



**YUKON
REGION**

NOVEL CORONAVIRUS DISCUSSION PAPER

COVID-19 POLICY ANALYSIS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YUKON FIRST NATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In the late days of 2019 and the early ones of 2020, a new virus strain was beginning to emerge in international news reports. Very quickly, it became apparent that this novel strain of the coronavirus was a serious threat to public health and indeed in early spring the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic.

In March 2020, the government of Canada announced the first of many policies to guide, support and police Canadians during the pandemic through which we are now living. With Indigenous and other marginalized communities feeling the biggest impact of COVID-19, AFN Yukon has identified the need for a discussion paper to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the federal and territorial COVID-19 response, identify the gaps of that response as it relates to Yukon First Nations and discuss areas of potential growth for Yukon First Nations' internal governance structures.

This paper provides an overview of the pandemic globally, nationally, and territorially. It then provides an in-depth summary and analysis of federal and territorial funding and policy responses to the pandemic and the effects of those decisions on Yukon First Nations. Finally, informed by interviews with Yukon First Nations Chiefs and key staff, the paper provides recommendations to move forward in the “new normal” in which we find ourselves.

DATA FOR THE PAPER WAS COLLECTED FROM SOURCES INCLUDING:

- Federal webpages and communications
- Territorial legislation, webpages, and communications
- Phone interviews with Yukon First Nations Chiefs and key staff
- Online media reports
- Publicly available academic papers and think tank reports

SECTION 1: OVERVIEW OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

1. WORLDWIDE

In early January, 2020, officials in Wuhan, China, confirmed with the World Health Organization (WHO) dozens of cases of “viral pneumonia of an unknown cause.”¹ This was the first official report of what we now know is COVID-19, a novel strain of the coronavirus that causes respiratory sickness in infected patients. On March 11, WHO declared a pandemic and by November 2020, the virus has reached almost every country in the world² with over 48 million reported cases worldwide, a number that continues to grow.³

COVID-19 is a respiratory virus that results in no symptoms or mild symptoms in some patients to severe illness, hospitalization, and death in worst cases. It is currently understood that symptoms appear

¹ World Health Organization. *Timeline of WHO's response to COVID-19* (2020, June 29). <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/29-06-2020-covidtimeline>

² As of October 2020, only Kiribati, Micronesia, Nauru, North Korea, Palau, Samoa, Tonga, Turkmenistan, Tuvalu and Vanuatu had no reported COVID-19 cases, according to the WHO *Dashboard*.

³ World Health Organization. *WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard*. (2020, Oct 29). <https://covid19.who.int/>

between two and 14 days after exposure to the virus and according to the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) those symptoms could include:

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- Loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea⁴

Between January and March 2020, the world witnessed the spread of COVID-19 across the globe, first with rising cases in Wuhan, followed by Italy, Spain, and the United States.⁵ In this first wave of the pandemic, governmental response has tended to be to enact strict restrictions on gatherings, business openings, and physical proximity – commonly referred to as “lockdowns” – after which the virus will reach its peak and restrictions will begin to lessen. While not all jurisdictions have taken this approach – with notably exceptions being the United States and Sweden⁶ – it has been the predominant response and the one that provincial and territorial governments adopted in the spring of 2020 during the first wave of the virus.

In addition to the significant risks COVID-19 poses to worldwide health and the associated strain on healthcare systems, the pandemic has also caused the highest unemployment rates since the Great Depression in both Canada and the United States,⁷ and has resulted in some innovative public policy measures, including emergency measures for essential workers like grocery store workers, additional safety measures for offices and businesses, and municipal by-laws mandating face masks in public places.

2. CANADA

COVID-19 was first reported in Canada on January 25, 2020 when a man in his fifties was diagnosed with a presumptive case after travelling home to Toronto from Wuhan.⁸ From that date, cases continued to increase from travelers returning home, travelers visiting Canada and community spread within Canadian communities.

Throughout the spring Canadians saw escalating policy measures restricting travel, including:

- Advising against non-essential travel (March 13)

⁴ Centre for Disease Control and Prevention. *Symptoms of Coronavirus*. (2020, May 13). <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html>

⁵ World Health Organization. *Timeline of WHO's Response to COVID-19*.

