



COVID

RESPONSE



Canadian Urban Institute

Institut Urbain du Canada

## CANADIAN URBAN INSTITUTE

CUI is Canada's Urban Institute. We are a national platform where policy makers, urban professionals, civic and business leaders, community activists and academics can learn, share and collaborate with one another from coast to coast to coast. Through research, engagement and storytelling, our mission is to support vibrant, equitable, livable and resilient cities in Canada.

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

CUI is committed to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. We acknowledge and respect that our programs are delivered on the territory of many Indigenous Peoples. CUI is headquartered in the City of Toronto, the traditional territory of many Nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississauga and Chippewa bands.

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report reflects intellectual and data contributions from many partners. The photos on the cover of this report are a sample of the hundreds of people who have spoken at CUI CityTalk events over the past year. You can learn directly from these and other inspiring city builders through the video recordings, transcriptions and summaries available online at [CityTalkCanada.ca](https://CityTalkCanada.ca). They also provided insights on what they learned over the past year, captured in Part III of this report. The survey data throughout was provided in-kind by Advanis, based on inputs from more than 180,000 Canadians during the pandemic. CUI gratefully acknowledges this contribution and extends thanks to Advanis for collecting detailed urban-level, racial and ethnic data from the beginning, which is unfortunately not as common in Canada as it should be.

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## LETTER FROM PRESIDENT & CEO

### MARY W. ROWE

March 11, 2021



Dear Reader,

A year ago today, I was in Victoria speaking at a conference. There was some provocation about whether too much attention was being paid to cities. I pushed back, arguing that cities are humanity's greatest creation. Cities drive economies. Cities incubate innovation. They are a critical part of this extraordinary ecosystem we call Canada, including urban and rural areas, where people come together to solve the problems we face – and in crisis, it is at the local scale within communities where resilience is found.

Little did I know that this would turn out to be my last in-person conference, last flight, and last large gathering for a long time. And, little did I know how true this statement about finding resilience in community would turn out to be in the year ahead.

Jane Jacobs used to say that cities hold “the seeds of their own regeneration.” Time after time, I’ve witnessed this to be true. Real innovation and resilience is grown at the most granular level. In crisis, people pull together what resources they have and try new things to respond to the needs they see around them. Crisis sparks a kind of ‘DIY improvisation’ on the ground that, in urgent situations, scales faster and more effectively than sweeping, grand-scale solutions. It’s why cities persist through history; it’s why I continue to hold that cities are humanity’s greatest creation.

Over the past year, COVID has wreaked havoc on our cities, our nation and our world. Globally we have lost about 7,110 people per day, every day, over the past 365 days. We have lost more than 22,000 Canadians this year with more than 893,000 people sick with confirmed cases of the virus. For the lucky among us who did not contract COVID, the impacts have still been severe: prolonged lockdowns; isolation from friends and family; major life events postponed or unrecognized; delays or difficulty accessing health and other critical services; job losses, changes and instability; adaptations in so many parts of our lives. For racialized communities, people living in poverty and others who already faced significant barriers in their lives, the COVID experience has been even more difficult.

But in crisis, people innovate. Over the past year, we have seen remarkable demonstrations of leadership. High school students leading protests of thousands around longstanding racial injustices. A librarian with an idea to move a wireless router closer to the window so the signal is stronger for people experiencing homelessness and accessing services from outside. A real estate professional concerned with the lack of race-based data who creates a self-reporting tool targeted to BIPOC communities to share their experiences, and then forges new partnerships with researchers and government to see these communities receive needed supports (or, access previously denied supports). Neighbourhood ‘care mongering’ groups popping up all over the country to help people with basic needs like pharmacy orders and groceries.

The response from local governments has been equally swift and inspiring. A year ago, local leaders sprung into action, quickly adapting key local services like transit, libraries, supports for the population experiencing homelessness and access to community spaces. Many took immediate steps to support people and businesses with the financial struggles associated with the pandemic.

At the Canadian Urban Institute, we created several new platforms — like **CityTalk**, **CityWatch** and **CityShare** — to connect local leaders. We brought stakeholders together around shared goals like restoring main streets and urban cores, securing the right to home, and building healthy communities. All of this work has been an exercise in listening to one another, learning and connecting — exactly what will be needed in the recovery work that still remains ahead.

To reiterate Jane Jacobs’ words, cities hold “the seeds of their own regeneration.” Yet again we have witnessed this to be true all across Canada. To each and every person who has stepped up or pitched in over the past year in your community, we salute you. This report is for you.



**Mary W. Rowe (she/her)**

President & CEO | Canadian Urban Institute | @rowemw



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*Canadian Urban Institute Team, Donors & Partners*

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On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. WHO Director General Dr. Tedros said, “this is not just a public health crisis. It is a crisis that will touch every sector.”

He was right.

Over the past 365 days, nearly every aspect of life in Canada’s cities has fundamentally changed.

It has been a hard year.

But, it has also been a year when we have seen **leaders rise up in cities across the country** — sometimes from positions of power, and sometimes from unexpected places.



# PART I: 365 DAYS OF COVID IN CANADA'S CITIES

Throughout history, pandemics have been distinctly urban crises. A century ago, Canada and the world battled the 1918 Influenza (sometimes called the “Spanish Flu”) which claimed the lives of 55,000 Canadians. The Flu arrived in port cities such as Halifax, Québec City and Montréal, and then spread across the country. Public health measures such as mandatory masking and physical distancing were aggressively implemented, but the impact was highly uneven: the loss of life was concentrated in cities, with a disproportionate impact on Indigenous peoples and racialized communities.<sup>1</sup>

For Canadians living through the SARS-CoV2 (“COVID”) pandemic, sadly this feels like an eerily familiar story.

Just like the 1918 Influenza, COVID is an urban crisis. The United Nations reports that 95% of global cases are in urban areas.<sup>2</sup> Canada’s 893,518 cases and 22,304 deaths to date<sup>3</sup> have been disproportionately in cities.<sup>4</sup> **As of March 9, 2021, Canada’s 20 largest cities — representing 42% of Canada’s population — have experienced 62% of confirmed COVID cases and 64% of deaths.**<sup>5</sup> However, the COVID experience has looked different in each city.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Death counts from the 1918 Influenza were more than five times higher among Indigenous peoples, including entire Haida settlements perishing from the virus.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, “UN-Habitat COVID-19 Response Plan” (June 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Canada-wide epidemiological data, including cases and deaths by age group and gender, are based on the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) Daily Epidemiology Update (data as of March 9, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Canadian Urban Institute, *Signpost 100* (June 2020), *Signpost 200* (September 2020) and *Signpost 300* (January 2021).

<sup>5</sup> These percentages have fluctuated (from 64% of cases and 75% of deaths at Day 100) over the course of the pandemic — but the disproportionate impact of COVID on cities has been present from the beginning.

<sup>6</sup> The data in Table 1 is based on local public health reporting in each city, as of March 6, 2021.

**Table 1: Cases and deaths per 100,000 population, in Canada's largest cities**

	CASES				Day 100	DEATHS		
	Day 100	Day 200	Day 300	One Year		Day 200	Day 300	One Year
Toronto	446	648	2,307	<b>3,619</b>	33.7	43.1	71.8	<b>98.0</b>
Montréal	1,265	1,533	3,585	<b>5,237</b>	148.2	168.3	188.1	<b>219.6</b>
Calgary	326	573	3,116	<b>4,174</b>	7.9	8.8	26.5	<b>47.7</b>
Ottawa	214	361	1,110	<b>1,611</b>	26.9	29.9	42.0	<b>47.3</b>
Edmonton	48	434	4,648	<b>5,809</b>	1.3	7.2	59.2	<b>104.6</b>
Mississauga	386	484	1,984	<b>3,079</b>	10.7	31.7	41.6	<b>52.2</b>
Winnipeg	31	101	2,150	<b>2,527</b>	0.7	0.7	67.5	<b>90.9</b>
Vancouver	86	288	952	<b>2,027</b>	9.3	12.2	25.8	<b>41.2</b>
Brampton	420	876	4,386	<b>6,462</b>	14.7	15.8	28.3	<b>38.9</b>
Hamilton	126	203	1,208	<b>1,990</b>	5.6	8.6	33.0	<b>53.1</b>
Québec City	315	593	3,464	<b>4,252</b>	26.3	38.7	132.0	<b>186.3</b>
Surrey	68	245	2,023	<b>4,190</b>	3.8	5.0	31.1	<b>64.0</b>
Laval	1317	1593	4,110	<b>5,951</b>	150.1	161.0	181.3	<b>205.9</b>
Halifax	214	215	292	<b>324</b>	13.2	14.1	14.1	<b>14.4</b>
London	135	196	840	<b>1,426</b>	13.5	14.9	25.1	<b>41.8</b>
Markham	124	274	1,540	<b>2,322</b>	14.0	15.8	24.6	<b>36.8</b>
Vaughan	282	552	2,264	<b>4,034</b>	30.0	37.6	52.9	<b>71.2</b>
Gatineau	144	307	1,286	<b>1,685</b>	6.9	8.9	31.1	<b>42.6</b>
Saskatoon	46	105	1,797	<b>3,056</b>	0.6	0.6	12.2	<b>33.7</b>
Longueuil	534	750	2,192	<b>3,118</b>	35.9	45.6	74.4	<b>109.6</b>



Early in the pandemic, COVID was often described as “the great equalizer” or with phrases like “we’re all in the same boat.” It did not take long, however, before there was a general realization that this was in fact not the case. Data confirmed what experts feared from the beginning: that COVID and its related consequences were disproportionately affecting Black, Indigenous and other racialized communities.

Governments were not collecting the race-based data needed to fully understand these impacts — and so community leaders like Montréaler **Thierry Lindor** stepped up, launching **TheColorsOfCOVID.com**. Together with university research partners, Thierry is generating needed insights from this self-reporting tool about what the COVID experience has involved for Black, Indigenous and other racialized communities.



## COVID + HOW WE LIVE

The majority of Canadians have not contracted COVID – but the impact of the virus has nevertheless been profound, affecting people and communities from coast to coast to coast. Lockdowns, stay-at-home orders and physical distancing have dramatically altered social, professional and personal interactions. However, these impacts have not been felt evenly.

- As illustrated in Chart 1, many people report feeling a **sense of despair** (“I don’t know when this will end”) about the pandemic – but the mix of feeling varies by city. In Montréal, for example, a higher proportion of people are feeling despair than people in Vancouver or Toronto.
- When asked about **whether the pandemic has affected one’s household**, people who identify as women (55%) and gender non-binary (63%) are more likely to report a stronger impact than men (51%). As Chart 2 illustrates, Indigenous people report stronger impacts than white people. People with children in the home (40%) also report a stronger impact than people living without children at home (31%).
- Women (89%) are more likely than men (82%) to indicate that they are **practicing stricter social distancing** to reduce the spread of COVID. Social distancing also positively correlates with age: the Silent Generation is more likely to practice it (95%) than younger generations, and it declines in step: Baby Boomers (92%), Gen X (86%), Millennials (79%), and Gen Z (75%).
- Since June 2020, most Canadians have not **touched, hugged or been in close contact** with someone outside of their ‘bubble’ – including 86% of Baby Boomers, 81% of Gen X and 76% of Gen Y; and 81% of urban dwellers, compared to 77% of rural residents.
- Since June 2020, urban residents (82%) are more likely to report **wearing a mask** when out in public than those who live in rural areas (76%).
- Most Canadians believe their **local government has done well to protect them** from the risks of COVID (56%), including 52% of men and 60% of women.

