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# HARSH REALITIES AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES: ROYAL SOCIETY OF CANADA MEMBERS ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CANADIAN SOCIETY

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Since March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has altered life as we know it. In so doing, according to members of the Royal Society of Canada (RSC), it has provided opportunities for positive social change. The RSC's mandate is to recognize research, artistic or scholarly excellence, and harness this excellence to make "substantial contributions of knowledge, understanding, and insight through engagement with the larger society."<sup>i</sup> To tap the collective insights of its members, the RSC conducted three on-line surveys between April and June 2020, asking members to respond to the following statement: "In my view, "three of the most pressing societal issues confronting Canada as it responds to, and recovers from, COVID-19 are ..." The findings of these surveys shed light on this transformative moment in history, where Canadians not only reeled from the direct effects of the pandemic, but also from the ripple effects, which impacted education, work, and healthcare, and generated revelations about systemic social inequalities and long-term care, to name only a few.

Some of the concerns raised by RSC members were front of mind for many Canadians during the spring of 2020: controlling the spread of the virus, the impact of the pandemic on our economy, concerns for the well-being of the elderly and various marginalized groups, the implications of social isolation for mental health, as well as the capacity of our healthcare system. Beyond this, however, RSC members saw opportunities for a better future for Canada – advocating for societal change that would enhance balance, equity, and sustainability. While the pandemic's impact has been devastating, RSC members voiced hope that Canadians will respond in a manner that generates meaningful social change.

## Methods

The Royal Society of Canada has over 2,460 Fellows in the Academy of Science, Academy of Arts and Humanities, and the Academy of Social Sciences, as well as 370 members of the College of New Scholars. All were invited to share their views on the pressing challenges facing Canada, at three points in time. Data were collected by the RSC between April 2<sup>nd</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, April 25<sup>th</sup> to May 5<sup>th</sup> and June 8 to 18<sup>th</sup> 2020. After eliminating duplicate responses and non-responses, there were 293, 252, and 302 usable responses to the first, second, and third surveys respectively, for a total of 847 entries. Although participants were requested to list up to three entries, some participants listed fewer. Participants sometimes provided entries that had two separate ideas and required two different codes. Although a wide array of concerns and challenges were identified, several themes were recurring, revealing a fair degree of consensus across these scholars from different disciplines and institutions.<sup>ii</sup> As part of a preliminary open coding stage, the data from the first two surveys was used to generate a table of 17 thematic categories. Data were then recoded using the table of categories, which was subsequently used to code the third survey. Survey responses were hand-coded independently by both researchers, and agreement was considered high given the largest difference between individual counts, aggregated across the three surveys, was 1.3 % in two of the 17 categories (and smaller differences in other categories).

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Data analysis focused on aggregating our counts across categories for each survey and for the total across the three surveys, calculating percentages of total counts per category, and ranking the top ten categories. The derivation of a common table of thematic categories across the three surveys made it possible to identify changes across the two-month period. The results are first presented in aggregated form, followed by a comparison of the frequency of responses at the three time-points.

### Pressing Societal Issues

Table 1 provides a ranked list of the ten most common thematic categories aggregated across all 3 surveys. The most common concerns raised pertained to the unequal impact of the pandemic, and policies proposed to **protect the vulnerable** and **counter inequalities** exposed (or exacerbated) by the pandemic. Many advocated for a more equitable society. Some participants called for greater equity, generally, but many singled out specific groups for particular attention: the economically marginalized, Indigenous and racialized people, the elderly, and children. Respondents also drew attention to digital inequalities (e.g., access to high-speed internet), regional differences, and domestic violence. Anti-black racism was also mentioned. To counter and address these inequalities, respondents called for policy changes, with *basic income* policies most-mentioned.

Respondents identified **the economy** as a pressing societal consideration, especially the impact of the recession and the need for economic recovery. There were many calls for a more balanced economy. Some mentioned the need to balance economic recovery with continued public health measures to curb the spread of the virus, while others called for Canada's economy to become more environmentally sustainable. A growing number of respondents felt that economic growth had to be balanced with a concern with health, the environment, and equity. For instance, one respondent identified a "economy-environment-equity 'trilemma'... how can we optimize economy security for Canadians while also accounting for environmental and equity considerations."

