Forty-two per cent of all respondents said isolation was one of their top mental health concerns from COVID-19. Respondents were concerned about how isolation and loneliness would impact others, themselves and social activities. One respondent wrote, "We are so used to being with friends, family, coworkers, even strangers (potential friends!) at businesses and parks and coffee shops, that it's extremely depressing to have that end suddenly." Of note, more than twice as many respondents in this category were concerned about isolation's impacts on others (49 per cent of respondents) than the impacts on themselves (22 per cent of respondents). Other priority concerns relating to isolation included loneliness and the restrictions to social activities. Some respondents were especially concerned about the impact of reduced social activities. One respondent said, "Individuals and families living with Autism Spectrum Disorder already face social challenges. The pandemic is increasing these stresses by increasing isolation and interfering with important routines and predictability." While urban and rural residents were equally concerned about isolation, urban residents made up a larger proportion of respondents who identified the impacts of isolation on themselves (59 per cent urban to 41 per cent rural) and on social activities (56 per cent urban to 44 per cent rural) as a priority concern.

Access to Mental Health Support and Services

Respondents were also concerned about access to mental health supports and services, with 33 per cent of respondents highlighting this as a primary concern. Respondents were most concerned about how

people would access mental health services for existing or developing conditions. Concerns were also raised around accessibility issues to services due to the existing stigma surrounding mental health. One respondent noted, "How is accessibility to services being facilitated? What is being done to vulnerable populations without internet or devices to access online supports?" Another respondent expressed concern for "people experiencing mental health challenges for the first time [if they are] not reaching out for help." Survey respondents also expressed concern about a lack of mental health supports and services overall, especially for vulnerable populations. A respondent asked, "Will suicide rates go up because fewer people have access to mental health supports? I am concerned that mental health supports are too expensive for people who have lost their jobs (even if only temporarily.)" Another respondent questioned the pandemic's long-term impacts and highlighted the need for support even after the pandemic is over. "What supports will be available after the pandemic ends to support mental health needs that have occurred due to COVID 19?" Lastly, respondents also discussed the increase in people who need access to services and how to support workers providing these services. One respondent discussed the stress of caring for a high-risk group, "Keeping the seniors at my workplace safe - this weighs heavily on my mind and is quite stressful."

Challenges to Mental Health

Twenty-nine per cent of survey respondents overall highlighted mental health challenges as a major concern. Almost half of the respondents in this category discussed pandemic-induced mental health challenges in particular (49 per cent of the group). One respondent explained, "I am a school counsellor, and my biggest concerns were for students with families who already were struggling (mental health, domestic violence, low income, immigrant or refugee status, etc.) I had three students attempt suicide during the two month isolation period. Thankfully, there are supports in Calgary for them. I wasn't sure how my virtual counselling would work, but once my clients and I were comfortable with it, it was effective." Another respondent highlighted a concern for the mental health of seniors, "Grandparents can't see their family supports - [It's important to] know they are in the high-risk group." Another key concern was an increase in violence or trauma, including domestic violence and crime.

Anxiety

Anxiety was another significant theme in the survey, with 24 per cent of respondents identifying general anxiety as a primary concern of the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey respondents were most concerned about heightened anxiety, which 32 percent of participants in this category mentioned. One respondent highlighted the possible impacts on specific demographics, "[I am concerned about] anxiety, particularly in children who can't see friends, can't go to school, the park,

etc. and who are inundated with 'death totals' every day." The long-term effects of the pandemic were brought up again and discussed by this respondent, "What will be the long-term effects of living with heightened anxiety?" Urban residents made up 63 per cent of respondents with concerns about the fear of becoming ill and 65 per cent of those concerned about heightened anxiety. Rural residents were slightly more concerned about non-compliance to guidelines (55 per cent) than those in urban settings.