Chart 1: Mood towards pandemic, by city

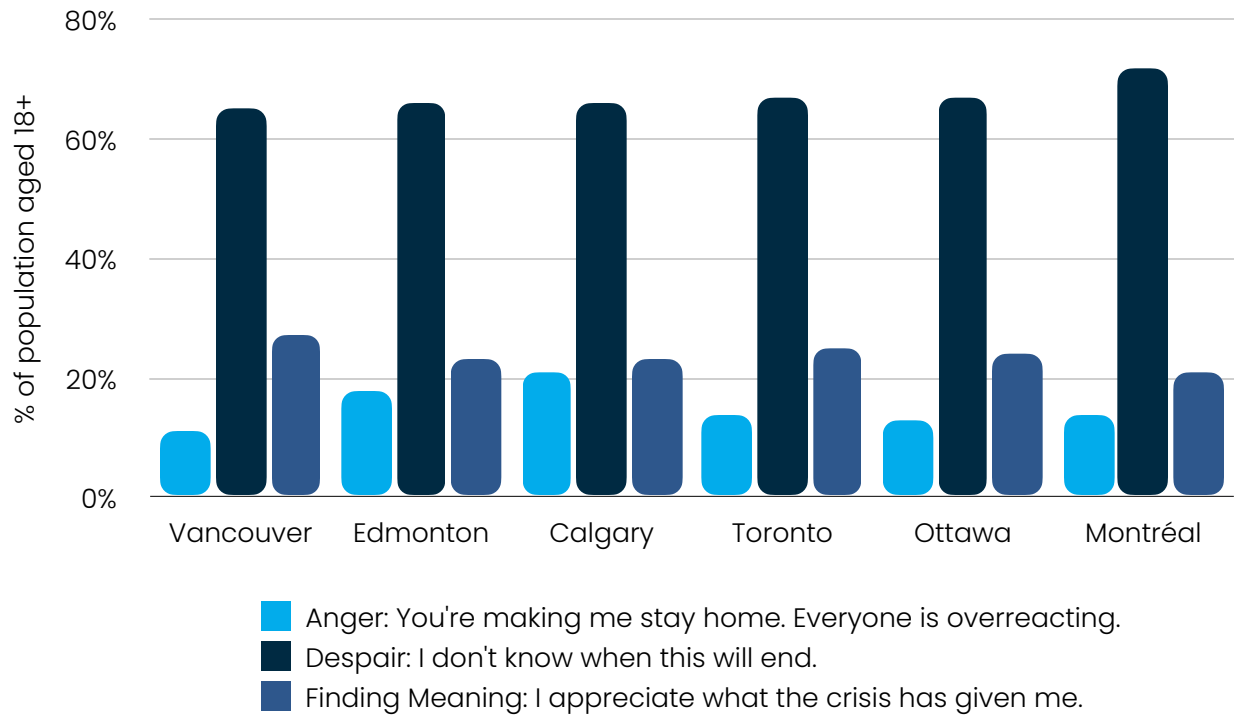
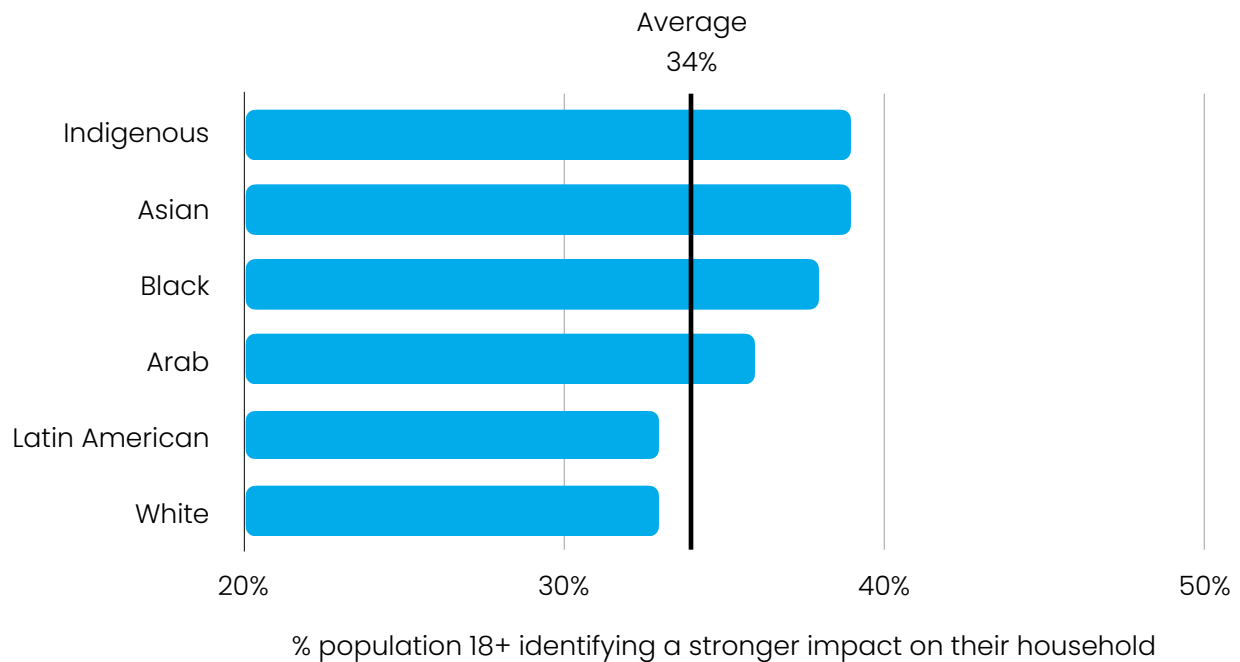


Chart 2: Pandemic impact, by racial and ethnic group





**LaMeia Reddick** is an urbanist, activist, facilitator, organizer and artist. She is the founder of KINnected Leadership consulting firm where she works with local governments to connect with startups to practically address social issues. She runs the BLxCKHOUSE youth hub out of her basement where young people can meet to design solutions to the chronic disparities in their community. LaMeia is also involved in building the capacity and access of Black Nova Scotians: the North Preston Surf Program is a surf program for people of African Descent and The Change is Brewing Collective helps to increase the diversity of people interested in beer brewing to enter the industry.



## COVID + HOW WE WORK

The nature of work in Canada was changing long before COVID – sometimes called the ‘fourth industrial revolution’ characterized by advances in automation, robotics and artificial intelligence – and at a pace that has raised important questions about the current workforce’s ability to adapt. Layer in the COVID pandemic, and “how we work” is undergoing unprecedented disruption and experimentation. Sometimes this has marked a step forward, and sometimes a step back.

- Many have dubbed COVID a ‘**she-cession**’<sup>7</sup> due to the disproportionate economic impact of the pandemic on women. Across Canada, in February 2020 the unemployment rate for women was 5.4%. As of January 2021, it is 9.7% – and goes as high as 11.5% for women in Newfoundland and Labrador, 11.4% for women in Alberta, 10.5% for women in Ontario.<sup>8</sup>
- Per Chart 3, many people are feeling pessimistic about their **personal financial outlook** as a result of the pandemic. Not surprisingly, this is more true in cities like Calgary than it is in cities like Ottawa with a large public sector base. Men (20%) also report slightly higher pessimism than women (18%), but both are far lower than those who identify as gender non-binary (34%).
- As illustrated in Chart 4, Black, Indigenous and other racialized communities are more concerned about the possibility of their **work being automated** after the pandemic. Women (29%) are more likely to say they are somewhat or very concerned about this than men (26%).
- Among people who are **working from home** during the pandemic<sup>9</sup> (approximately 4 in 10 Canadian workers), 63% enjoy working from home. After the pandemic, most employees and managers report a desire for a hybrid work arrangement which includes some working at home. This option is most attractive to people aged 35–64 with kids at home (84%) and least desirable to people 55+ without kids at home (but still with 70% indicating a desire for a hybrid model).

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<sup>7</sup> For an insightful discussion on the “she-cession” and “she-covery”, see [Armine Yalnizyan’s CityTalk on July 14, 2020](#).

<sup>8</sup> Statistics Canada, Labour Force Characteristics by Province, seasonally adjusted. Table 14-10-0287-03.

<sup>9</sup> This is based on a special study by Advanis on working from home, released in February 2021. The survey was conducted from January 18 to 26, 2021 with a sample of 925 people who worked from home during the pandemic.

Chart 3: Personal financial outlook, by city

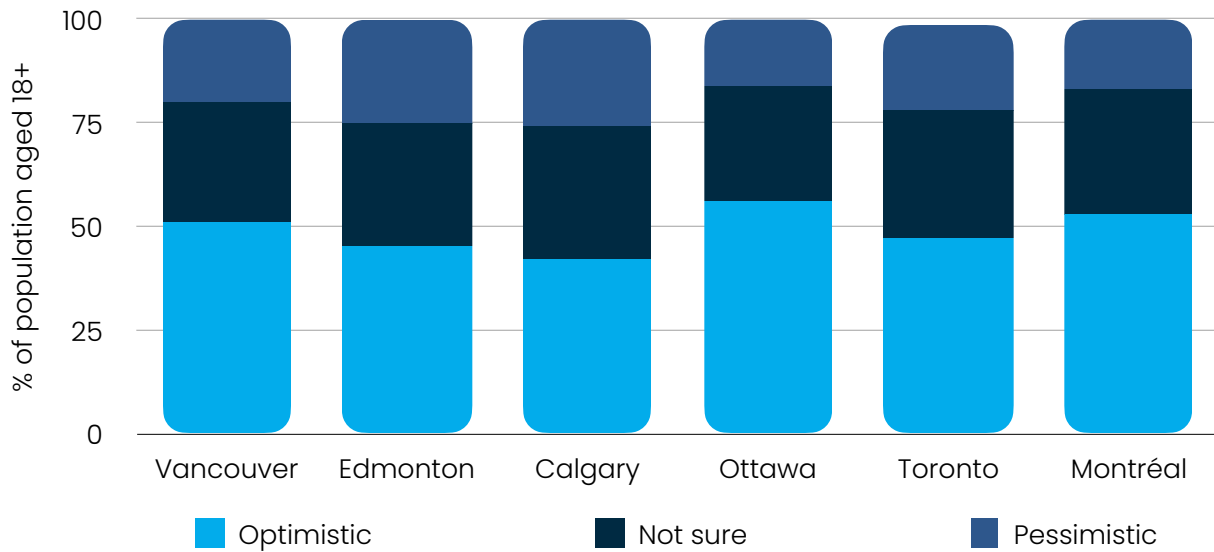
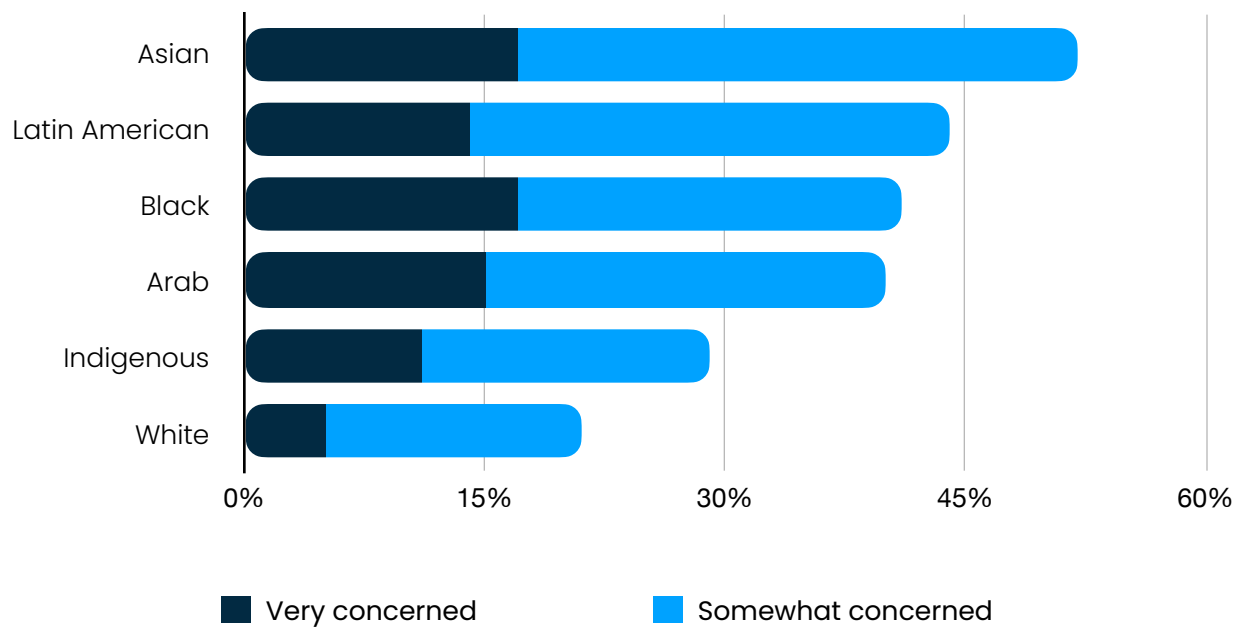
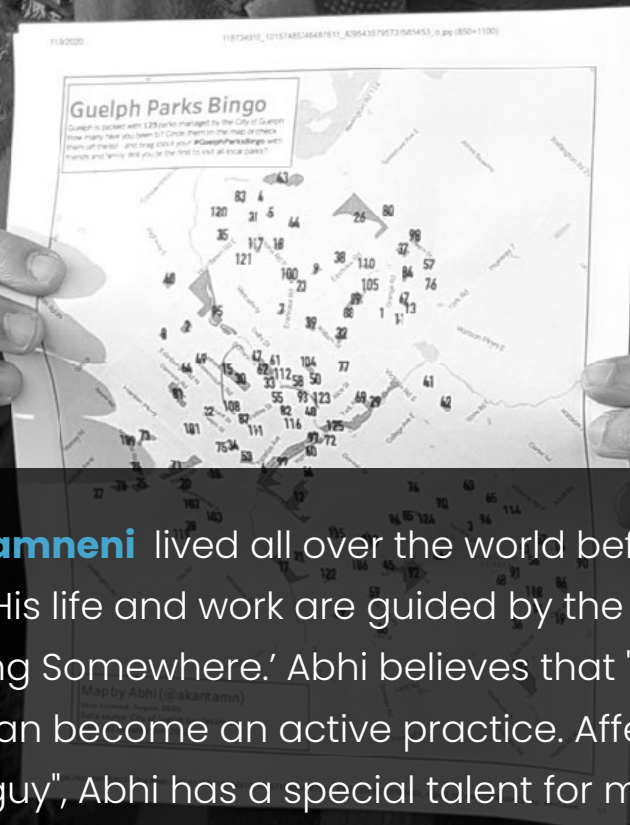
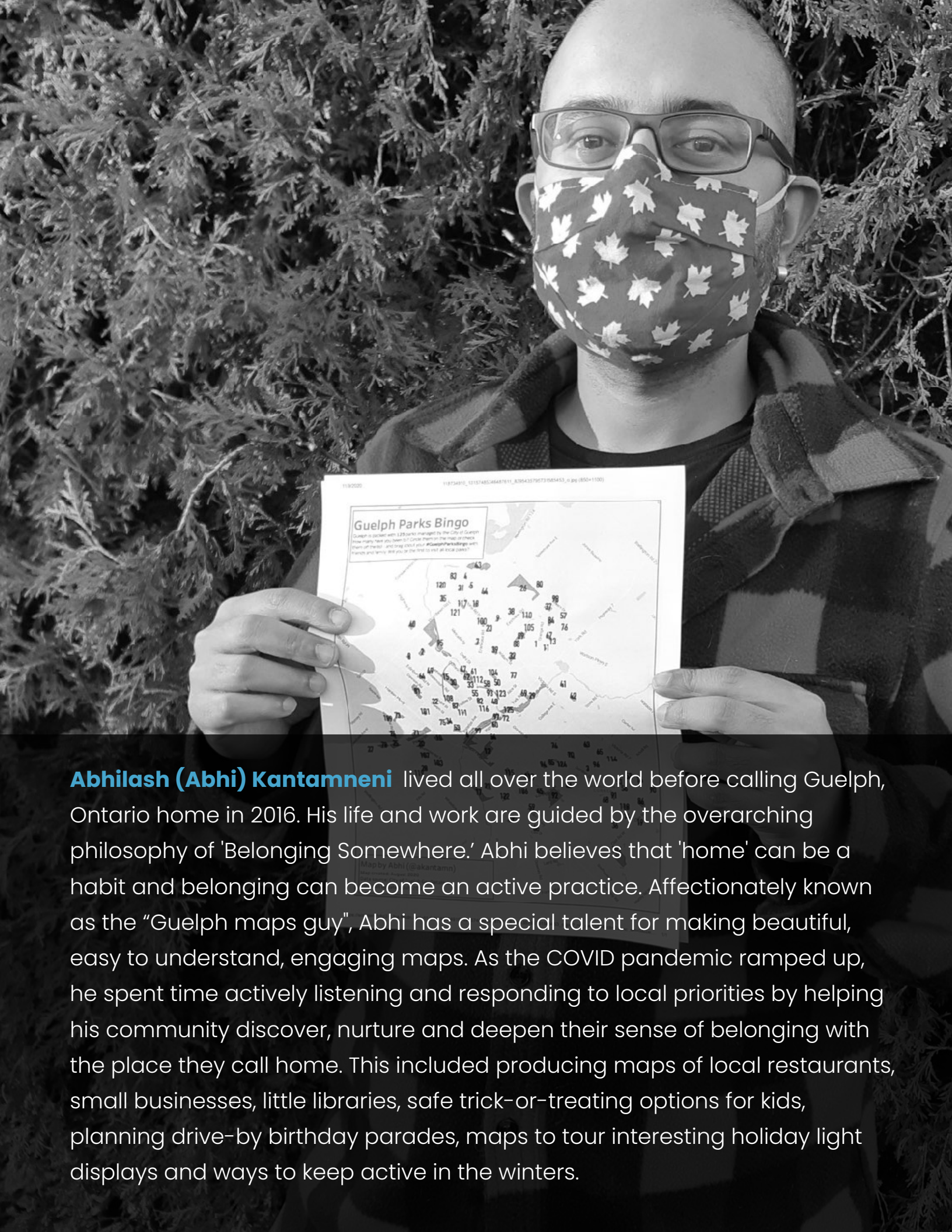