Not surprisingly, many respondents emphasized **health considerations**. Concern was raised over the mental health of Canadians resulting from social distancing, isolation, illness and mortality. Concerns about the healthcare system including both medical care and public health, access, sustainability, and capacity were also raised. Moreover, for many respondents, the most pressing societal concern facing Canadians was to '**curb the spread**' of the virus through social distancing, hand-washing, testing, contact tracing and other means such as personal protective equipment (PPE).

**Table 1: Top 10 Themes and Thematic Categories, Across Three Surveys**

Rank	Thematic Categories and major themes	%
1	<b>Equity, Inequalities, and Policy:</b> Protect the vulnerable, help the marginalized, increase equity, minimize social inequalities; establish a social safety net and implement policies such as basic income.	16.7
2	<b>Economy:</b> Economic recovery, but also concerns about recession. Calls for balancing economic concerns with health and the environment.	11.0
3	<b>Health:</b> Healthcare planning, capacity, concerns for mental and physical health, public health concerns.	10.6
4	<b>Curb the Spread :</b> Steps to minimize the spread of the virus, including social distancing, use of PPE, testing, contact tracing treatment and so on.	8.3
5	<b>Science / Research:</b> Support for science, new research (science and social science), research respecting virus, vaccine.	7.9
6	<b>Workers/Employment/ Small Business:</b> Concern for worker well-being, unemployment, front-line workers, worker compensation, remote working, work-family conflict, calls to rethink and revalue work.	6.7
7	<b>Communicate the Science, Evidence-Based Policy:</b> Concern over misinformation, ensuring the science behind policies are accurately communicated, and people are informed; calls for evidence-based policy; respect for science	5.1
8	<b>Environment and Climate Change:</b> concern for the environment, calls for policy change to protect environment, need to keep environment front of mind in policy change.	4.9
9	<b>Government Crisis, Debt, Politics, Privacy:</b> Includes concerns about a looming government crisis, debt, taxes, but also governance, policy that balances rights, privacy & liberty; politics.	4.7
10	<b>Future Preparedness:</b> Preparing for a second wave and/or future pandemics, planning for the future, resilience, recovery.	4.1

Note. Additional themes with smaller percentages included Long Term Care (3.5%), Rethink Society / New Normal (4.0), Social Cohesion (3.0), Education (3.3) Domestic Manufacturing (2.9), Global Concerns (2.5), and Return to Old Normal (0.8)

The fifth most-mentioned themes related to **science and research**. RSC members advocated for more research related to the virus and pandemic – transmission mechanism(s) and impacts -- and especially research towards a vaccine and effective treatments. Calls for science funding and support were evident as well.

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The sixth most common set of themes pertained to **workers, employment and unemployment, the nature of work, and worker compensation**. Respondents highlighted the plight of the unemployed and under-employed, and those small-business owners devastated by the pandemic. They called for more respect and compensation for front-line workers, and expressed concerns about their well-being. Others called for a ‘rethink’ about how we reward and structure work, with many advocating for more recognition of essential workers, while others wondered whether remote working could become a new norm for many workers in years to come. Work-family conflict was also highlighted by some.

Next, respondents expressed concern about the societal backlash against scientists and other experts, and increasing resistance among policy-makers and the public to follow expert advice. In response, survey respondents urged state leaders to engage in **evidence-based policy making**, and they emphasized the need to **communicate scientific evidence** in a manner that informed the public, increased “public trust in science” and countered beliefs “based on false or inaccurate information”.

Survey respondents also highlighted issues related to the environment, ecosystems and climate change. Across the surveys, this was the eighth most-cited challenge. Some felt the pandemic made **environmental concerns and climate change** all the more urgent. Others were concerned that as the country battles COVID-19, it would put environmental policies on the back-burner. For them a key challenge was “continuing to take climate change as a serious threat to human well-being.” Still others argued there was an opportunity now to restructure society to encourage more sustainable and balanced lifestyles.

Additionally, many respondents raised concerns around **governance**. Some predicted a pending government crisis spurred, at least in part, by crushing government debt. Respondents also raised alarms about how governments’ efforts to curb the spread threatened liberty, privacy and individual rights. For them, the challenge was “maintaining individual rights and democratic guarantees despite the temptations a crisis has for governments to transgress both.” Political considerations and concerns were also mentioned.

**Preparing** for a second wave of the virus and for future pandemics was a challenge that emerged as the tenth most-mentioned.

Other themes that received less attention included the following: Educational challenges, concerns for social cohesion, continued support for the arts and other cultural activities, challenges for the global community and Canada’s relationships with other countries.