Economic Concerns

Economic anxiety arose as a key concern. Twenty-two per cent of respondents said economic anxiety was their primary concern. The majority of these respondents had a range of financial stresses (63 per cent of respondents in this category). These stresses included the extra costs of upgrading technology, the loss of employment and even bankruptcy. "Economic uncertainty is an added stress," said one participant. "Our families worry about inaccessibility and future sustainability of disability related services." Twenty-two per cent of respondents in this category were also concerned about the long-term financial repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on Albertans and the economy. One respondent explained, "People's livelihoods have changed...will they be able to sustain or bounce back from all of this?" Another respondent expressed concern about "the economic crisis that is likely a given due to the already distressed AB economy." Urban residents made up a larger proportion of respondents concerned about the pandemic's financial repercussions (58.5 percent urban respondents). However, there was no significant variation between rural and urban residents' priority concerns in the remaining themes in this category.

Uncertainty About the Future

Many survey respondents discussed uncertainty about the future, with 21 per cent of respondents highlighting long-term uncertainty as a primary concern. Respondents were concerned about the length of the impact (30 per cent of respondents in this category) and expressed concern about the 'new normal' (24 per cent). One respondent found hope within the uncertainty, "The term 'new normal' – this creates a sense of fear that this will never end. I believe this is a 'temporary normal' and we will get back to our work and social lives – it will take time." Among those in this category, 24 per cent of respondents highlighted concerns related explicitly to COVID-19, such as availability of testing and the unclear or changing public health guidelines.

Family and Relationships

Nine per cent of survey respondents highlighted family and relationship concerns. These concerns included worry about increased family tensions resulting in family breakdowns or domestic violence. Many respondents wondered how they would cope with being in the same space with their family

for longer periods than usual, living in tight quarters, not having outlets and what the long-term effects might be. One respondent expressed uncertainty about how to support the mental health of those close to them, "How can we help others while protecting ourselves?" The desire to take care of loved ones, such as spouses, children, elderly and more, while maintaining boundaries and self-care, was a common theme.

Education

Nine per cent of survey respondents were also concerned about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, with many discussing the pandemic's mental health impact on both students and parents. One respondent mentioned the stress of parenting while their children were completing school at home, "The abrupt end of the school year [was] disastrous for working parents, single moms, children with learning disabilities and more. I don't know what could have been done differently, but maybe plan in case this happens again. I place a high degree of expectations on myself. I wasn't thinking it was going to be easy, but I thought it was possible to achieve - which is kind of ridiculous, I now see. Now I feel like I failed, and continue to fail." Another respondent reflected on the impact on teachers, "[The] concern for teacher wellbeing is non-existent. Who is supposed to look after our mental health and wellbeing while we are expected to look after the wellbeing of our students and their parents?"

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING SUPPORTS

The survey asked:

What do you think has been helping your mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic?

Results indicated that while the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant challenges, there is a broad range of coping mechanisms and supports to help individuals, families, and communities manage throughout the pandemic. The most popular coping mechanisms and supports were summed up in eight general themes: (1) Staying connected, (2) Physical activity and health, (3) Self-Care, (4) Benefit of the outdoors and changing environments, (5) Maintaining routine, (6) Increased support and shared learning, (7) Information intake and (8) Acceptance of the situation. The first three themes were the most prevalent responses, and almost half of respondents said their coping mechanisms included staying connected, routines and self-care.

Staying Connected

When respondents were asked what has helped their wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, the most common response was staying connected (57 per cent). The majority of these participants described 'connection' as regular online contact. Online contact included, "Socially connecting with family while physically distancing through video platforms." Many respondents described getting creative by organizing virtual coffee dates, cocktail hours, game and trivia nights with coworkers, family and friends. Many participants discussed the importance of in-person connections such as spending time outside while maintaining social distancing, visiting in a common outdoor area with neighbours, walking and getting active with friends. In-person time with households and cohorts was also commonly cited, with an emphasis on intentional quality time and creativity to establish enjoyable bonding activities with their close contacts.