⁶ Goodman, Peter S. (2020, July 7). Sweden Has Become the World's Cautionary Tale. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/business/sweden-economy-coronavirus.html>

⁷ Hannon, Paul. (2020, July 7). Unemployment Expected to Reach Highest Level Since Great Depression. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/unemployment-expected-to-reach-highest-level-since-great-depression-11594112400>

⁸ The Canadian Press. Coronavirus: Here's a timeline of COVID-19 cases in Canada. *Global News*. <https://globalnews.ca/news/6627505/coronavirus-covid-canada-timeline/>

- A ban on foreign nationals entering from all countries except the United States and a Canada-US border closure for non-essential travel (March 18)⁹
- Requiring – via an order under the Quarantine Act - international arrivals to self-isolate for 14 days (March 25)
- A requirement for all air travelers to wear masks while on planes (April 20)¹⁰

After consulting with provincial and territorial governments, the Canadian federal government decided on a decentralized pandemic response.¹¹ Rather than exacting the Emergencies Act, which would give the government authority to “prohibit travel, render essential services, regulate the supply of goods, and seize personal property,”¹² the Government of Canada is relying on each provincial and territorial government to create individual responses that take into account regional differences. One clear example of the regional differences is the Atlantic Bubble, in which the four Atlantic provinces restrict visitors, but residents can travel freely between the provinces.

The federal government did create a robust funding support envelope through the COVID-19 Emergency Response Act, which created the initial \$82 billion aid funding envelope and enabled the Liberal government to take emergency spending measures without Parliament approval for six months;¹³ since that Act was passed on March 18, it has been amended to adapt aid programs in response to the pressures individuals and businesses are facing due to the ongoing pandemic, as evidenced by the cumulative funding announcements detailed below.

An overview of federal support programs during the pandemic is provided below in the Federal and Territorial Pandemic Response – Funding Programs section, below.

Following the decentralized approach to the pandemic response, by mid-April, all provinces and territories across Canada had declared some form of state of emergency or public health emergency.¹⁴ By July, many jurisdictions relaxed restrictions across Canada, including:

- The opening of the Atlantic Travel Bubble: residents of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador and PEI are able to travel within the Atlantic provinces with no restrictions
- Ontario has moved into Phase 3 of their reopening plan, in which “nearly all businesses and public spaces will be able to gradually reopen...with public health and workplace safety restrictions in place”¹⁵
- Outdoor gatherings of up to 200 people were permitted in Alberta¹⁶

⁹ Government of Canada. *Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): Outbreak Update*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection.html?topic=tilelink#a4>

¹⁰ Government of Yukon. (2020, May 8) COVID-19 Public Update.

¹¹ Turnbull, Sarah. Majority of premiers oppose using Emergencies Act, after PM consults. CTV News. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/majority-of-premiers-oppose-using-emergencies-act-after-pm-consults-1.4891527>

¹² Turnbull, Sarah. (2020, April 10) Majority of premiers oppose using Emergencies Act, after PM consults. CTV News. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/majority-of-premiers-oppose-using-emergencies-act-after-pm-consults-1.4891527>

¹³ Harris, Kathleen. (2020, March 18) Trudeau unveils \$82B COVID-19 emergency response package for Canadians, businesses. CBC. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/economic-aid-package-coronavirus-1.5501037>

¹⁴ Dawson, Tyler. (2020, April 15) As the COVID-19 pandemic hit, provinces declared states of emergency. Now many are up for renewal. *National Post*. <https://nationalpost.com/news/provincial-states-of-emergencies-were-issued-a-month-ago-most-are-coming-up-for-renewal>

¹⁵ Government of Ontario. (2020, Jul 13) *A Framework for Reopening our Province: Stage 3*. <https://files.ontario.ca/mof-framework-reopening-province-stage-3-en-2020-07-13.pdf>

¹⁶ Government of Alberta. *Alberta's Relaunch Strategy*. <https://www.alberta.ca/alberta-relaunch-strategy.aspx#toc-2>. Accessed July 29, 2020.

- British Columbia is in Phase 3 of their reopening plan, which opens provincial parks to overnight camping, allows most businesses to open following public health restrictions, re-opens motion picture and television production¹⁷
- Residents of the three territories and British Columbia can enter and travel throughout Yukon without needing to self-isolate.¹⁸

As cases have begun to surge in Canada during the fall months, some restrictions have been re-enabled to continue to protect Canadians against the worst effects of the pandemic. For example, in October, the government of Alberta has restricted gatherings to 15 people in Calgary and Edmonton¹⁹ and hot spot cities in Ontario have moved back into Phase 2.²⁰