Chart 4: Concerns about job being automated after pandemic ends, by racial and ethnic group<sup>10</sup>



<sup>10</sup> Advanis added questions to its COVID-19 survey for CUI in June 2020 to generate these results (n=8307).



**Abhilash (Abhi) Kantamneni** lived all over the world before calling Guelph, Ontario home in 2016. His life and work are guided by the overarching philosophy of 'Belonging Somewhere.' Abhi believes that 'home' can be a habit and belonging can become an active practice. Affectionately known as the "Guelph maps guy", Abhi has a special talent for making beautiful, easy to understand, engaging maps. As the COVID pandemic ramped up, he spent time actively listening and responding to local priorities by helping his community discover, nurture and deepen their sense of belonging with the place they call home. This included producing maps of local restaurants, small businesses, little libraries, safe trick-or-treating options for kids, planning drive-by birthday parades, maps to tour interesting holiday light displays and ways to keep active in the winters.

## COVID + HOW WE MOVE

How people move has changed dramatically over the past year. Google Mobility data describes the profound shift in Canadians' travel patterns: from retail and recreation (-30%), to grocery and pharmacy (-5%), parks (+23% as of February in winter, and over 100% increase during the summer months of the pandemic), transit stations (-54%), workplaces (-13%) and residential spaces (+10%).<sup>11</sup> These major swings reflect the broader changes in how people live – but some may have a lingering impact.

- Although **public transit** ridership has declined during the pandemic in cities across Canada, the Canadian Urban Transit Association reported in February 2021 that service levels are at 87% and ridership has rebounded to 42% of pre-COVID levels.<sup>12</sup>
- Looking forward, among those who use transit, there are important differences across generations in terms of preferred **modes of transportation** after the pandemic, in the event that public transit services are reduced or are unavailable.<sup>13</sup> For Millennial transit users, 28% would cycle, 23% would use ride-sharing or hailing like taxis, UberPool, Lyft Shared, Uber and Lyft, and 32% would walk. For Baby Boomer transit users, who may face more limited mobility options, just 12% would cycle, 14% would use ride-shares or ride-hails, and 25% would walk. Notably, about 25% of Canadians reported that they would likely keep working from home if public transit services have reduced service or were unavailable after the pandemic.
- When asked in May and June 2020, Canadians revealed varied opinions about when they may **take an international trip**. About one-quarter (24%) planned to travel as soon as allowed or as soon as they are comfortable with the preventative measures in place. Almost half (46%) said they will not be travelling until a vaccine or treatment has been widely deployed. The rest will “wait and see.” Tellingly, 14% of the Silent Generation and 7% of Baby Boomers indicated in May/June 2020 that they did not plan to travel abroad ever again.

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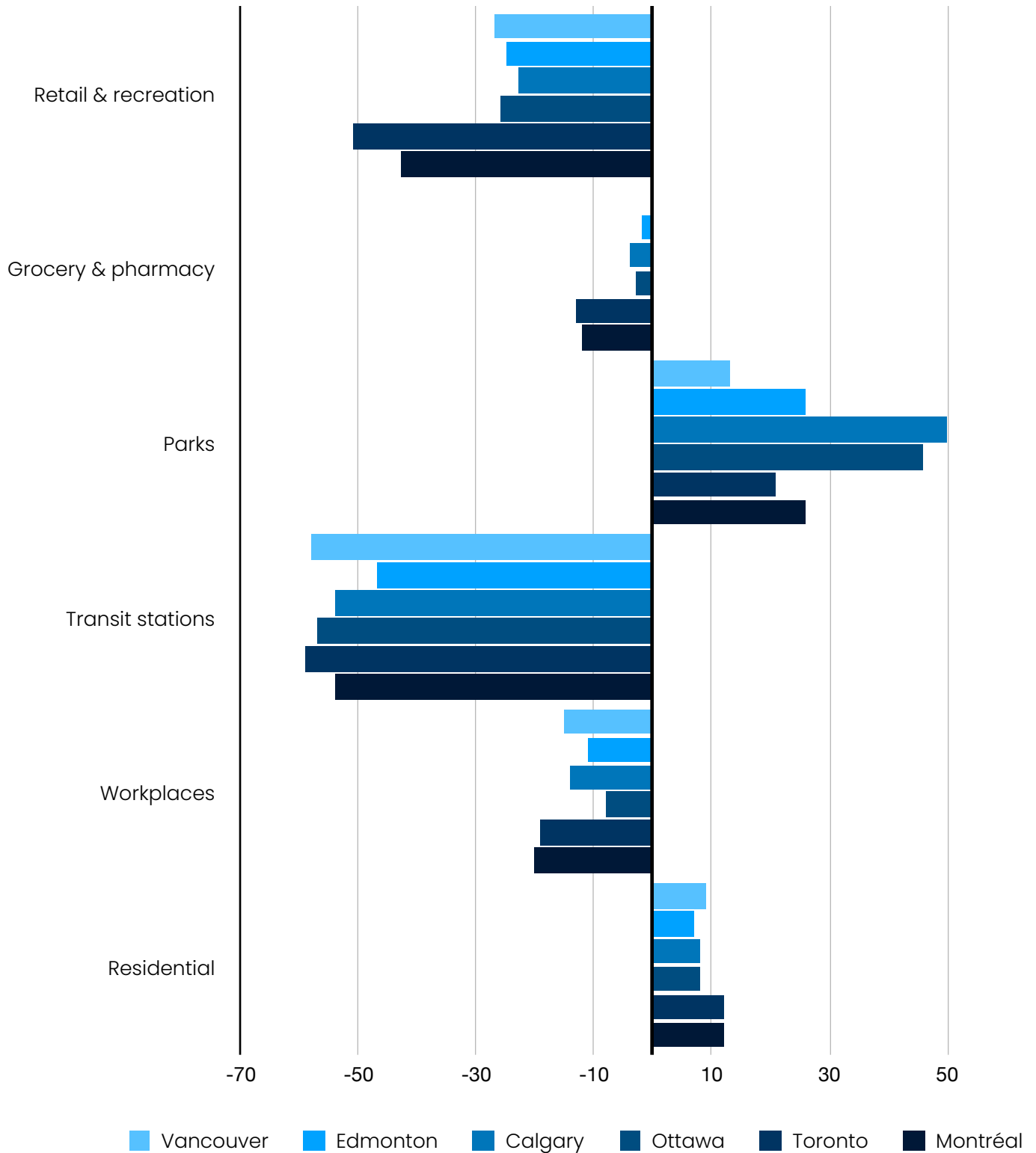
<sup>11</sup> Google COVID-19 Community Mobility Report: Canada (as of February 20, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Canadian Urban Transit Association, “Transit Systems Ask Governments to Continue Operating Support.” Media release February 5, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Advanis added questions to its COVID-19 survey for CUI in June 2020 to generate these results (n=1697).



Chart 5: Changes to mobility patterns, by destination, by city (per Google Community Mobility Reports, as of February 20, 2021)





The vast majority of COVID deaths in Canada have occurred among older adults living in long-term care homes. In January 2021, palliative care physician **Dr. Amit Arya** and several of his Ontario medical colleagues launched a group called **Docs4LTCJustice.ca** calling on the provincial government to take a number of immediate steps to address the escalating long-term crisis. Their Open Letter has now been signed by 1,079 Ontario physicians, sparking needed public dialogue.

“Our prescription for ending this crisis starts with supporting staff, improving working conditions, taking steps to end private for-profit long-term care, and incorporating long-term care into our universal health care system,” says Dr. Arya. “Long-term care should be a verb, not a place.”

## COVID + HOW WE CARE

This has been a year when we all need a little extra care. The pandemic has taken a toll on most every Canadian – but what that has looked like has depended in large part on who we are and where we live.

- The **mental health** of Canadians has clearly declined over the course of the pandemic as shown in Chart 6. In April 2020, 85% of Canadians aged 18+ reported that their mental health was good, very good, or excellent. By the end of February 2021, that percentage had fallen 18% points to 67%. However, the decline varies by racial and ethnic group, as illustrated in Chart 7, with the largest declines in the Chinese and Arab communities.
- The pandemic has impacted the **care of children**. Although the impact of COVID on the care of children has not changed markedly since the beginning of the pandemic, there are important racial and ethnic variations. All non-White Canadians are more likely to report stronger impacts on the care of their children (18-31%) than White Canadians (13%). Filipino Canadians are most likely to cite stronger impacts (31%).
- Similarly, when asked about the impact of the pandemic on the **care of elderly** family members, many racial and ethnic divergences emerge. Filipino Canadians are again the mostly likely to report a stronger impact on the care of elderly family members (28%), followed by Korean (24%), First Nations (23%), Inuk (23%), Japanese (23%), and South Asian (22%) Canadians..
- The pressures of responding to a pandemic have impacted many parts of Canada's health care system, and Canadians' **access to healthcare** – and this impact has been felt more for lower income Canadians. 21% of households earning less than \$60k/year report a stronger impact on their access to healthcare compared to 14% of households earning \$60k/year or more.