Physical Activity and Health

Physical activity and the focus on physical health became positive outlets during this time for about half of the respondents (49 per cent). Most participants shared that regular exercise, including bike riding, daily walks, working out and other physical activities, gave them a sense of purpose and were meaningful forms of self-care. The need to maintain regular exercise from home required commitment and, at times, creativity. Respondents were dedicated to "getting exercise (setting up workout stations around the house when weather is poor)" and "making time for a walk even when I don't feel like it." Some individuals also reported that staying at home offered them a chance to focus on a healthier lifestyle. One respondent explained, "Our meals are better planned now that we shop once a week. We are eating healthier with no restaurant meals, and fewer snacks picked up from convenience stores, etc." Additionally, respondents discussed the importance of rest while taking care of themselves. This included taking time for relaxation, prioritizing good sleep, napping and taking breaks when needed. "[I am] listening to my body and not 'forcing' myself to do anything. [I] nap when I feel I need to." One participant also shared that they adapted their schedule when things got overwhelming for their family, "We took a week off school. My mental health and the kids' were more important." Each component of maintaining physical activity and health seemed to feed into the common theme of caring for oneself and those around them.

Self-Care

Intentional self-care activities were the second most discussed coping technique reported by participants (48 per cent). Familiar activities, such as crafting, reading, watching movies and TV, baking, board games and music, were frequently discussed as methods to stay busy and enjoy

leisure time. Some participants also shared that taking care of their homes and spending time on projects they may otherwise not have time to do helped manage their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant said they are "staying in the present moment using mindful techniques." This statement reflected a common theme among respondents connecting with spirituality, mindfulness and/or religion. Many people cited prayer, attending virtual church services, journaling, meditation and slowing down as proactive techniques to dealing with stress and coping with uncertainty. Pets were another positive influence for many respondents. One respondent said, "My pets give me joy, and they don't know the difference in the world right now, which is refreshing." Many respondents shared that attempting to stay positive and offer support and compassion to others was helpful during this time. For example, one respondent shared, "Seeing the good that comes out of people struggling together" was encouraging. Many people were inspired after witnessing acts of kindness and felt comforted knowing caregivers were assisting loved ones who may need extra help. Lastly, some respondents mentioned they are taking part in webinars and enrolling in classes to develop skills or hobbies. These educational opportunities appeared to be helpful with staying busy and making meaning out of the spare time provided by the COVID-19 restrictions.

Outdoors and Changing Environment

Many respondents (34 per cent of all participants) shared benefits they've experienced while being outdoors and from changing their environment. Seventy-five per cent of respondents in this category discussed the benefits of enjoying fresh air through walking their dog, horseback riding and hiking. The remaining 25 per cent highlighted gardening or starting home improvement projects as beneficial to their mental health. One respondent said, "I have taken time to enjoy my 'rural' life more, including planting a few more flowers, riding and enjoying my horses more." Many people cited the benefits of connecting with nature and sunshine as good for their general wellbeing. Additionally, some participants said getting out of the house and changing up their environment was a beneficial way to help them cope, "[I like to go] for a drive outside of town, away from people, and enjoy nature without having to worry about anyone coming up too close."

Maintaining Routine

Maintaining routine was a significant theme within the responses. Thirty-one per cent of individuals emphasized the importance of having a sense of control and normalcy amongst the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people expressed gratitude for their employment. Respondents said their job provided the opportunity for a more consistent schedule. One individual spoke of finding meaning in their continued work, "I am working really hard at my job to get a sense of purpose." Many respondents shared that creating a daily plan and maintaining a routine helped keep order and structure in their day-to-day lives. Additionally, some respondents spoke of keeping health routines

through access to formal supports like doctors, therapists and mental health professionals online. Regular contact with friends, family and co-workers was also an important element of routine reported by respondents. This included creating schedules for when to connect with loved ones. Some people also shared that this regular contact with their support network was a way to stay accountable to their self-care.