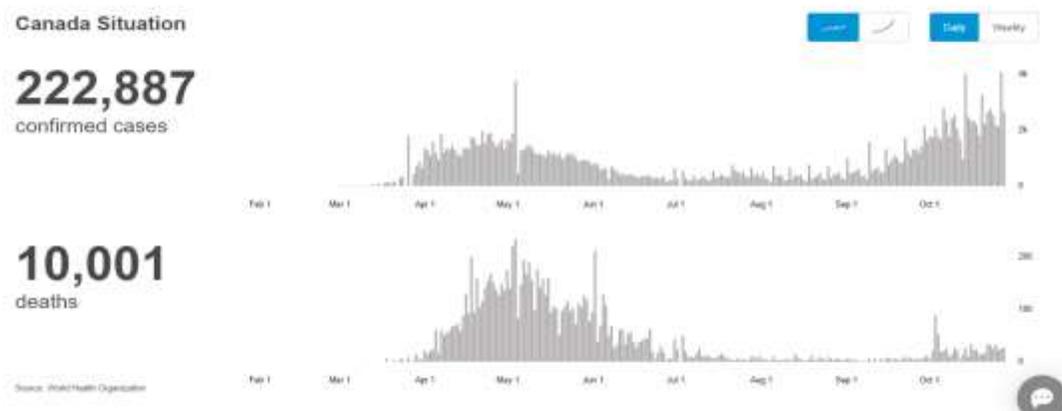


Figure 1 COVID-19 in Canada, as of October 29, 2020

3. YUKON

Yukon’s COVID-19 story has largely been a success, with only 23 cases, five of which occurred in October and 15 of which are recovered.²¹ The first case in the territory was announced by Yukon’s chief medical health officer on March 22²² and a state of emergency was declared on March 27 through the Civil Emergency Measures Act, which allowed the territorial government to, among other things:

- “protect people and property;
- maintain, clear and control the use of roads and streets;
- requisition or otherwise obtain and distribute accommodation, food, clothing and other services;
- provide and maintain water supplies, electrical power and sewage disposal;
- assist in the enforcement of law;

¹⁷ Government of British Columbia. (2020, July 29). *Phase 3 – BC’s Restart Plan*. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/covid-19-provincial-support/phase-3>

¹⁸ Travel Yukon. *COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Update*. <https://www.travelyukon.com/en/plan/travel-information/covid-19-coronavirus-update>

¹⁹ CBC News. (27 Oct 2020) Calgary and Edmonton’s new COVID-19 rules and guidelines: Your questions answered <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/faq-cohorts-gatherings-calgary-edmonton-alberta-covid-questions-1.5778697>

²⁰ Government of Ontario. (2020, October 16) Ontario Moving Additional Region to Modified Stage 2. <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/58842/ontario-moving-additional-region-to-modified-stage-2>

²¹ CBC News. (2020 October 26) 2 more COVID-19 cases in Watson Lake, Yukon. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/covid-19-yukon-watson-lake-1.5776922>; Government of Yukon. (2020, October 29) Yukon’s COVID-19 case count rises to 23. <https://yukon.ca/en/news/yukons-covid-19-case-count-rises-23>

²² The Canadian Press. (2020, March 22) Yukon sees its first two COVID-19 cases — a couple who recently visited the U.S. Global News. <https://globalnews.ca/news/6716692/yukon-first-cases-coronavirus-covid-19/>

- fight and prevent fires;
- protect the health, safety and welfare of local inhabitants; and,
- put into effect any civil emergency plans.”²³

The state of emergency has been extended twice, once on June 12 and again on September 9. In June, the Premier explained the decision was made to ensure the territory “would remain in a position to act quickly should action need to be taken regarding COVID-19.”²⁴ Yukon is now well into its recovery plan, Phase 2 of which started on July 2, 2020. This phase means:

- restaurants can provide dine-in services at 100% capacity if they can maintain physical distancing, as well as take-out
- personal services (e.g. hairdressers, nail salons) can re-open
- everyone must continue practicing public health recommendations (e.g. physical distance, hand washing, stay home if feeling sick, etc)
- people can gather indoors socially in groups of 10 or fewer people
- people can gather outdoors socially in groups of up to 50 people
- households can combine with 1 other household to form a two-household bubble

4. YUKON FIRST NATIONS

All 14 Yukon First Nations communities have had to endure the effects of COVID-19 and its accompanying restrictions. On March 24, the Assembly of First Nations joined the provinces and territories to declare a national emergency, calling for “increased resources and support to First Nations — based on needs and equity and stressing the need for specific consideration for northern, remote, and isolated communities.”²⁵ Like First Nations communities across Canada, Yukon First Nations struggle with resources and capacity in non-emergency situations, including access to funding supports and human resources capacity, making the effects of a pandemic potentially more dangerous as compared to non-Indigenous communities.