## Change over Time

Table 2 compares the top ten thematic categories emerging from the surveys in early April, April/May, and June. Both continuity and change are evident. The top three concerns – social inequality, health, and economy -- remain the same across the surveys, although ranking order shifts slightly, with economy over-taking health in the latter two surveys. Other themes mentioned often across all three surveys include Science / Research (ranked 5<sup>th</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, then 6<sup>th</sup>) and ‘Curb the Spread’ (ranked 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup>). Concerns related to work, workers, and small business also appeared frequently across the surveys (ranked 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup>).

Despite such consistency, change is evident across the surveys, reflecting shifts in prevailing social concerns. For example, supply chains and domestic manufacturing concerns were prominent enough early in the pandemic to rank 8<sup>th</sup> among the most-mentioned challenges in the April survey. During the early spring, when Canada was struggling to get enough PPE, ventilators, and there was concern about the food supply, many survey respondents argued Canada needed to be more self-sufficient in producing essential goods domestically. Respondents continued to mention these issues in later surveys, but they appeared less often (ranking 14<sup>th</sup> in April/May and 16<sup>th</sup> in June).

Conversely, by late April, Canadians had become aware of just how many residents and care workers in long-term care homes were afflicted by COVID-19. In late May, residents in long-term care accounted for four-fifths of all reported COVID-19 deaths in Canada.<sup>iii</sup> The military’s report on long-term-care in Ontario delivered in late-May further exposed the appalling conditions in these facilities, and their fatal impact. Not surprisingly, then, more RSC members identified eldercare as a pressing challenge facing Canadian society in the later surveys: long-term care emerged as the ninth most-common mentioned challenge in the second survey; in the third survey it ranked seventh.

**Table 2 Ranked Top 10 Themes in April, May, and June, compared.**

Rank	April	April/May	June
1	Inequality/ Equity/ Policy (14.1)	Inequality/ Equity/ Policy (16.4)	Inequality/ Equity/ Policy (19.3)
2	Health (11.8)	Economy (10.8)	Economy (11.2)
3	Economy (11.1)	Health (9.9)	Health (10.0)
4	Curb Spread (9.1)	Science / Research (8.1)	Curb Spread (7.8)
5	Science/Research (8.6)	Curb the Spread (7.8)	Work/Business (7.5)
6	Work/Business (6.9)	Environment/ Climate Change (7.2)	Science/ Research (7.2)
7	Inform/ Communicate Science (5.5)	Work/Business (5.5)	Long-term care (5.1%)
8	Domestic Manufacturing (5.3)	Communicate Science (5.0)	Government crisis, debt (4.9)
9	Government crisis, debt (5.2)	Long-term care (4.8)	Communicate Science (4.7)
10	Social cohesion (4.3)	Rethink Society (4.7)	Education (4.6)

Note. Percentages in parentheses. These percentages are based on total of all themes (including those outside the top-ten).

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Attention to the environment surged during the second survey, where it ranked sixth. This increased attention may have been encouraged by media reports on the mixed impact of COVID-19 on the environment. While physical distancing and quarantine reduced air pollution and our carbon footprint, plastic pollution appears to have increased in the opening months of the pandemic.<sup>iv</sup> Challenges related to the environment and climate change were mentioned frequently in all three surveys: this theme was the 11<sup>th</sup> most common in the first and third surveys. Respondents urged Canadians to capitalize “on the policy window created by this event to ensure measures are put in place for sustainable and environmentally responsible policies and legislation” and to “build a sustainable economy not based on destruction of environment and extraction of natural resources.”

There was additional change across the three surveys, which is less evident in Table 2 because it occurred in subthemes under these thematic categories. For example, responses to the third survey reflected the anti-black racism and anti-racism movements spurred in part by the killing of George Floyd in late May. For example, one RSC member mentioned “stopping public lynching (murder and abuse) of Indigenous and black and other marginalized people by ‘law enforcement’ agencies. Others identified “racialized barriers and inequalities highlighted by the pandemic, especially affecting African Canadians and Indigenous people.” Some earlier survey responses did mention racial inequalities as an area of concern, but it was only in the third survey that anti-black racism and racial inequalities emerged as a prominent sub-theme.

Moreover, subthemes under the thematic category of ‘economy’ changed. In the early April survey, mentions of economy were fairly general and vague: “economic challenges”, “financial distress”, “economic stability”, and “restarting the economy”. In April/May, the emphasis was especially on economic recovery and moving the country out of the recession. By June, economic recovery and financial distress were still concerns, but “balanced economy” had become a major sub-theme, with approximately one third of participants who mentioned the economy, arguing that economic considerations needed to be balanced with attention to equity, health, and the environment.