Increased Support and Shared Learning

Thirteen per cent of survey respondents discussed how an increase in support and shared learning opportunities helped them manage their mental health and wellbeing. The most prominent theme was how connection allowed respondents to support those they cared about, as well. One respondent shared, "It also helps to feel like by connecting with others, work and personal, that it may help their mental health and knowing that we can do small things to bring a smile to others who may need it." Respondents said using online resources and supports while working from home was helpful. Lastly, many respondents found it helpful to share their experiences and feelings with others. A higher proportion of respondents benefitting from online resources and supports were urban residents, with 61 per cent living in urban areas. Similarly, urban residents were more likely to feel they benefited from talking about their personal experiences, comprising 67 per cent of this category.

Information Intake

Information intake was highlighted by 12 per cent of respondents as a way to help their mental health and wellbeing. While some respondents found that following COVID-19 updates was helpful, the majority (83 per cent) of respondents in this category said that reducing their media intake contributed positively to their mental health. For example, many people said that accessing the necessary information while taking intentional time away from the news reduced their feelings of being overwhelmed. One respondent explained, "[I minimize] how much [I read] about COVID-19, [and take] a break from it from time to time." As well, reducing time spent on social media was commonly referred to as a coping mechanism.

Acceptance of Situation

Ten per cent of survey respondents discussed how their acceptance of the situation helped their mental wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Acceptance included letting go of small worries and easing expectations. One respondent explained, "Slowing down in life has been very helpful for my mental health. I haven't had to work so hard on my mental health since this started." Respondents described being patient with themselves, reducing expectations and trying to stay positive and hopeful even when it has been challenging. One respondent explained the importance of understanding that some days will be harder than others: "Some days are hard and not motivating...[I tell] myself every day that I am doing the best I can."

FUTURE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The survey asked:

The pandemic has caused our lives to change in many ways due to physical distancing. As we transition into the next phases of this pandemic, over the next 6 months, what future challenge do you anticipate regarding mental health and mental illness? What potential opportunities may emerge due to the changes we are experiencing? (e.g., more comfort with online meetings)

Respondents had a wide variety of concerns as they faced an unknown future during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most pressing future concerns encompassed six general themes: (1) Ongoing, increased mental illness and mental health problems, (2) Human contact, (3) Fear and searching for a new normal, (4) Economic challenges, (5) COVID Concerns and (6) Mental health supports and resources. Of these six concerns, the first three were the most commonly cited and mentioned by almost one-third of the participants.

Respondents also shared their perspectives on what they anticipated would become future opportunities. These responses encompassed four main themes: (1) Social connectedness, (2) Self-development, (3) Workplaces adapting to remote work and (4) Online service delivery. The first two themes were most commonly cited and mentioned by almost one-fifth of participants.

It is worth noting that, unsurprisingly, respondents who answered this question still reported that they experienced more concerns about the future (64 per cent) than opportunities. However, over one-third (36 per cent) of responses highlighted opportunities or potential positive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. These results underscore the significant concerns the pandemic has placed on individuals and families in Alberta but also point to our population's strength and resilience.

Future Challenges

Ongoing/Increased Mental Health Problems

The most pressing concern facing 30 per cent of respondents was increased mental health concerns within the province. A large portion of participants worry about forthcoming societal mental health issues, including increased stress, anxiety, depression, substance use and suicidal behaviours. One participant stated, "I worry about those who are in crisis and require support. [They are] not getting support because people do not see them in person on a regular basis." This is a common fear because the lack of in-person communication is potentially placing vulnerable people at increased risk of concerning behaviours or unobservable declining mental health. Of the respondents who cited these

concerns, 11 per cent reported fear of increased domestic violence or abuse. "In homes where there is abuse, there are no 'safe' places for people...Where do they go? How do they get help?" There were also concerns about how stress from the pandemic could potentially exacerbate levels of violence.