Yukon First Nations have received government funding to decrease the risk of COVID-19 to their communities and their citizens, as summarized in the next section of this paper. Importantly, they have also created community-led supports for their citizens, which underscore the need to include First Nations in all aspects of decision-making.²⁶ As the territorial and federal governments were making policy changes, Yukon First Nations needed to adapt to those changes and, at times, create their own governing policies to augment or clarify the policies – for example, declaring their own states of emergency to ensure compliance from their citizens.²⁷ Examples of these actions, as informed from community interviews, include:

- Creating community-led guidelines for visitors to traditional territories and settlement lands, or limiting access to settlement lands altogether

²³ Government of Yukon. (2020, March 27) Yukon declares state of emergency in response to COVID-19. <https://yukon.ca/en/news/yukon-declares-state-emergency-response-covid-19>

²⁴ Fortin, Gord. (2020, June 12). State of emergency in the Yukon extended 90 days as reopening continues. Yukon News. <https://www.yukon-news.com/news/state-of-emergency-in-the-yukon-extended-90-days/>

²⁵ Black, Meg. (2020, April 16) COVID-19 in Canada: Fears Mount That Indigenous Communities Could Be Left Behind. *Global Citizen*. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/covid-19-in-canada-indigenous-communities/>

²⁶ Community interview, July 2, 2020

²⁷ Community interview, July 8 and 23, 2020

- Ensuring access to food and supplies by ordering stockpiles for community use and providing access to country foods
- Providing economic support through rent payments, utility bills and providing one-time payments to citizens for unexpected costs.

The Council of Yukon First Nations (CYFN) has also been a leader for Yukon First Nations, providing both important public health information and communications for and about Yukon First Nations, as well as providing financial and program support. Some examples of CYFN actions include:

- Creating a comprehensive webpage dedicated to COVID-19 information locally, territorially and nationally²⁸
- Creating posters, infographics and other communications materials in Yukon First Nations Languages²⁹
- Created encouragement phrase posters in eight First Nations languages to help encourage individuals to follow public health guidelines, and tips on how to stay happy and healthy during the pandemic
- Co-chairing the Yukon Forum with the Yukon Government
- Provided \$15,000 worth of infant supplies to Yukon First Nation communities³⁰

The AFN Yukon team has also taken on a coordinating role during the pandemic response, and has been happy to

- Participate in and coordinate Yukon First Nation Chiefs' calls
- Gather and share information from a centralized location
- Participate in Indigenous Service Canada's (ISC) Northern Public Working Group on COVID-19
- Participate in the Yukon Forum with the Yukon Government.

²⁸ Council of Yukon First Nations. *Yukon First Nations COVID-19 Information Hub*. <https://www.cyfn.ca/covid-19/>. Accessed July 29, 2020

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Hong, Jackie. (2020, June 12). CYFN sends \$15k of infant supplies to the communities. *Yukon News*. <https://www.yukon-news.com/news/cyfn-sends-15k-of-infant-supplies-to-the-communities/>

5. FEDERAL AND TERRITORIAL PANDEMIC RESPONSE – FUNDING PROGRAMS

Both the federal government and the Yukon Territorial Governments announced funding programs to help support individuals and businesses during the pandemic. Here is a compiled list of the funding programs that are most relevant to Yukon and Yukon First Nations. The table is meant to provide a snapshot into the decision-making process for both the federal and territorial governments.