Chart 6: Trend of mental health during pandemic, Canadians 18+

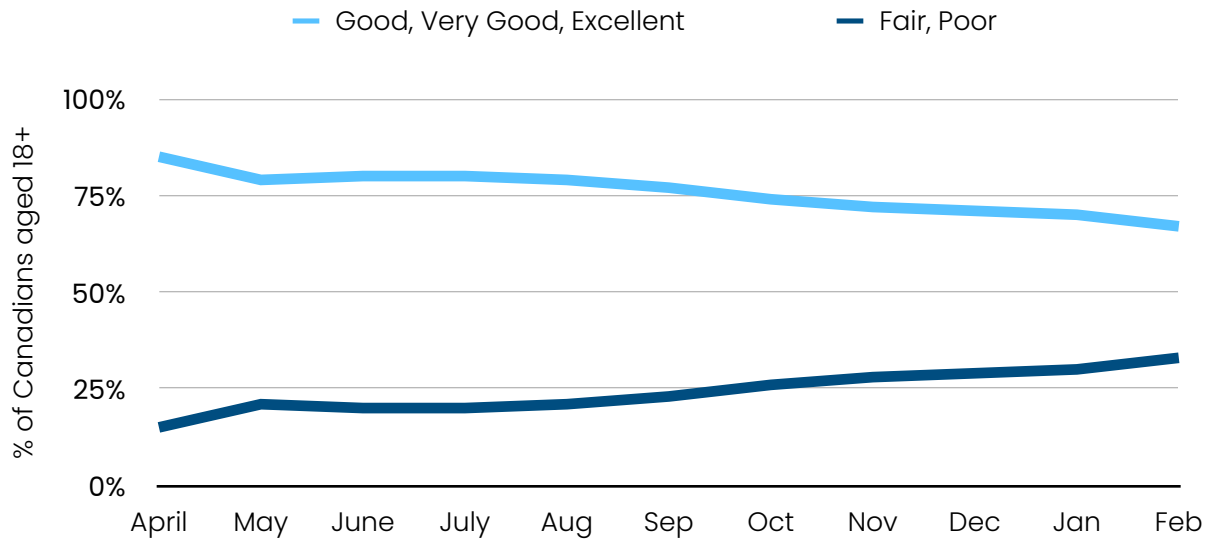
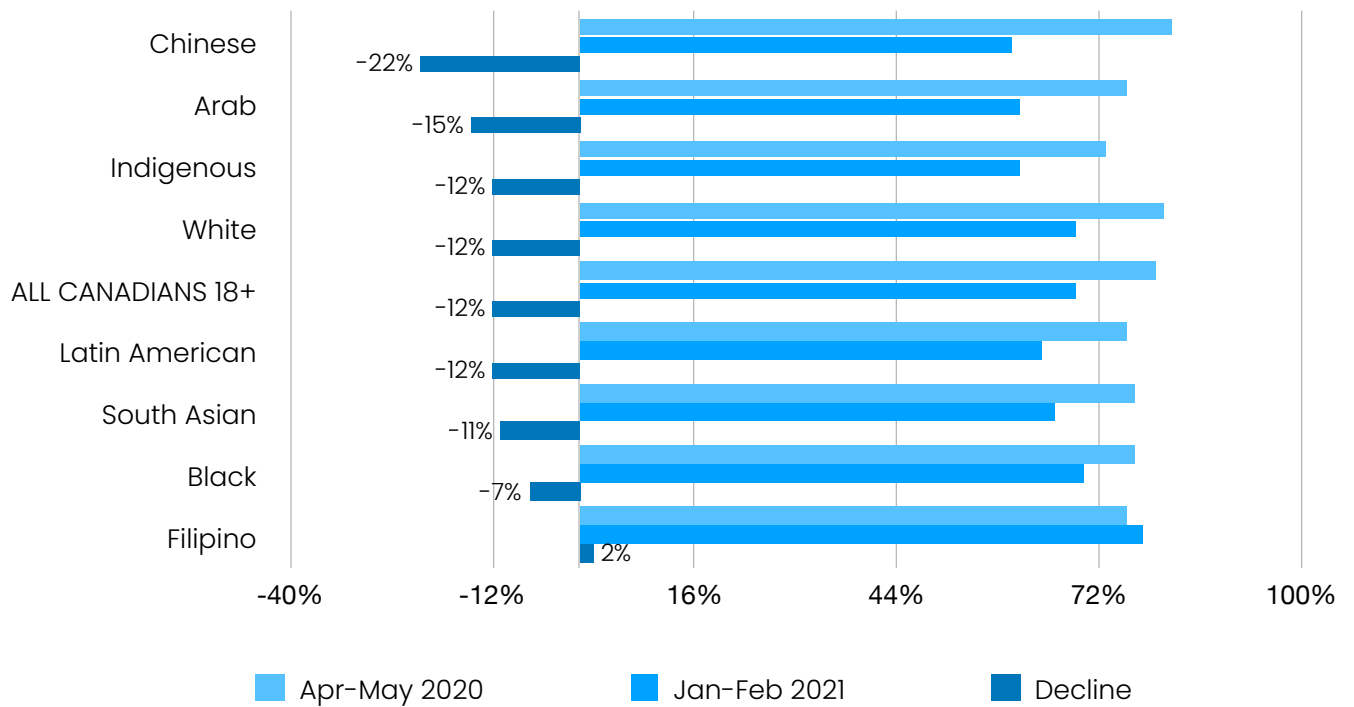
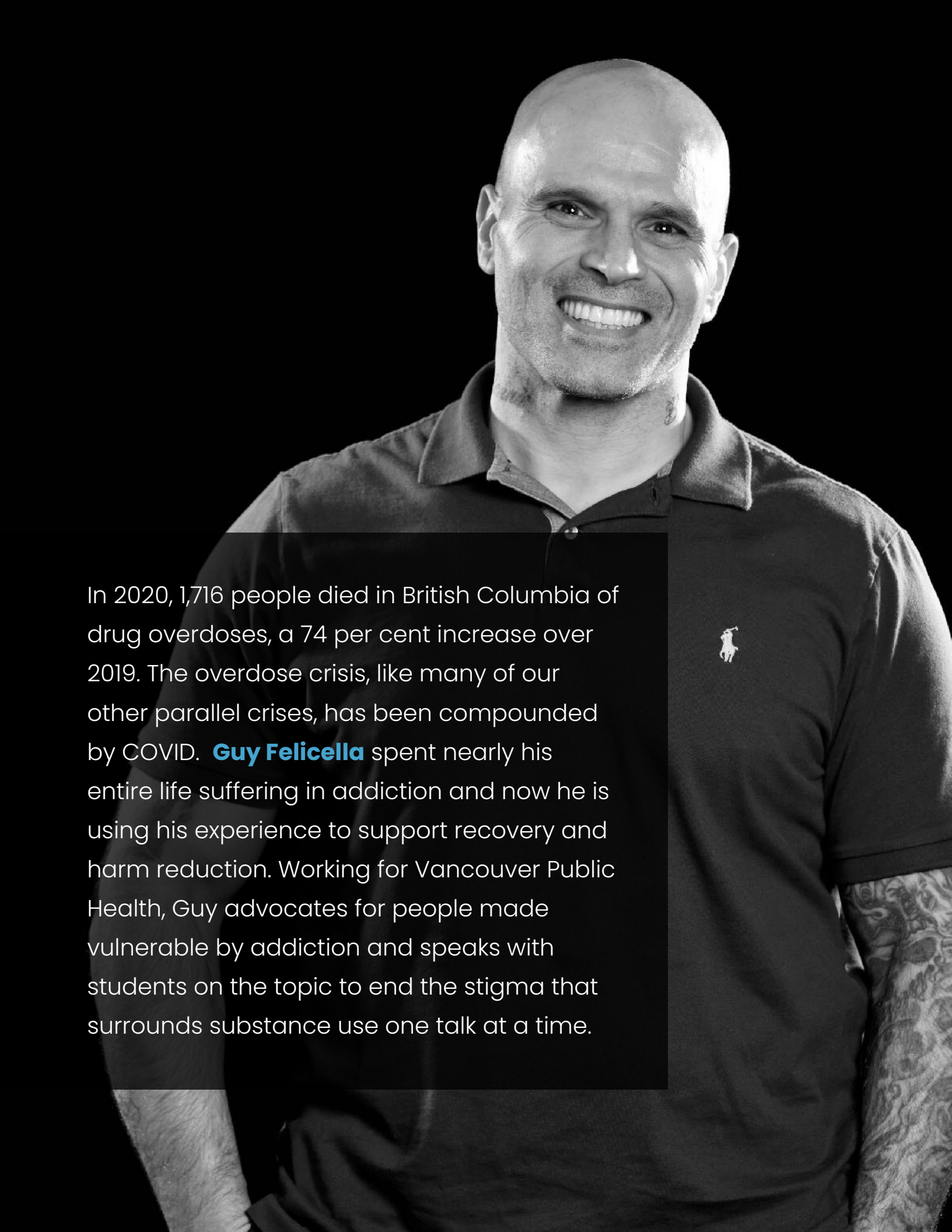


Chart 7: Decline in mental health from April/May 2020 to January/February 2021, by racial and ethnic group







In 2020, 1,716 people died in British Columbia of drug overdoses, a 74 per cent increase over 2019. The overdose crisis, like many of our other parallel crises, has been compounded by COVID. **Guy Felicella** spent nearly his entire life suffering in addiction and now he is using his experience to support recovery and harm reduction. Working for Vancouver Public Health, Guy advocates for people made vulnerable by addiction and speaks with students on the topic to end the stigma that surrounds substance use one talk at a time.

## COVID + HOW WE THRIVE

COVID has introduced dramatic economic struggles for many Canadians – and for cities. In a February 2021 report, the Conference Board of Canada says the pandemic has “led to the largest contraction in Canadian economic activity in modern history.”<sup>14</sup> Compared to pre-COVID forecasts, the estimated four-year loss in nominal GDP is estimated to total up to \$500 billion.<sup>15</sup> Without question, the economic impact in Canada’s cities has been and will be significant – and the overall implications are yet unknown.

- When asked about the pandemic’s **impact on household finances**, 25% of urban Canadians report a high degree of hardship versus the 22% of those in rural areas.
- What these specific financial pressures have involved for individuals and families has also varied vary by racial and ethnic group:
  - 16% of Asian Canadians, 10% of Black Canadians and 10% of Indigenous Canadians indicated difficulty paying **mortgage payments**, compared to only 7% of White Canadians.
  - 22% of Black, 19% of Indigenous, and 18% of Asian Canadians indicated difficulty in making **rent payments**, compared to only 8% of White Canadians.
  - 40% of Indigenous Canadians and 37% of Black Canadians indicated difficulty of paying for **basic amenities** such as groceries, household supplies and medicine, compared to 24% of White Canadians.
- Not surprisingly, people who own and operate **small businesses** are more likely to feel pessimistic about their own financial stability (25%) compared to those who do not (18%).
- **Household savings** have improved dramatically in 2020. Statistics Canada reports an “unprecedented gain” in net savings for Canadians in 2020, with middle income earners seeing the largest improvements – moving from a net dissaving position to a net savings position for the first time in more than 20 years.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Conference Board of Canada, “Challenges Ahead: Canada’s Post-Pandemic Fiscal Prospects,” February 18 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Statistics Canada, “Household economic wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic,” Released March 1 2021.