Human Contact

The impacts of long-term physical distancing were a prominent theme in 29 per cent of the responses. Many participants reported struggling to connect safely and had some level of fear of the virus. Of those who worried about the continuing physical distancing measures, some people reported anxiety over not seeing family members in long-term care facilities or members who live in other provinces or countries. A large portion of participants emphasized that while they actively use technology to stay in contact, online meetings and socializing did not fill the gap the same way that in-person connection can. Many respondents felt lonely and feared further isolation, especially people living alone. One individual said, "[I am] alone again. I have been socially isolating alone, in my small apartment, for seven weeks. Being alone for this long is excruciating. I hope I never again have to spend this length of time on my own." Many people reported missing friends and family. Another subset of respondents reported concern over the potential future impacts of reduced socializing. This included fear about social skills declining as a result of extended isolation. A respondent explained, "I am nervous about our social skills as a whole. We have observed the negative effects screen time has already had on our population. Now that technology is our main form of communication, how is the transition back into society going to look?" Lastly, respondents also referred to the fear of being around others. One respondent was concerned about the lasting effects of their social anxiety after the pandemic, "I anticipate we will have challenges with people being fearful to be around others and will not want to participate in any group activities."

Fear and Searching for a New Normal

The data revealed concern from 28 per cent of respondents about the transition back to 'normal.' Individuals felt anxiety about the differing views of how and when to re-open. Many people also expressed uncertainty about navigating public opinion about re-opening with strangers, family and friends. Many respondents who had cited fears about transitioning back to 'normal' were concerned about finding appropriate social boundaries and were uncertain about how much social integration was appropriate. Additionally, some respondents feared too rapid a return to normalcy could be a potentially destabilizing pressure for individuals and families who are not yet ready to leave self-isolation. Some respondents worried about the pandemic's long-term impacts, with fears of what they might be and uncertainty of how to manage them as they come to light. Lastly, respondents were concerned about

finding balance as the pandemic continued on and were unsure how to set boundaries around work/life, especially if working from home continued. One participant stated, "I am always 'on' for others...and it's wearing me out. I could wear hats more or less one at a time before; I don't know how long I can go on wearing many hats, much of the time." In addition, some participants cited trouble balancing optimism and their fear of loss of control for the future. A long term loss of social norms was another concern for respondents. Some participants feared that feeling normal while in public may never return. Further, some people did not know how they would adapt to new social norms, such as the change to handshakes, hugs, etc.

Economic Challenges

A significant number of respondents (16 per cent) expressed concerns about the future economic challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many people cited fear that financial strain will cause businesses to shut down or streamline their operations, which will lead to job loss. Participants feared that more people would increase their debt to support themselves and their families. Additionally, some respondents were fearful of becoming ill with COVID-19 and lose employment if they take time off. A large portion of these respondents had concerns about the ripple impact that financial uncertainty may have on family dynamics and individual wellbeing and mental health. Ongoing job loss was also a concern for respondents. Some participants cited a looming fear that they will lose their jobs and that ongoing business closures will increase competition for future work opportunities. One respondent explained why they feared that certain jobs would not have a future, "As a musician, a challenge is how to practice and perform in a live environment." Another person asked, "Will I have a job? Will workforces be reduced because people can work from home? They may not have a need to hire for office support."

COVID Concerns

Sixteen per cent of participants expressed concerns regarding COVID-19. These concerns included following guidelines, future waves and the varying opinions on how to re-open. Regarding following guidelines, respondents were worried others might abandon physical distancing rules and sanitary practices that were followed at the pandemic's outset. Respondents were also concerned about the clarity of guidelines across sectors and the consistency of compliance with the guidelines. Some people worried that others will push boundaries. "[I fear] people will get frustrated because their lives won't go back to normal and [they will] try to force others outside of their comfort zone." Some respondents worried about contrasting opinions on re-opening and how people might react if they disagree with the guidelines and restrictions.

Mental Health Supports and Resources

Survey results indicated that future access to mental health supports and resources was a concern for nine per cent of respondents. For example, participants feared that access to services would be impacted as fewer referrals may occur because many are putting off their medical appointments. The anticipated growing demand for mental health resources and services prompted concerns for equitable access to these services and the ability to meet the increased demand. One participant stated, "Alberta did not have sufficient resources to support mental health before this crisis, and now more people than ever need wellness support. The idea of more video conferences is interesting, but, as we have seen over the past few months, an online conversation is not always a replacement for face-to-face connection." This was of particular importance to individuals who might be more isolated during the pandemic, including seniors or those in the province who may already face mental health support accessibility issues, such as those in rural communities. Many people were concerned that if there isn't increased capacity to support mental health needs, a resulting increase in mental health needs will place individuals at higher risk.