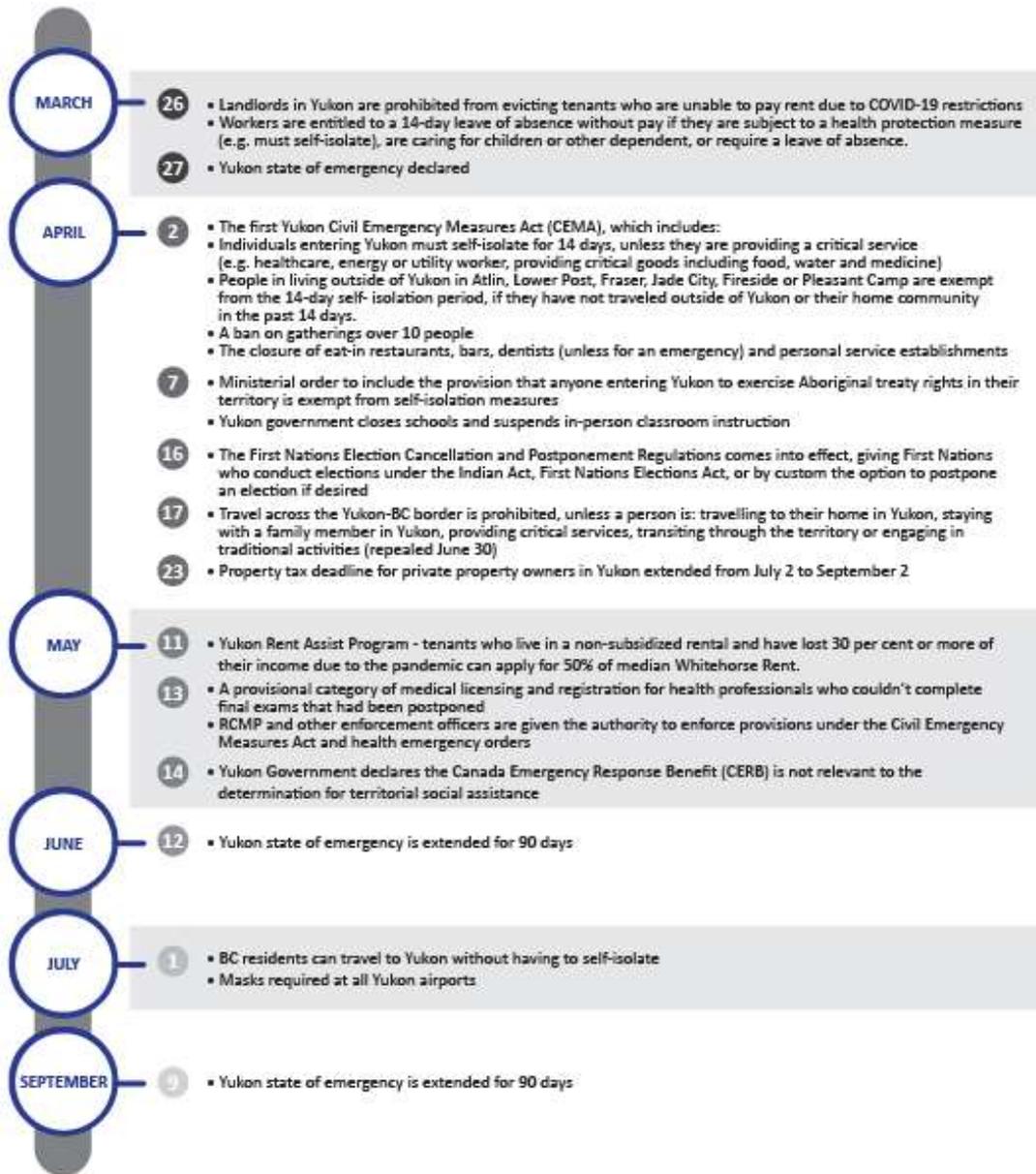
POLICY	DESCRIPTION	FUNDING NOTES
<p>Canada Economic Response Plan <i>(March 18, 2020)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in GST credit payment • Increase in Canadian Child Benefit payment • Extra time to file federal tax returns (June 1) • Mortgage payment deferral • \$3 billion in federal support for wage top-ups for low-income essential workers • One-time, tax-free payment of the Disability Tax Credit • Changes to the Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP) to allow more students to qualify for support and be eligible for greater amounts • Federal student loan repayments paused until September 30, 2020, interest-free. • One-time tax-free Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement payments • Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) - \$2,000 per month for people who have lost their jobs • Canada Emergency Student Benefit – \$1,250 per month to students for the months of May, June, July and August 	<p>Included the \$305M Indigenous Community Support Fund, which provided \$3.9M for Yukon First Nations (see Figure 2, below). Overall, the Indigenous Community Support Fund provides:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$215 million for First Nations: allocated to each First Nation based on population, remoteness and community well-being • \$45 million for Inuit, which will flow to each of the four land claims organizations through an allocation determined by the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami and regional Inuit land claims organizations • \$30 million for Métis Nation communities, which will flow through each of the Governing Members • \$15 million for Indigenous organizations and communities providing services to Indigenous peoples in urban centres or off reserve such as Friendship Centres, Métis Settlements General Council of Alberta and Métis in the Northwest Territories” • \$25 million additional funding for Nutrition North Canada (note: only Old Crow in Yukon is covered by NNC) <p>Economic response plan also includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$270 million additional funding to supplement the On-Reserve Income Assistance Program