Chart 3: Impact on household finances affected during the pandemic, by racial and ethnic group

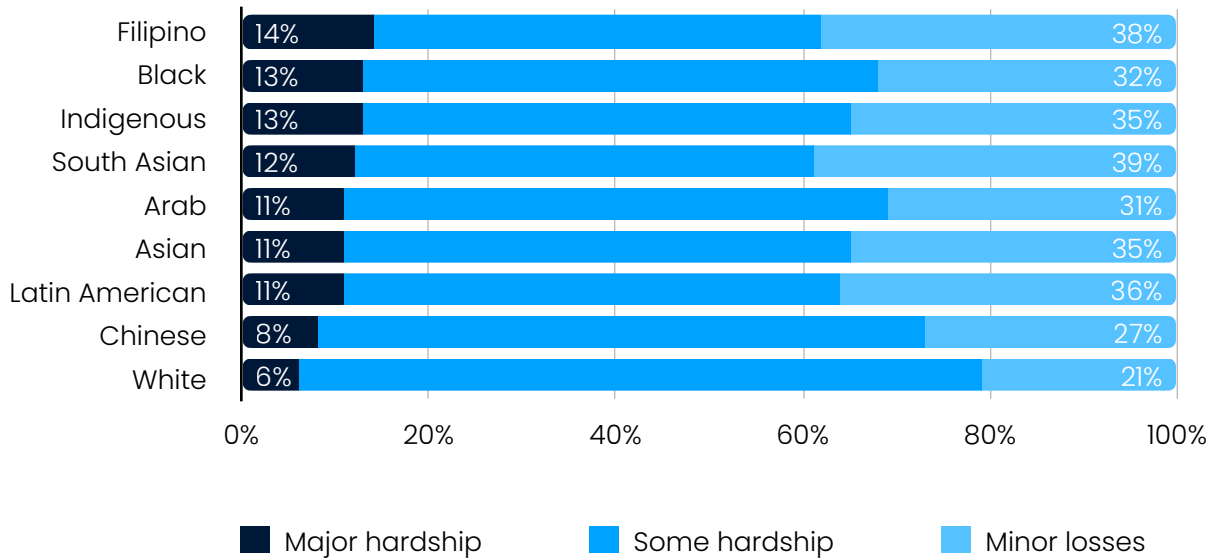
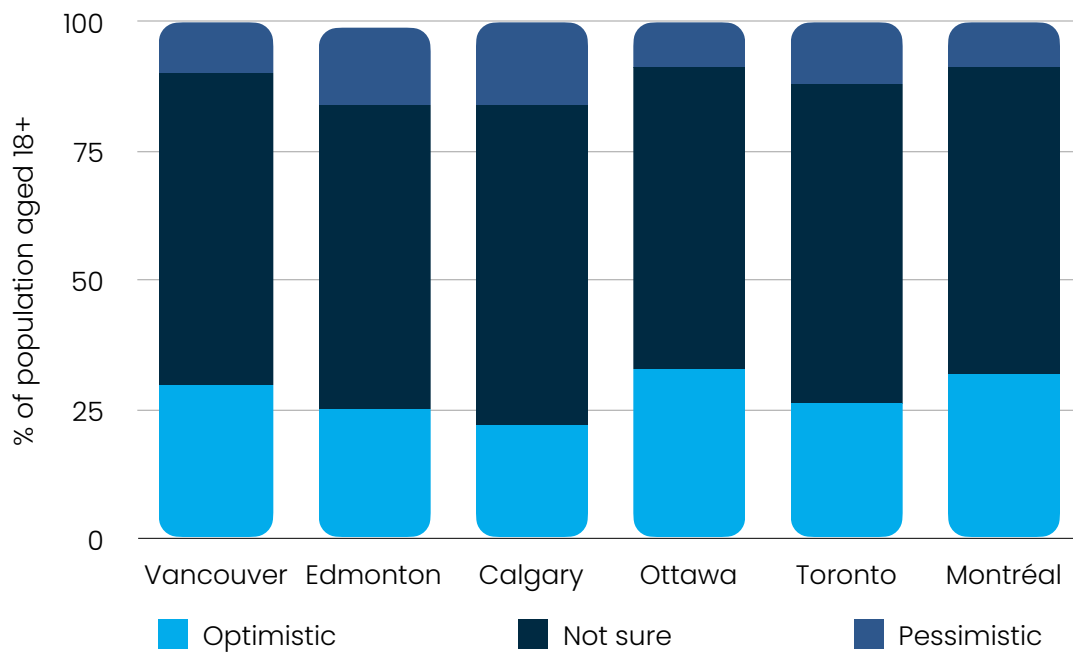


Chart 9: Outlook on own financial stability post-pandemic, by city





**Christy Morin** is the Founder and Executive Director of Arts on the Ave, an organization bringing art to Edmonton's 118th Avenue. She is also working on a community-driven project to bring 76 affordable live-work spaces for artists to the area, retail, market and exhibition space. During COVID, Christy hustled to find bakers to bake 30 dozen loaves of bread a day to give to those in need. She also created a pantry hub and another initiative called Families Helping Families – matching families for a six month commitment to help with groceries and other supports.





At a time when  
people needed to  
stay apart ...

**communities  
came together.**

**#InItTogether**



# PART II: LEADERSHIP FROM THE GROUND UP

Think back to early 2020. What plans did you have for the year ahead? For most of us, the past year has been radically different than the one we had planned. News of a rapidly spreading, deadly virus was scary. Watching daily reports of outbreaks, mass loss of life and needed rapid change created anxieties — and we didn't know what exactly it would mean for our families, our workplaces, our classes, our most important celebrations and life moments, and our communities. For most people, the past 365 days have been marked by uncertainty and the unknown.

But in these hard times, **something remarkable happened. At a time when people needed to stay apart, communities came together.**

At the Canadian Urban Institute, we believe this is the story of COVID in Canada's cities over the past year. Over and over again, we have seen leaders rise up within every city and every community across the country. Sometimes leadership has come from people in positions of power and from organizations built to serve. Sometimes it has come from less expected places, where people — like the remarkable leaders we spotlight in this report, and so many more — have stepped up far beyond their usual roles to help those around them.

Communities have been in it together from the start: to *adapt* when they needed to quickly change to meet new needs in their cities; to *innovate* when they needed to find systems change solutions to long-standing problems, where what was once only possible became necessary; to *lead* when they needed new governance structures that spanned sectors and spaces. This year we learned how quickly viruses can spread — but we also learned that other things, like ideas and innovation, can spread just as fast.

This is the story of COVID365.

# #InItTogether

The pandemic has repeatedly demonstrated cities' ability to adapt under pressure. For municipal governments across Canada, this meant rapidly transforming the delivery of vital government services and responding to the unprecedented challenges that have unfolded over the past year. From acquiring empty hotels to house the increasing number of Canadians facing homelessness to creating new transit routes for essential workers, local public servants are finding adaptations to keep Canadians safe and respond to many of our pressing public policy challenges.

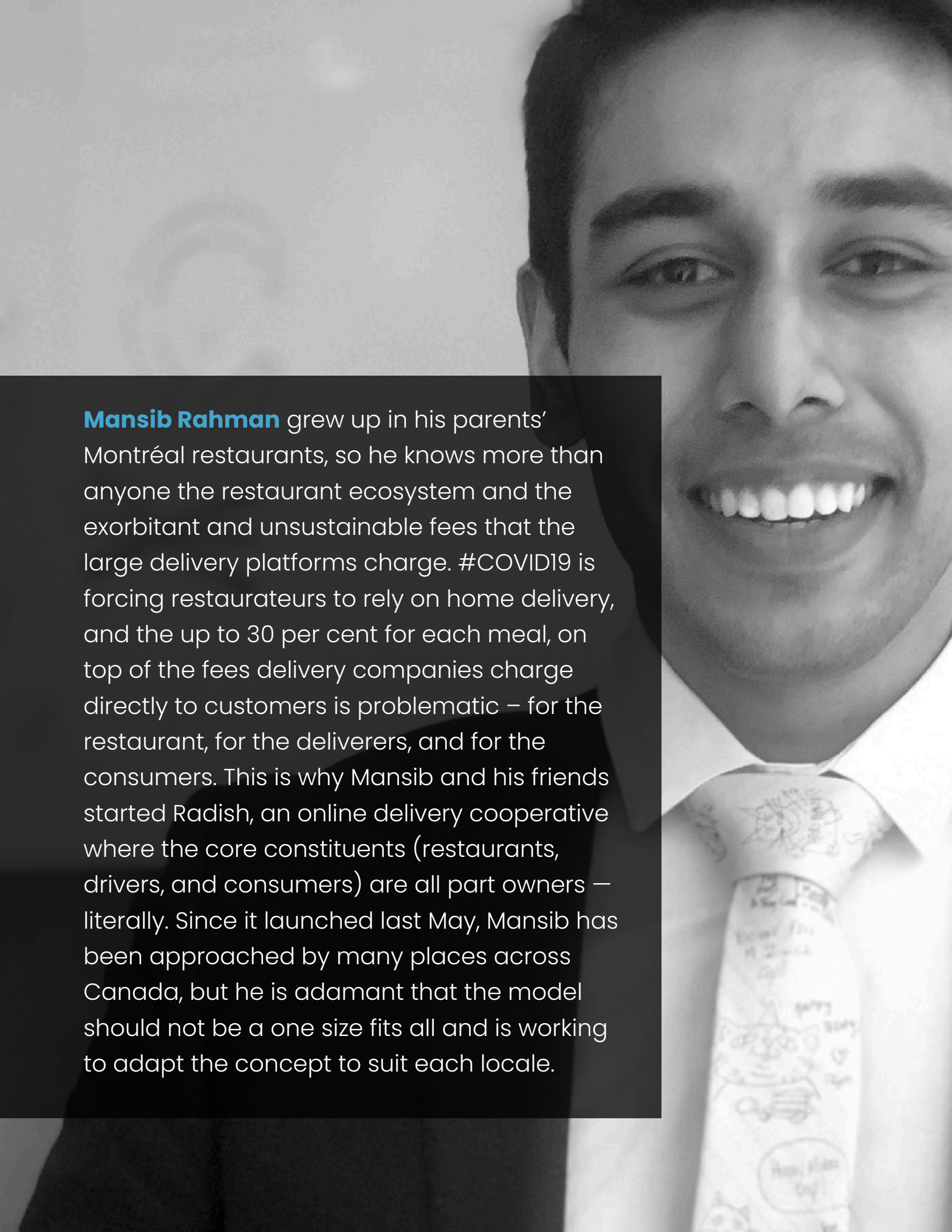
To track these adaptations, new tools were launched to share municipal responses across communities. For the early months of the pandemic, [CityWatchCanada.ca](https://www.citywatchcanada.ca) provided daily volunteer crowd-sourced data about how more than 60 urban municipalities were responding to COVID including transit adaptations, closure of public spaces, deferred property taxes and more. [CityShareCanada.ca](https://www.citysharecanada.ca) continues to capture innovative programs, supports and adaptations across Canada's cities — now featuring over 850 different ideas which could be tried in other cities, too. These innovations include:

- **Vancouver Park Board Growing Food for Families** - In some nurseries and golf courses, the city is now growing low-maintenance vegetables such as beans, kale and turnips. The food is distributed to hundreds of families through Fresh Roots and Grandview Woodland Good Connections programs.
- Members of the **Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra** and **Edmonton Symphony** worked together to deliver one of their most viewed performances of all time. After

musicians and staff were temporary laid off, the group reconnected for a virtual performance while in self-isolation.

- **Park People** prepared a planning guide to assist in delivering safe and successful face-to-face programs during COVID. Includes a simple checklist to be used by park leaders, volunteers and participants.
- **A community bulletin board in Nanaimo** features stories and artwork by homeless creatives, along with news, announcements and a map of local services. People without access to the internet find weekly headlines, jokes and a map of local services. Community agencies submit program updates or information on events and opportunities, to be added to the display.
- **Black Foodie Week** aims to ‘bring joy’ to Toronto while also highlighting how Black food culture is tied to social justice. A free virtual event promoting Afro-Caribbean cooking in the city had the aim of getting people to eat good food, and support Black-owned businesses during COVID-19.
- **The Ryerson University National Institute on Ageing** created a tool to help people better understand the factors that affect the risk of visiting with others on both getting and dying from COVID. By working through the questions of this online decision aid, the NIA’s aim is to prepare people to better discuss the potential risks and benefits of visiting with each other and in the end make a well-informed choice on how to make any necessary visits as safe as possible. After a 10 minute survey, a personalized report is generated to help understand the risks associated with planned visits, together with tips on how to try and make any proposed visits as safe as possible.

As these adaptations unfolded, the level of sharing and knowledge transfer across communities was equally impressive. Hundreds of speakers made time to be part of **CityTalk conversations** over the past year, sharing what they were learning, observing and doing with others facing similar challenges. These online, candid discussions about what’s working, what’s not and what’s next for urban Canada are all available online including videos, full transcripts (including text chats) and main takeaways. We learned much from our CityTalk speakers this year — and some of what they learned is captured at the end of this report (see: **What We’ve Learned**).



**Mansib Rahman** grew up in his parents' Montréal restaurants, so he knows more than anyone the restaurant ecosystem and the exorbitant and unsustainable fees that the large delivery platforms charge. #COVID19 is forcing restaurateurs to rely on home delivery, and the up to 30 per cent for each meal, on top of the fees delivery companies charge directly to customers is problematic – for the restaurant, for the deliverers, and for the consumers. This is why Mansib and his friends started Radish, an online delivery cooperative where the core constituents (restaurants, drivers, and consumers) are all part owners – literally. Since it launched last May, Mansib has been approached by many places across Canada, but he is adamant that the model should not be a one size fits all and is working to adapt the concept to suit each locale.

At the Canadian Urban Institute, we are equally grateful for the many partners who stepped forward to be a part of transformative, systems-change level initiatives to address challenges facing Canada's cities. This is but a small list of these collaborations. They were all sparked to address different COVID-related problems, but have one important thing in common: these are partnerships that are here to stay.