Future Opportunities

Social Connectedness

When asked to consider opportunities that may emerge due to changes from COVID-19, 24 per cent of participants cited online connections to facilitate potential social connectedness. Many people pointed to the newly increased comfort with online meetings and increased comfort using technology as tools to connect us personally and professionally. Participants pointed out that increased comfort in using technology has facilitated more connections with people in rural areas or who may be otherwise isolated. One participant said, "Online options are the single biggest advantage of the pandemic - while not an outlet for all personal connections, this has been a way of increasing connection during isolation." Further, many respondents found that the pandemic prompted them to consider new, creative ways to connect. Respondents were creating new routines and methods for staying in contact and showing care for others. One respondent said they have been intentional about "more social networking, phone calls to those alone, small surprise packages for those struggling." Another respondent explained, "I now read my grandson his bedtime story- he lives 6 hours away!" Efforts to cultivate and nurture relationships in new ways have, for some, inspired hope that Albertans will be intentional about creating quality time when this has not been the case in the past.

Self-Development

A significant portion of respondents (19 per cent) said their enhanced sense of gratitude is a positive outcome of the pandemic. Many participants recognized they have a tremendous amount of gratitude

for what they have, including the time they have with their close family. Participants were grateful to focus on family, live a slower pace of life, have time to live in the moment and to have the chance to be more present due to less outside responsibilities or social obligations. One person explained, "On the positive side, this experience has been a gift in a sense, where it has reminded people of what's really important and the rush to get back to normal, really consider which aspects of 'normal' are worth rushing back to." Additionally, some respondents noted that the shared struggle of going through the pandemic prompted them to do more acts of kindness and take care of others. Many people also said the pandemic provided the opportunity for growth and change. This change included developing new routines. One respondent explained, "I didn't think I had the personal discipline to work from home before, but now it's not too bad. I am getting up and going through various routines and keeping up with my work tasks (mostly). I am more easily recognizing my anxiety symptoms and have the ability to tell my supervisor that I need an afternoon or a day to re-calibrate." Further, participants also noted their growing awareness of materialism, consumerism and wastefulness. Respondents are re-evaluating past consumption practices to assess what they really need. One participant stated that the pandemic provided the opportunity to "figure out how to use the lessons of what this is to grow and transform."

Workplaces Adapting to Online and Remote Work

A portion of respondents (15 per cent) described the opportunity to work from home positively by citing more flexibility within their work schedule. One participant stated, "[I am] thinking of presenting a flexible work proposal with my employer as I find I'm more creative/relaxed while working remotely." Extended screen time was challenging for many, but respondents often mentioned that their comfort online increased over time and their computer skills improved, which allowed them to manage. "Potential opportunities that may emerge due to the changes would be businesses being more open to individuals working from home and being more comfortable with online meetings, increased communication in the workplace (as there has been an increase in communication when everyone is working at home during the pandemic to ensure people are still on track with their work)." Some respondents described a generally positive change in corporate culture due to more consideration for what is best for employees. Additionally, respondents working from home have not had to participate in the daily stressors of office work. Some people indicated that working from home had built trust and support between themselves and their management, opening new avenues for collaboration.

Online Service Delivery

Due to the evolving need to offer programs and services in new ways, many respondents (10 per cent) felt that online service delivery was more inclusive for people unable to 'get out' as easily and increased service accessibility. One participant wrote, "One of the pros [to online service delivery] is

many businesses have been forced to think of other ways to do things other than face-to-face. For the community of people who are having a hard time with their mental health, hopefully, it makes it easier for them to access support virtually than it may have been before." The new online and remote service offerings were cited by respondents as an accessible option for individuals who live in rural areas or are otherwise isolated.