POLICY	DESCRIPTION
Yukon Business Relief Program <i>(April 9)</i> <i>(Expanded on September 24, 2020)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grants for between 75% and 100% of fixed costs to a maximum of \$30,000 per month • Open to Yukon businesses; does not include governments, non-profits, religious organizations, finance and insurance, real estate, utilities, telecommunications and mines. • Eligible costs between March 23 to March 31, 2021
Canada Emergency Business Account <i>(April 9)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$40,000 interest-free loan available to small businesses and non-profit organizations. • To qualify, an organization must have paid between \$20,000 and \$1.5 million in payroll in the previous year • The loan is 25 percent forgivable if repaid by December 31, 2022
Federal Business Supports <i>(April 18)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$306.8M for small and medium-sized Indigenous businesses • Short-term, interest-free loans and grants for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis businesses • Additional support added to the Economic Response Plan
Yukon Essential Worker Income Program <i>(May 22)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporary financial support for lower-income workers providing “essential and critical services.” • Open to businesses, community societies or associations, and employers accessing the. • Wage top-up of either \$4 per hour for 40 hours/week or an amount that increases hourly pay to \$20 per hour.
Additional Support for Indigenous Communities <i>(Added to the Economic Response Plan on May 29)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$650M for Indigenous communities: • \$285.1 million to support “community-led responses...[and] targeted increases in primary health resources for First Nations communities.” • \$270 million to supplement the On-Reserve Income Assistance Program • \$44.8 million over five years to build 12 new shelters for Indigenous women and girls fleeing violence, two of which will be in the territories
Federal Support for Indigenous Businesses <i>(Added to the Economic Response Plan on June 11)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 133M to support Indigenous businesses • \$117M to small and community-owned Indigenous businesses • \$16M to the Indigenous tourism sector
Safe Restart Agreement <i>(July 16)</i>	\$19 billion in federal funding to support provinces and territories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase testing

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support contact tracing • Increase health system capacity including mental health supports • PPE procurement • Yukon received \$13.5 million
<p>Safe Return to Class Fund <i>(August 26)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$2 billion to support provinces and territories ensure the safety of students and school staff. • Yukon received \$4.16 million
<p>Tourism Accommodation Sector Supplement <i>(Added to the Yukon Business Relief Program on October 19)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$2.88 million of additional funding for the tourism sector.

6. FEDERAL AND TERRITORIAL PANDEMIC RESPONSE - POLICIES

In following the decentralized approach to a pandemic response, most of the applicable policies for Yukon First Nations have been enacted by the Government of Yukon. Here, we have compiled a non-exhaustive list of both federal and territorial legislation most relevant to Yukon First Nations and their citizens.³¹



³¹ From: Government of Yukon. (2020, July 29) *Legislation Changes for COVID-19*. <https://yukon.ca/en/health-and-wellness/covid-19-information/latest-updates-covid-19/legislation-changes-covid-19>; Government of Canada. (2020, April 16) Statement by the Minister of Indigenous Services on the First Nations Election Cancellation and Postponement Regulations (Prevention of Diseases) coming into effect. *Statement*; Fortin, Gord. (2020, May 13). YG announces help for renters during pandemic. Yukon News. <https://www.yukon-news.com/news/yg-announces-help-for-renters-during-pandemic/>; Government of Yukon. (2020, May 19) Government of Yukon offering support to families impacted by COVID-19. *News Release*.

SECTION 2: COVID-19 POLICY IMPACTS FOR YUKON FIRST NATIONS

7. OVERVIEW OF THE INCREASED BURDEN FROM COVID-19 ON INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN CANADA

Indigenous people in Canada are the fastest-growing demographic across the country. The most recent census from 2016 reaffirmed the findings of past censuses that “Aboriginal³² people are both young in age and growing in number.”³³ Since the 2006 census, the Aboriginal population had grown by 42.5%, which is “more than four times the growth rate of the non-Aboriginal population.”³⁴ At the same time, Indigenous communities continue to face issues of unequal access to healthcare, education and critical infrastructure, a fact that COVID-19 has only served to highlight.