- **Bring Back Main Street** is a nationally-coordinated research and action campaign to ensure the people, business and organizations that call Canada's main streets home can recover and emerge from the crisis more resilient than ever. COVID is having an unprecedented impact on our main streets. Many small businesses, for example, have already been lost, and more will continue to close permanently in the coming days, weeks, and months. We need bold action right now. More than 40 organizational partners have stepped up to be a part of this work including private, public and non-profit partners. The group has already overseen a main street design challenge, worked with the federal government to advance key policy priorities, and convened important conversations about how to support street-level recovery.
- **Restore the Core** is about re-imagining the future of downtowns. Office workers have not returned. Transit ridership is down. Students have moved to online learning and people are staying closer to home for shopping and social activities. The prevalence of people experiencing homelessness, mental health, and addiction challenges has grown, and there are fewer supports for the most vulnerable in turn, making downtowns less safe and supportive for everyone. While these challenges put the future of downtowns into question, they also open up a whole range of possibilities such as the opportunity for downtowns to become more complete neighbourhoods, with a greater diversity of uses and more affordable housing options.
- The Government of Canada has made a number of major investments in Canada's cities and communities during the pandemic, which are already yielding positive results. One example is the **Healthy Communities Initiative** which supports communities as they create and adapt public spaces, and programming and services for public spaces to respond to ongoing needs arising from COVID over the next two years. This \$31 million investment from the Government of Canada will fund small-scale infrastructure projects to create safer, more vibrant and inclusive communities. Community Foundations of



Canada and its network are working alongside the Canadian Urban Institute and other partners to deliver the Healthy Communities Initiative locally.

- Finally, the **Big City Executive Partnership** (affectionately known as BiCEP) is the result of the city managers in six of Canada's largest metropolitan areas (Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal) identifying a need for intentional peer-to-peer learning and collaborative problem solving among their municipalities. The city managers established working groups including municipal staff in all six cities focused on pressing issues affecting all of their cities, including mental health and addictions, community safety, digital transformation and more – with a focus on developing shared advocacy positions and engaging with federal and provincial governments. Together, these working groups represent an innovative new model for the development of trilateral initiatives that capitalize on the true potential of Canadian federalism. This model will allow cities to catalyze shared innovations to build back better from COVID and ensure Canada's economic engines are equipped to enable innovation, generate jobs and wealth, and promote equity.

Despite the vast differences in geography, culture, scale, language and more, the past year has demonstrated that Canadian cities are united by a number of common challenges – and, amid one of the most challenging times in modern history, will find ways to work together to address them. This ethos is evident across and within cities. In almost every city in the country, new governance models have been forged to respond to crises: mayors convening new (virtual) tables of community, business and faith leaders to lead local response efforts and recovery planning; elected officials working across cities to advocate for some of the most pressing urban problems. Municipalities, through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and other organizations, have engaged with one another and with other levels of government at an utterly unprecedented rate over the past year – and it has paid off. The federal government's historic investment in cities over the past year has been in large part due to a willingness of leaders across levels of government to work together to support Canada's cities.

**At a time when people needed to stay apart, communities came together – and we're all better for it.**

**Linda Hoang**'s parents own a Vietnamese noodle shop in Edmonton's Chinatown. Concerned about the fate of businesses in Chinatown and across the city, she started #AdoptAShopYEG as a way to rally community support for local businesses affected by the pandemic. The concept was simple: sign up to "adopt" a small business in the Edmonton area and support them by spending at least \$20. In July 2020, 173 people collectively spent more than \$8,000 at 50 Edmonton small businesses they "adopted" and then in November 2020, nearly 250 people spent over \$17,000 at 64 small businesses across 8 neighbourhoods. In February 2021, Linda ran her third event which resulted in 100 people spending \$10,000 to support 50 downtown Edmonton businesses (plus almost 400 social media posts, 500,000 people reached and 2.3 million impressions!). She makes these initiatives fun and inviting and uses food and drink to bring people and communities together. In addition to #AdoptAShopYEG, Linda's blog houses Guides to Black and Women-owned Businesses to support.



# READING THE SIGNS

“Build back better.”

“New normal.”

“Post-COVID world.”


How often we hear these phrases! But, what do they mean? Are we actually on a path towards a markedly different future for cities and communities in Canada? What have we learned from this experience, one year in, and are we putting those learnings into action?

Even at the one-year mark, there is much about COVID – and how it will impact cities – that we do not know. We cannot predict how long the pandemic will last or how many waves are ahead. We do not know when we will reach a point of ‘herd immunity’ based on the administration of vaccines, or what the longer term vaccination regime will need to involve to control the virus. We do not yet know the total loss of life or lingering economic impact COVID will have in Canada, nor do we know how months of physical isolation may have changed our orientations towards the places where we live or those around us. We do not yet know when that moment we have all been waiting for will finally occur: when life once again feels “normal,” whatever that means.

But, there are signs all around us, pointing to things we do know. That has been the focus of the **COVID Signpost** series over the past year, with reports out every 100 days throughout the pandemic to mark what we believe are important moments in time.

Indeed, the pandemic has presented us with new signs that cast our eyes towards old problems. Although some such injustices existed long before COVID, they may have been hidden in plain sight amid the hectic realities of our daily lives. As devastating and difficult as COVID has been, this unusual departure from “normal life” has forced us to think long and hard about what kind of cities, and country, we want to build.





# What we learned this year

#InItTogether



**Adam Lubinsky (Toronto)**  
**Managing Principal, W X Y architecture + urban design**

"This past year has been a wake-up call to move on from our notions of individualism and to accept that we are part of an interconnected ecosystem that can breed infection, but can also, when combined with mutual trust, support and social justice, allow our cities and species to survive and thrive!"



**Ahmed Elgeneidy (Montréal)**  
**Professor, School of Urban Planning, McGill University**

"Public transport is an essential service for cities to survive, the pandemic has highlighted the fragility of the public transport operations funding mechanisms and accelerated the need to figure new sources for operations funding."



**Alexandra Flynn (Vancouver)**  
**Assistant Professor, Peter A. Allard School of Law, University of British Columbia**

"The urgency and gravity of COVID-19 on our most vulnerable has taught me the importance of taking transparent and equity-focused action now, not passing the baton elsewhere."



**Alicia Scholer (San Francisco)**  
**Vice President, Responsible Hospitality Institute**

"Don't underestimate our ability to adapt to the unthinkable. Even the most introverted person needs to connect with people; not recognizing that has led to our current mental health crisis on top of the global pandemic. [...] The fact of the matter is we need each other – for comfort, for joy, for friendship and for bonding. What is life worth living for without these things? What are we most looking forward to when the crisis is "over" or "averted" for the time being? We will need places to reconnect. Allowing the spaces that facilitate sociability to close is doing a great disservice to the future of humanity."



**Amanda Gibbs (Vancouver)**  
**Engagement Advisor, Vancouver Plan, City of Vancouver**

"I've learned the critical importance of collaboration and partnership among public and civil society sectors in the exchange of knowledge, shared leadership in public involvement and most critically, the delivery of public benefit/services."



**Amarjeet Sohi (Edmonton)**  
**Senior Advisor, ALAR Strategy Group**

"While the pandemic has laid bare many uncomfortable truths and exposed our society's deep vulnerabilities (the plight of seniors in care homes, the precariousness of jobs, social and economic inequalities, homelessness, poverty, systemic racism and mental health), it has also shown that Canada has the capacity and ability to wrestle big challenges. The question is, are we willing to harness our collective energy and wisdom to tackle them."





**Amina Yasin (Vancouver)**  
**Planning Commissioner, City of Vancouver**

“Accessible and functional infrastructure such as balconies are the amenity heroes of this pandemic. We can no longer afford to view accessibility as an afterthought and as negotiable design features. These are human rights issues in a pandemic accelerated future.”



**Andrea Reimer (Vancouver)**  
**Founder and Principal, Tawaw Strategies**

“This past year has really shown the consequences of starving cities of the money, power and respect they need to support strong and healthy communities.”



**Andres Penalozza (Vancouver)**  
**Research Assistant, Housing Research Collaborative**

“I think the last year taught us just how resilient we can be as a society if we find opportunities to learn and innovate during difficult times. When mobility become a noticeable challenge during lockdown, we saw a significant rise in the public’s interest on sustainable mobility that led many governments to seize the opportunity to implement policies to encourage this behaviour further after the pandemic – Paris being one of the most prolific examples of that. The pandemic also revealed how our governments’ priorities were failing to reduce inequalities but thankfully we have seen a shift to prioritize affordable and supportive housing.”



**Arielle Kayabaga (London)**  
**City Councillor, City of London**

“Now more than ever we need to reform our policies to make our country truly resilient and protect all our communities from similar COVID19 impacts on our socio, environmental and economic well being.”



**Beth Gignac (Calgary)**  
**Vice President & COO, United Way of Calgary and Area**

“My most important learning has been that people are resilient, over a short-haul, but our systems are barely resilient at all – and, certainly are not resilient enough for ALL of us.”



**Brian Kelcey (Winnipeg)**  
**Founder, State of the City, Inc.**

“In Year 1 of COVID, I learned that within the broader Canadian public policy community, the casual misunderstanding of what local governments do – and how they can do it – goes a lot deeper than I thought.”



**Carol Coletta (Memphis)**  
**President and CEO, Memphis River Parks Partnership**

"Leaders show up."



**Carolyn Whitzman (Ottawa)**  
**Adjunct Professor, Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics, University of Ottawa**

"The main thing I learned in relation to housing policy is that we have to stop counting new "affordable" units and start counting net loss of affordable homes as our basis measure of success."



**Catherine Craig-St-Louis (Gatineau)**  
**Coordonnatrice de projets, Rues principals**

"Durant la dernière année, en tant qu'urbaniste, j'ai reconnu l'importance de faire confiance à la fois à mon instinct et à la nécessité de mettre mon propre point de vue en perspective, afin de créer de meilleurs processus au sein de meilleurs projets."



**Catherine McKenney (Ottawa)**  
**City Councillor, City of Ottawa**

"Over the past year it has become exceedingly clear that we need to reclaim public space for people in our cities so that there are safe and comfortable places for gathering and commuting with each other."



**Chandra Sharma (Niagara)**  
**Chief Administrative Officer/Secretary-Treasurer, Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority (NPCA)**

"That the distribution of publicly accessible greenspace in urban areas is a critical need from a public health perspective. That the work of local conservation agencies such as conservation authorities is becoming critical during a crisis such as COVID pandemic or climate impacts."



**Charles Montgomery (Vancouver)**  
**Principal, Happy City**

"During the last year we learned that when we all feel a sense of urgency, cities can move quickly to create healthier and more inclusive places."



**Charlie Clark (Saskatoon)**

**Mayor, City of Saskatoon**

"We can achieve much more than we imagine, especially in crisis, by putting trust and teambuilding at the center, finding the opportunity in uncertainty, and taking one day at a time."



**Chris Rickett (Toronto)**

**Director, Municipal and Stakeholder Relations, Valuation and Customer Relations, Municipal Property Assessment Corporation**

"The resilience and creativity of my public service colleagues in the face of adversity has been the biggest learning I've taken from the pandemic. Under pressure, governments have rapidly prototyped to solve challenges and I hope this reborn instinct continues as the new operating model for government."



**Cynthia Dorrington (Halifax)**

**President, Vale & Associates**

"Urbanization has a huge impact on society; thus city planners should collaborate with a diverse group of people who will bring different perspectives to the planning exercise thus enhancing the final outcome."



**Dane Williams (Toronto)**

**Co-founder, Black Urbanism Toronto**

"Trust and collaboration is essential to the development of our community spaces and the places we call home. Authentic community consultation and action cannot take place without trust from the community."



**Daniel Pearl (Montréal)**

**Founding Partner, L'Oeuf Architects**

"The hope I am getting from this year is simple: When forced to adjust, we can. And, it can happen in an incredibly short time-span, and so we need to stop solely focusing on magical technological and medical breakthroughs to reduce our ecological footprint and increase our resilience and simply tap into our greatest potential – our capacity to activate our own hopes and dreams through 'co-learning and local action,' wherever most appropriate and effective."



**Dave Harvey (Toronto)**

**Executive Director, Park People**

"The past year has reinforced so strongly that parks and green spaces are absolutely essential urban infrastructure, especially for underserved neighbourhoods, and must be far better entrenched in how we plan and support our communities."



**Doug Earl (Toronto)**

**Charter City Toronto**

“The pandemic has taught me that cities should have the codified and protected autonomy, authority and resources to quickly and nimbly go beyond emergency provincial measures, where necessary, on all critical matters related to disease prevention, including housing, proclaiming and enforcing public health measures and creating support mechanisms for the most vulnerable.”



**Ebrahim Varachia (San Francisco)**

**President and Co-Founder, Patronicity**

“The value of our public spaces cannot be taken for granted, as we’ve been sheltering the resilience of our communities have shown how we can adapt and the need for common space is integral to our wellbeing.”



**Elizabeth Ha (Windsor)**

**Equity Vice-President at the Ontario Federation of Labour**

“What I’ve learned over this past year is we all experienced the impact of a pandemic differently. We are more empathetic to others because we see how our government has failed to support and take care of our most vulnerable, families, working class people, low income families, migrant workers and essential workers. We, as a community, stayed strong. Even when we ourselves are struggling we took time to reach out to someone or help another person in some way.”