This subtheme shift is reflective of a broader trend. For example, although it was not a prominent theme, several people responding to the first survey looked forward to a “return to normal.” By survey two and three it was more common for respondents to look forward to a ‘new normal’. The number 10<sup>th</sup> theme in April/May (and 13<sup>th</sup> in June) was ‘rethink society’. Respondents seldomly looked backwards towards how things used to be, but instead advocated for positive social change. While ‘rethink society’ emerged as a stand-alone theme in all three surveys, it was also a subtheme in other thematic categories. Comments categorized under ‘equity and policy’ advocated for policies to make Canadian society more equitable. Many comments categorized under ‘work and business’ challenged Canadians to rethink employment, and how workers are remunerated. Comments under ‘environment’ called for changing our practices to address climate change.

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In this sense, the over-riding themes across all three surveys may be ‘rethink’ practices, and achieve more balance and equity. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare several social problems – especially respecting equity, our healthcare system, economy, manufacturing, the environment, our workplace practices, and our respect to research and science, and even governance. RSC members argue that we now have the opportunity to seize the opportunity to make meaningful change to improve society. In this RSC members are not alone. Recent polls have identified concerns for racism, mental health, work and education opportunities, trust, social cohesion and social inequalities.<sup>v</sup> More and more voices are advocating for change : addressing anti-black racism, Indigenous racism and other barriers to equity, exploring policy alternatives like basic income, rethinking how we organize work, and work-life balance – to name a few.<sup>vi</sup> These RSC surveys, however, highlight the linkages between these concerns, showing that healthcare, the economy, inequalities, the environment, and other concerns are all interconnected.

To conclude, while members of the Royal Society of Canada identified many distinct challenges facing Canada during this COVID-19 spring, most saw it not simply as a health crisis or a threat to the status quo, but as the opportunity to build a better society – one that is more equitable, balanced, sustainable, as well as healthy and secure. Policymakers should realize that the pandemic has offered an opportunity for innovation and rebuilding society in a more sustainable way. RSC members have identified several areas in which policy improvement would be particularly welcome.

## References

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<sup>i</sup> Royal Society of Canada. <https://rsc-src.ca/en/about>

<sup>ii</sup> Initial coding of Time 1 data was conducted by William Turkel, Janice Graham, and Terra Manca (see Graham, J.E. and Manca, T. (2020). Return to a New Normal: Royal Society Members Identify Key Societal Challenges posed by COVID 19, Royal Society of Canada [[https://rsc-src.ca/sites/default/files/Publication%204%20-%20Return%20to%20a%20NEw%20Normal\\_0.pdf](https://rsc-src.ca/sites/default/files/Publication%204%20-%20Return%20to%20a%20NEw%20Normal_0.pdf)]). We decided to recode the data, and to arrive at a set of codes that would best capture key issues identified and allow us to trace trends over time. Coding was confirmed through the use of N-Vivo (we thank Drew Tetley for her research assistance). We began with open coding on data from the first two surveys. Themes and subthemes were identified, and then categorized into over-arching thematic categories.

<sup>iii</sup> Szklarskim C. 2020. Canada’s proportion of COVID-19 deaths in long-term care double the average of other countries, study shows. CBC News, June 25. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/coronavirus-canada-long-term-care-deaths-study-1.5626751?cmp=rss>

<sup>iv</sup> Golden, B. 2020. How COVID-19 is good for news for the environment. York.Region.com.

<https://www.yorkregion.com/opinion-story/9959589-how-covid-19-is-good-news-for-the-environment/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/covid-19-poll-canadian-youth-the-most-impacted-by-pandemic-lockdown-848074531.html>; <https://www.ipsos.com/en/public-opinion-covid-19-outbreak>

<sup>vi</sup> Statistics Canada. 2020. StatCan COVID-19: Data to Insights for a Better Canada.

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-28-0001/2020001/article/00047-eng.htm>; Li, W. 2020. New report shows why a basic income makes sense during COVID-19 recovery. The Star, June 29.

<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/06/29/new-report-shows-why-a-basic-income-makes-sense-during-covid-19-recovery.html>; Doward, J. 2020 Only 13% of UK working parents want to go back to ‘the old normal’. The Guardian, Sunday June 28,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/28/only-13-of-uk-working-parents-want-to-go-back-to-the-old-normal>