COVID-19 has both shone a spotlight on and exacerbated those inequities in Indigenous communities. As the Yellowhead Institute, an Indigenous-led Canadian think-tank points out, the pandemic “lays bare the vast differences in people’s abilities to maintain physical and social distance across the country. The housing, water, community and health infrastructure deficits on First Nation reserves create ideal conditions for the transfer of viral infection.”³⁵ Many articles, op-eds and policy papers echo this same observation, noting the extreme discrepancy that exists between non-Indigenous, urban communities in Canada and Indigenous communities both on and off-reserve. These factors include:

- Difficulties associated with following public-health measures including maintaining a safe physical distance and hand-washing when Indigenous communities often lack access to clean water and safe housing
- The “convoluted relationship between different levels of government” that exists between First Nations, territorial and federal government agencies
- Access to reliable healthcare and the discrimination Indigenous people face when accessing healthcare
- Access to goods and services on reserves and in off-reserve rural and remote communities
- The disproportionate number of Indigenous people who are in care or incarcerated, and the impact that cancelled visits have on those families³⁶

There is also a historical reason for Indigenous communities to fear the effects of a pandemic. Not only have Indigenous communities across Canada been decimated by previous illnesses including smallpox as brought by the original colonizers and later tuberculosis, Indigenous communities were disproportionately affected by the H1N1 outbreak in 2009, where Indigenous people “made up just 4.3

³² In this case, the word Aboriginal is used to capture the legal federal meaning; for the purposes of this paper, Aboriginal and Indigenous should be considered interchangeable.

³³ Statistics Canada. *Aboriginal peoples in Canada: Key results from the 2016 Census*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025a-eng.htm>. Accessed July 29, 2020

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Pasternak, Shiri and Houle, Robert. (2020, April 9) No Such Thing As Natural Disasters: Infrastructure And The First Nation Fight Against COVID-19. *Yellowhead Institute*.

³⁶ See, variously: Starblanket, Gina and Hunt, Dallas. (2020, March 27) Indigenous communities and COVID-19: The virus may not discriminate, but responses to it do. *The Globe and Mail*; Pasternak and Houle; Carling, Amanda and Mankani, Insiya. (2020, June 9) Systemic Inequities Increase Covid-19 Risk for Indigenous People in Canada. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/09/systemic-inequities-increase-covid-19-risk-indigenous-people-canada>

percent of the population, but accounted for 27.8 percent of all hospital admissions, 26 percent of critically ill patients in intensive care units and 18 percent of deaths during the first wave of infections.”³⁷

The Canadian government has acknowledged the vulnerability of Indigenous communities during the pandemic, with the chief public health officer of Canada noting that “Indigenous communities are particularly at risk of “severe outcomes” related to COVID-19 because of poor access to health care and resources, higher rates of illness, and their often remote locations.”³⁸

Despite the fact that Indigenous communities were more at risk to the effects of the pandemic, out of the \$82 billion support initially announced by the government, only 0.003% of it was earmarked for Indigenous peoples.³⁹ It is for these reasons and more that it is imperative that First Nations governments and community leaders are included in pandemic response planning as the country shifts into planning for widespread re-opening and the response to the second wave of the virus.



Figure 2: Indigenous Community Support Fund Map

As one Yukon First Nation Chief put it: “What’s frustrating is that the COVID pandemic is much like mercury – it seeps into all of the cracks in our systems and once you step back it creates a mosaic of underfunding that communities have experienced.”⁴⁰

The following sections break down specific issues that Yukon First Nations face, and how the government response to the pandemic has affected community support.

³⁷ Palmater, Pamela. (2020, March 20) First Nations face specific risk factors that make them more vulnerable to COVID-19. We need a comprehensive pandemic prevention and response plan. *Policy Options*. <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/march-2020/priority-pandemic-response-needed-for-first-nations/>

³⁸ Saltman, Jennifer. (2020, June 12) Protecting communities, elders paramount for First Nations during COVID-19. *Vancouver Sun* <https://vancouversun.com/news/protecting-communities-elders-paramount-for-first-nations-during-covid-19>

³⁹ Pasternak and Houle

⁴⁰ Community interview, July 16, 2020

8. INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

One common response to the pandemic from countries and local governments was to close offices and schools and transition to digital work and learning environments. In Yukon, both territorial governments and Yukon First Nations adopted this approach, and on April 7 the territorial government suspended in-classroom learning. As a result of these policies, at-home internet use increased by fifty percent during daytime hours⁴¹ and internet access became a necessity for employees and students alike.