**Elliott Cappell (Toronto)**

**National Director, Climate Change, Resilience, & Sustainability, WSP in Canada**

“Shocks really are accelerators for trends in the urban system. Huge upticks in online retail; challenges to shelters; challenges to public finances; need for renewal of the housing stock – these were all percolating pre-pandemic, accelerated by it.”



**Enid Slack (Toronto)**

**Director, Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto**

“COVID-19 has shown just how much cities are on the frontline when it comes to delivering essential services, but they have limited sources of revenue to respond to the crisis.”



**Erin Chrusch (Calgary)**

**Senior Strategist, Office of the Mayor, City of Calgary**

“That we can get a lot done even under very challenging circumstances. We adapt, and even thrive, once we start focusing on what we CAN do instead of what we can’t.”



**Franc D'Ambrosio (Victoria)**

**Founding Principal, D'Ambrosio architecture + urbanism**

"I suppose the most significant thing I've noticed in the last year, is peoples' heightened awareness and sensitivity to the urban built environment. This has come with the hyper-awareness (for some verging on fear) of the physical presence and proximity of other people. Walking along street sidewalks, I at times notice people looking constricted as they approach each-other and then relieved as they encounter a widened sidewalk or a set-back façade. People seem to be discovering their own and the neighbourhoods of others, as well as urban open spaces."



**Graham Singh (Montréal)**

**Executive Director, Trinity Centres Foundation**

"This year, the most important thing I have learned is that bringing a heritage building into tomorrow's urban plan has no shortcuts – the painstaking work of studies, listening and raising capital is often more than any group of charities can muster. Cities-sized solutions need city-wide planning!"



**Hazel Borys (Winnipeg)**

**CEO, PlaceMakers**

"Parsing the work of recovery while safeguarding wellbeing is essential, so local governments must look for the biggest little thing they can do, and change policy and regulations to let the pivot happen ASAP."



**Howaida Hassan (Edmonton)**

**General Supervisor, Urban Growth and Open Space Strategy, Urban Form and Corporate Strategic Development, City of Edmonton**

"Cities have the ability to greatly influence and shape the physical and mental health of their residents. This year cities responded with temporary mass shelters for those experiencing homelessness, converted underused road space to walking and biking trails, amped up the cleaning protocols on transit, and provided transit service helping to connect essential workers to their jobs – even as transit was challenged with massive declines in ridership. Any one of these initiatives on its own would have been a major feat under regular circumstances but we have shown we can accomplish amazing things even under great strain."



**Isla Tanaka (Edmonton)**

**Winter City Planner, City of Edmonton**

"I've learned that the work and focus Edmonton has put into winter over the past 8 years has paid off – beginning with warming elements, an expanded bike network, increased skiing and skating trails, and new park buildings designed with winter in mind, we've put in place the facilities and amenities for our residents to easily enjoy being outside this winter in a physically distanced, safe way."



**Jane Farrow (Toronto)**

**Principle and Founder, Dept of Words and Deeds**

"#1 lesson COVID has taught me is to slow the fuck down – to look up more often, and enjoy the clouds, the snow, the blue sky or the rain – because the journey is the destination."





**Janine Theobald (Victoria)**  
**Inclusion & Collaboration Manager,**  
**Greater Victoria Coalition to End**  
**Homelessness**

“Closing communications loops, and clearly defining roles and responsibilities, are paramount to effective and successful community collaboration in response to any challenge, including unprecedented ones.”



**Janna Levitt (Toronto)**  
**Partner, LGA Architectural Partners**

“Covid revealed to me, in a real not theoretical way, how extraordinarily complex people’s response to a crisis can be and how this influences, in aggregate, the course of a day on matters small and large.”



**Jason Robbins (Winnipeg)**  
**Principal Architect, JC Robbins**  
**Architecture**

“Design professionals have a greater role to play in the built environment than we currently take responsibility for because we are caught in the trap of design to program and budget, rather than designing for public health, safety and security.”



**Jason Syvixay (Edmonton)**  
**Principal Planner, Development and Zoning**  
**Services, Urban Form and Corporate**  
**Strategic Development, City of Edmonton**

“Across the country, cities are transforming their urban spaces both temporary and permanently – creating civic commons – places to be informed, to discuss ideas, to formulate solutions, to participate, to network, and to test opportunities. Cities need to foster a civic-minded culture that balances the voices of the loudest and quietest people in the city; prioritizes and engagement between builders, developers, architects and impacted residents; and explicitly encourages its decision-makers to dive into urban debate and discussion, not shy away from them.”



**Jay Pitter (Toronto)**  
**International placemaker, author**

“During this time, I’ve experienced and witnessed soul-crushing loss. I shrieked like a small animal caught in a snare while watching on Zoom as a friend and her baby were buried. Three days later, a young man I collaborated with on a Confederate monument project site transformation drowned. Less than two weeks ago, a beloved friend and colleague from Charlotte, who’d buried his aunt and brother within the same week, died. And so, through the expression of my own grief, I’m deepening my approaches to designing and programming public spaces that will enable us to process our collective COVID-19 grief, and by extension, create healing and joy.”



**Jeff Hebert (New York)**  
**President, HR&A Advisors, Inc.**

“What the COVID response and the recovery underway has highlighted for me is the importance of leadership and institutional capacity to be flexible in adapting to meet the direct needs of communities. Governments, NGOs, and charities need to be nimble in order to respond and self-aware enough to realize off the shelf policies and programs may not work.”



**Jeff Lehman (Barrie)**  
**Mayor, City of Barrie**

"The most important thing I've learned is that the unwritten contract between government and the people that dictates the ability to mobilize collective action depends not on the severity of the threat or challenge being faced, but how effectively both the threat and the necessary collective response is communicated. The second most important thing I've learned is that government, when given a social license due to crisis to innovate and potentially fail, can become less risk averse and much more agile - a very good thing, that it would be wonderful to maintain after COVID."



**Jim Watson (Ottawa)**  
**Mayor, City of Ottawa**

"Despite the many challenges and loss of life in the face of COVID-19, I've witnessed the best in most residents when it comes to helping a neighbour, a stranger or a small business struggling in a time of great need."



**Joe Salmon (Vancouver)**  
**Student**

"The biggest thing I've learned in the past year is the importance of paying attention to myself."



**John Jung (Toronto)**  
**Chairman & Co-Founder, Intelligent Community Forum**

"People and organizations have been forced to change their lives and in many cases have moved their plans forward by as much as 10 years due to the pandemic. But these decisions have not been equitable. Businesses, educational institutions and even at home online practices, if available, have been forced to change due to the crisis. They will likely remain and expand in a post-COVID19 world. Of course this is only possible with accessible and affordable high speed broadband, especially in rural and remote communities and disadvantaged pockets within urban areas."



**John Tory (Toronto)**  
**Mayor, City of Toronto**

"I have learned we, as the City government, really can move much faster to get things done to support residents and business, such as through programs like CafeTO, and that we will continue to do that going forward, once we are on the other side of this pandemic."



**Josh Fullan (Toronto)**  
**Director, Maximum City**

"COVID has generated tangible opportunities to improve the lives of all children and youth in Canadian cities, and one of the fastest ways to do this is to make streets and sidewalks safer and more child-friendly since we now know that this is where kids, and especially kids without private yards, spend a lot of their outdoor time. Parks and playground are important but the pandemic reminded us that making streets and sidewalks quality places for play, movement and interaction is a health and equity power move."



**Judith Veresuk (Regina)**  
**Executive Director, Regina Downtown Business Improvement District**

"One of the things I've learned this year is that calm, clear, consistent communication goes a long way to providing reassurance, calming fears and inspiring confidence."



**Judy Morgan (Toronto)**  
**360 Collective**

"The most important thing I've learned over the past year is that it is possible for the public sector to be innovative, responsive and fast moving when faced with a crisis. The hope is that this experience carries forward to times when a crisis is not the motivator, and that we can still embrace experimentation and "in-flight" corrections and overcome fear of failure (and bad media associated with failure)."



**Julianna Charchun (Edmonton)**  
**Chief of Staff, Office of the Mayor, City of Edmonton**

"Governing is never what you thought it was going to be; the work is to find a way to still be the leader you planned to be while doing what is needed, not necessarily what you planned."



**Karen Gosbee (Calgary)**  
**Mental Health Advocate**

"Groups thrive when you achieve collective action for the common good, it takes a lot of time to establish a coalition based on trust and when you do, it pays off in spades."



**Kate Fenske (Winnipeg)**  
**CEO, Downtown Winnipeg BIZ**

"Even when things get chaotic, it's best to take a step back and give your brain time and space to consider all the options. The right answer will come."



**Kelly Paleczny (London)**  
**General Manager, London Transit Commission**

"During a crisis, decisions need to be considered not only in the current context, but also in terms of the longer term impacts and outcomes that will result."



**Ken Bautista (Edmonton)**  
**Partner, Makespace Group and Co-Founder of Startup Edmonton**

"That the pandemic has fully exposed city building and real estate development models that were already breaking down. So the answer isn't trying to get back to what we were doing before, but using this as an opportunity to create the freedom and speed in our cities that turn ideas into action that move us forward."



**Kevin Narraway (Port Hope)**  
**Manager, Marketing and Tourism, Municipality of Port Hope**

"Even the most prepared communities are vulnerable to global disruption as we live in an interconnected world where a ripple on one side of the planet can cause a tsunami on the other side."



**Kourosh Rad (Halifax)**  
**Urbanist & Owner, Garden Food Bar**

"We have been moving fast and breaking things for far too long. We were due for a long period of reflection to rethink, strategize and build back better."



**Laura Tamblyn Watts (Toronto)**  
**CEO, CanAge**

"Ageism is pervasive – during COVID19 it has taken military whistleblower reports, faces pressed against the glass in long-term care of people locked away from the rest of society, and death to get people talking about the way we treat seniors in Canada."



**Leilani Farha (Ottawa)**  
**Global Director, The Shift**

"There remains significant disconnect between the obvious and pivotal role decent housing plays in protecting against the virus and the commitment and collaboration of governments – through policies, legislation, and resource sharing – to ensure access to adequate, affordable housing for those most in need."



**Lisa Helps (Victoria)**  
**Mayor, City of Victoria**

"What I've learned over the past year is that the most important word is 'Thank you.' I've also learned that the only way around, through and over the massive obstacles that COVID-19 has presented to cities is deep, generous and unwavering collaboration, even when – and especially when – it feels difficult to do so."





**Margaret Pfoh (Vancouver)**  
**CEO, Aboriginal Housing Management Association**

“Our Indigenous peoples truly deserve solutions led by Indigenous peoples.”



**Marianne Meed Ward (Burlington)**  
**Mayor, City of Burlington**

“The most important thing I have learned throughout the past year as we have dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic is that it’s essential to provide accurate, timely, two-way communications with residents and with our community, business leaders and government partners so we can all work together to keep our community safe and prepare for recovery post-COVID.”



**Mark Garner (Toronto)**  
**COO and Executive Director, Downtown Yonge Business Improvement Area**

“What I have learned over the last year is how fragile our neighbourhood economy is, its health and wellness plays a significant role in all urban environments.”



**Meghan Winters (Vancouver)**  
**Associate Professor, Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University & Researchers, Centre for Hip Health and Mobility, Vancouver Coastal Health Research Institute**

“What I’ve really learned in the past year is just how fast cities can pivot with policies, investments, and supports – when they decide to do so. Whether it has been in terms of street reallocations, public space investment, business supports – we’ve seen funds redirected, application processes streamlined, plans that in another time would have taken years are implemented within weeks – start to finish. It’s been good to know cities can be nimble and flexible. We’ll need this.”



**Michael Mori (Toronto)**  
**Artistic and General Director, Tapestry Opera**

“Letting go allows you to move forward and find productive solutions – waiting is not a solution, it’s a measure.”



**Michael Shuman (New York)**  
**Director, Local Economy Projects, Neighbourhood Associates Corporation**

“COVID has proven to me that there’s a growing interest – indeed, a hunger – by people to move their money from Wall Street back into local people, projects, and businesses.”



**Micheal Vonn (Vancouver)**

**CEO, PHS Community Services Society**

“The most important thing I’ve learned this year is the power of radical pragmatism.”



**Mitchell Reardon (Vancouver)**

**Lead, Urban Planning, Design & Experiments, Happy City**

“In a year where the benefits of public space and the disparities of racial and social inequality were laid bare, the most important thing I learned is that urban designs are only as strong as the inclusive processes through which they were created.”



**Mohamed Lachemi (Toronto)**

**President and Vice Chancellor, Ryerson University**

“The most important thing I have learned this year is the power of resilience; Ryerson University’s leaders, faculty, staff and students have all shown incredible resilience in the face of constantly evolving information, circumstances and expectations and it is that resilience that has helped us to find opportunities to thrive and succeed in the last year.”



**Nigel Jacob (Boston)**

**Co-Chair/Co-Founder, Mayor’s Office of New Urban Mechanics**

“Over the past year, the most important thing that we have learned is that local government has to find new ways to collaborate with Community-Based Organizations in solving local neighbourhood challenges.”



**Nneka Otagbolu (Edmonton)**

**Director Communications and Equity Strategy, Edmonton Community Foundations**

“The COVID-19 pandemic is not the great equalizer it was thought to be at the beginning of the pandemic, equity-seeking communities were the worst hit, and in the past year, I have seen and learned from the resilience and strength shown in the support of these communities by Edmontonians. I have never been prouder!”



**Noreen Kassam (Burnaby)**

**Director of Finance, City of Burnaby**

“A local government’s primary source of revenue remains property taxation. Municipal Finance Reform is required to ensure sustainable, predictable and reliable funding tools to address the increasing financial pressures upon local government.”



**Patrick Brown (Brampton)**  
**Mayor, City of Brampton**

"Healthcare infrastructure is inadequate in high growth urban Canada & it creates two tier and unequal healthcare capacity in Canada."



**Patrick Sullivan (Halifax)**  
**President and CEO, Halifax Chamber of Commerce**

"We need to work together to get through this pandemic and that includes, the private sector, the public sectors at the federal, provincial and municipal levels, not for profits and all organizations. We can't survive this by operating as an individual, we need to work as a group."



**Patti Pon (Calgary)**  
**President and CEO, Calgary Arts Development**

"What we learned is that our current systems are not set up to support self-employed artists and gig workers, and yet people are leaning on and needing the arts now more than ever for all the reasons that arts are always important - to feel connected, to lift our spirits, to engage socially, and for our own mental health and self-care. What we need are programs that recognize the value of artists and art workers and provide ongoing support for them."



**Paul Takala (Hamilton)**  
**Chief Librarian and CEO, Hamilton Public Library**

"If you want to make a positive difference during a major crisis, do not wait to be told what to do, find useful actions that align with your broad mission and take action."



**Rami Bebawi (Montréal)**  
**Partner and Co-Founder, KANVA**

"The single most important thing I have learned is that we forget. We forget to understand and to take time in addressing the origin of our collective challenge. We forget that our human actions cause destruction of habitats leading to greater suffering of other living species, causing them to come closer to cities to survive, and thus increasing more potential viral infections onto humans. And by forgetting, we prevent needed change."



**Ratna Omidvar (Toronto)**  
**Independent Senator for Ontario**

"The pandemic has clearly illustrated the importance that essential workers, many who are immigrants residing in our cities, have kept us safe and fed while often putting themselves in harm's way. Let's not just say thanks, but back it up with real and lasting changes to give these workers the respect they deserve. They stepped up for us, it is now time that we step up for them. Their essential work must be compensated by essential pay."



**Rebecca Alty (Yellowknife)**  
**Mayor, City of Yellowknife**

"Focus on making the best decisions with the information that you have available, and update what you're doing, if/as the information changes."



**Richard Albert (Austin)**  
**Professor of World Constitutions, University of Texas at Austin**

"The previous year has made one thing clear: solving our biggest problems requires coordination, data-driven decision making, and advance planning – three essential actions that our elected and appointed leaders must perform much better going forward."



**Rob Miyashiro (Lethbridge)**  
**Executive Director, Lethbridge Senior Citizens Organization**

"The most important thing I learned over the past year is that, when necessary, our communities will fully collaborate to provide vital services for those in need in a sustainable manner."



**Roger Keil (Toronto)**  
**Professor, Faculty of Environment and Urban Change, York University**

"Since COVID-19 exposed and most affected the social, spatial and institutional peripheries of our urban society, we are compelled to make the protection of these marginalized communities the centrepiece of our future pandemic preparation – which must start now!"



**Rupen Seoni (Toronto)**  
**Senior Vice President & Practice Leader, Environics Analytics**

"Crisis focuses the mind and spurs innovation."



**Sadhu Aufochs Johnston (Vancouver)**  
**Former City Manager, City of Vancouver**

"The collaboration and alignment between municipalities across a region and across the country is critical to addressing COVID and the other challenges that urban communities are facing."





**Sarah Blyth (Vancouver)**  
**Executive Director, Overdose Prevention Society**

“Again its resilience of the people in the DTES and if you want something done you have to just do it.”



**Sheena Jardine-Olade (Ottawa)**  
**Manager, Strategic Initiatives at Canadian Institute of Planners**

“With recognition and desire to rebuild what the pandemic revealed to be a broken and inequitable system, we can now create stronger foundations built on the principles of access, safety and inclusion.”



**Shelby Ch'ng (Thunder Bay)**  
**City Councillor, City of Thunder Bay**

“One thing that has become apparent is the need for better public education regarding the role of municipal council. With anxiety and fears looming, it's been difficult to educate and calm fears of the public while essentially being the front line elected officials.”



**Shirley Blumberg (Toronto)**  
**Partner, KPMB Architects**

“Public health crises have precipitated radical changes to the design of cities over the last two centuries - architects and city planners are once again called on to imagine our new world anew.”



**Shoshanna Saxe (Toronto)**  
**Assistant Professor, Department of Civil and Mineral Engineering, University of Toronto**  
**Canada Research Chair in Sustainable Infrastructure**

“The most important thing I have learned this year is how quickly change is possible if/when we are willing to try (e.g. urban bike lanes, repurposing of existing space and infrastructure for new uses).”



**Siri Agrell (Toronto)**

**Author**  
 “People are amazing. Systems suck.”



**Stephanie Allen (Vancouver)**  
**Associate Vice-President of Strategic Business Operations and Performance, BC Housing**

"That Canada's race-avoidant (also known as "colour blind") approach to policy-making has exacerbated the devastating impacts felt by racialized communities with the federal and provincial responses continuing to fail their needs during the formulation of the response."



**Stephanie Cadieux (Surrey)**  
**BC Liberal Member of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia**

"People with disabilities have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, but government support programs across the board have largely ignored and even further marginalized this group."



**Stephen Willis (Ottawa)**  
**General Manager, Planning, Infrastructure & Economic Development, City of Ottawa**

"The approach to economic recovery is iterative, constantly evolving, and best informed by organizations and economic development partners representing the business community."



**Ted Howard (Washington)**  
**President, The Democracy Collaborative**

"In order to meet the enormous challenge of the ongoing and cascading economic effects of the pandemic, we will need big, systemic interventions, on par with those of the New Deal of the 1930s, not only to 'reopen the economy' but to do so in a way that makes workers and families whole, strengthens communities, and addresses the deep and long-standing structural inequities that COVID has revealed."



**Thom Mahler (Calgary)**  
**Manager, Urban strategy and Downtown Strategy Program Lead, City of Calgary**

"That the public is eager for change in the way our downtown is built and operates to ensure vibrancy in light of the trends that have been accelerated due to COVID – a new type of downtown is needed to address the reality of fewer employees and a significant reduction in business travel."



**Tim Jones (Toronto)**  
**CEO, Artscape**

"Even as it has torn the world as we knew it apart, the pandemic has created infinite opportunities to re-think everything including culture and to step up our leadership in empowering creators to lead the renewal."



**Timothy Papandreou (San Francisco)**  
**Founder, Emerging Transport Advisors**

"'Back to Normal' was awful for so many people, for our cities and our transport systems and it's time for a new inclusive society centered on equity."



**Vicki Saunders (Toronto)**  
**Founder, SheEO, Inc.**

"The old systems and structures are dramatically failing us and the path to a more equitable world requires deconditioning ourselves so we can dream in a new world. We witnessed business, government and organizations do things radically differently. The door is open to a whole new world."



**Will Prosper (Montréal)**  
**Co-Founder, Hoodstock**

"We can't afford to push back social injustices, as inequalities will always worsen in times of crisis revealing the worst of us."



**Yasir Naqvi (Ottawa)**  
**CEO, Institute for Canadian Citizenship**

"The pandemic has revealed the true/incredible value of connected, inclusive, and supportive communities – and we must never forget it."



**Zahra Ebrahim (Toronto)**  
**CEO and Co-Founder, Monumental**

"The work of recovery moves quickly, and has the greatest impact when city officials dedicate \*some\* time to build trust (and understand institutional barriers) with groups who have historically had negative experiences with city-initiated changemaking efforts."



**Zita Cobb (Fogo Island)**  
**Founder and CEO, Shorefast**

"The work we all must do to reimagine the economy with communities at the centre is critical and overdue. The communities (real places where people work and live) that will survive and thrive coming out of the pandemic are those that prioritize creating local, place-based solutions to challenges and focus on building a resilient future based on their inherent assets."



**Zoë Bennett (Toronto)**  
**Student**

"I think I learned how to deal with my stresses and helped others with their stresses (including my brother)."



**Charles Blanc (Calgary)**  
**Artist, Sans façon**

"Changes in practice and design can happen and be embraced incredibly quickly – busy streets were closed off to traffic and became pedestrianized in a matter of weeks, entire office buildings emptied out replaced by home offices across neighbourhoods, etc- but the need for human connection beyond technology and design solutions prevails and we still long for mingling beyond our private spheres."



**Don Iveson (Edmonton)**  
**Mayor, City of Edmonton**

"Large-scale economic and social disruption like the COVID-19 pandemic is compounded by inequality, and without addressing inequality we undermine our resiliency and ability to bounce back. Energy transition will likely propel the next world-shifting disruption, and as we make this shift we must use the lessons we learned during this public health crisis and forge new commitments to fighting inequality. Otherwise, extremely difficult societal divisions, like the many we've confronted in the pandemic, may prove barriers to ecological imperatives we still must meet. "



**LaToya Cantrell (New Orleans)**  
**Mayor, City of New Orleans**

"You have to be willing to make decisions that may create short-term hardships but create lasting results – most notably the health and safety of our people. And that is ALWAYS the most important part of my job, and grounds me in my work."



**Shivani Chaudhry (New Delhi)**  
**Executive Director, Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN), India**

"Nothing, absolutely nothing, can be taken for granted. Count your blessings and deeply cherish everything and everyone in your life. At a professional level, the pandemic has emphasized that the mission I've devoted my life to – striving for everyone's right to live in safe and secure housing – is worthwhile, because adequate housing is essential for life."



**Ana Gonzalez Guerra (Ottawa)**  
**Co-Founder and Managing Director, Youth Climate Lab**

"To always check my privilege, biases and assumptions, and to prioritize taking care of myself."





**Robert Plitt (Calgary)**  
**Canadian Urban Institute**

"I learned just how soundly constructed my white male privilege is. It's shameful."



**Christopher Clacio (Winnipeg)**  
**Activist, Inter Civics Commons**

"The most important thing I have learned over the past year is how important and crucial it is for local municipal governments to have the proper channels and tools to receive feedback from their own citizens."



**Carl Weisbrod (New York)**  
**Senior Fellow, NYU Marron Institute of Urban Management**

"The most important thing I've learned is that equity is a matter of life and death."



**Colette Murphy (Toronto)**  
**CEO, Atkinson Foundation**

"Truly reciprocal relationships make a community wealthy even when resources are scarce."



**Ana Bailão (Toronto)**  
**Deputy Mayor, City of Toronto**

"Over the past year I have learned once again how important it is to face every challenge as an opportunity. This pandemic has been the biggest challenge of the last century but we have the opportunity to build back better."



**Janice Abbott (Vancouver)**  
**CEO, Atria Women's Resource Society**

"We've run out of time for incremental change and in fact, being satisfied with small social justice victories is what's led us to the hell we are in today. We need significant change and we need it now."



**Veronika Bylicki (Vancouver)**

**Executive Director & Co-Founder, CityHive**

"Although we cannot predict or truly be fully prepared for any unexpected reality, when we have strong trust, collaboration, shared purpose and communication channels in place, we're able to coordinate and make what is seemingly impossible possible, at & between every scale - the individual, organization, community, city, etc. The same will be needed as we dream to redesign and work to reimagine the systems of pre-pandemic days to a new post-pandemic, 'better-than-normal' reality."



**Danny Bridson (Stockholm)**

**Associate Partner, Mandaworks**

"The 'bad news' learned from the last year is that the future is far more unpredictable than I would hope, followed by the 'good news' that the essential aspects of our lives appear to be remarkably more resilient than I ever imagined."



## CANADIAN URBAN INSTITUTE (CUI) TEAM

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President & CEO

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Program Director

**Emily McGirr**  
Senior Planner

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## NOTES

1. The photos on the cover of this report are a sample of the hundreds of people who have spoken at CUI CityTalk events over the past year. You can learn directly from these and other inspiring city builders through the video recordings, transcriptions and summaries available online at [CityTalkCanada.ca](https://CityTalkCanada.ca).
2. The survey data cited throughout the report was provided in-kind by [Advanis](https://advanis.net). Advanis has collected results from 180,000 Canadians since March 2020 using a continuous survey via its [Tell City Hall / Ma Ville Écoute](https://advanis.net) program. Advanis collects race and ethnic data as well as city-level data. Results are freely available as a public service at [advanis.net/self-sponsored-studies](https://advanis.net/self-sponsored-studies). Acknowledgement with appreciation for this contribution is extended to many at Advanis, particularly Adriana Bernardino, Edward Zavertyaev, and Dominic Pelletier.



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