These public health decisions accelerated an issue that Yukoners already knew: the internet infrastructure throughout the territory is insufficient to support widespread use. Called the digital divide, this access to reliable internet is just one symptom of the infrastructure deficit that exists in First Nations communities. Currently, while 85.7% of Canadians have access to broadband, only 40% of those living in rural communities do,⁴² broadband services are “virtually non-existent in many communities,” and prices are higher for services where they do exist, as compared to southern Canada.⁴³

Northwestel, Yukon’s only telecommunications provider, has provided some support for Yukoners during the pandemic:

- Caps were removed on internet usage in communities serviced by cable internet in March
- Communities that receive satellite DSL service had usage caps increased by 50 per cent
- Communities that receive terrestrial DSL service received an extra 100GB per month⁴⁴

The Yukon Government stepped in to provide support as well, providing families with children in Kindergarten to Grade 12 with \$250 per student “to help offset costs” associated with at-home, online learning.⁴⁵

This emergency support, however, will not solve the perennial challenge that Yukoners and Yukon First Nations simply do not have access to the same essential service as those in southern, urban centres. A Yukon First Nation Chief shared that “we do not have access to technology or internet in the shape and form we require” to access online learning tools.⁴⁶ They went on to explain that while Yukon Government has largely worked with First Nations on policy solutions thus far, Yukon First Nations need “the same commitment from the Department of Education”⁴⁷ as they are getting from other government agencies, a sentiment that was shared by at least one other Yukon First Nation.⁴⁸ During the pandemic period, education is so closely linked with digital infrastructure and Yukon First Nations are requesting “an opportunity to drive a community-based approach”⁴⁹ to education, reopening and safety that works for their citizens.

⁴¹ Zingel, Avery. (2020, April 21) Petition calls for affordable internet in the North during pandemic. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/crtc-northwestel-northern-broadband-petition-1.5540285>

⁴² Government of Canada. Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission. *Broadband Fund. Closing the Digital Divide in Canada*. <https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/internet/internet.htm>. Accessed July 29, 2020

⁴³ Statistics Canada. (2018, October 2) *Yukon: Beautiful, Complex and Changing*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/11-631-x2018006-eng.htm>

⁴⁴ CBC News. (2020, April 20) Northwestel to waive internet overage fees through May for some customers. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/northwestel-coverage-relief-may-1.5538511>

⁴⁵ Government of Yukon. (2020, May 19) Government of Yukon offering support to families impacted by COVID-19. *News Release*.

⁴⁶ Community interview, July 16, 2020

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Community interview, July 23, 2020

⁴⁹ Community interview, July 16, 2020

9. ECONOMY

In addition to the impacts on personal health and the strains on the worldwide healthcare system, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an enormous effect on the Canadian economy and will continue to have effects as it continues. These effects include:

- 3 million jobs lost
- At its peak, national employment rates fell 15.6 percent from pre-pandemic (February 2020) reporting
- The decline in GDP “is forecast to hit a staggering 25 per cent in annualized terms”
- An 8.2 percent contraction for the Canadian economy this year – the worst year on record
- Upwards of a 60 percent drop in household spending, with spending not forecasted to return to pre-pandemic levels until the second half of 2021⁵⁰

The federal response to the economic effects is the easiest to see and barring the health response has been the swiftest and most widespread. This response includes the \$82 billion COVID-19 Economic Response Fund, which was announced on March 18.

While some of these programs were undeniably helpful, others initially excluded First Nations. The Canada Emergency Business Account, for example, initially excluded many Indigenous businesses owners who did not qualify because they fell short of the \$50,000 minimum payroll requirement to be eligible.⁵¹ When the government later announced \$306.9 million available for small- and medium-sized Indigenous communities, they excluded municipalities and local governments from accessing that funding, which in turn excluded any businesses owned by First Nations governments and “inadvertently created critical gaps in support”.⁵² Had First Nations been included in decision-making, it is possible this oversight would have been corrected, freeing up essential financial support to Indigenous businesses earlier.

10. MINING

Yukon has been somewhat fortunate to have avoided the same macro-economic effects of the pandemic, with a recent Conference Board of Canada report finding that the territory’s economy is set to expand by nine percent this year and employment is projected to rise by 3.2 percent.⁵³ This territorial growth, however, is largely due to increased production in the mining sector, and individuals in the territory are facing “significant job losses in the arts, entertainment, and recreation sector and in the accommodation and food service industries.”⁵⁴ Notably, while the overall economy of the territory may increase from the mining industry, since none of those companies are Yukon-owned, this overall expansion obfuscates the real impact of the pandemic on locally-owned businesses.

That Yukon will benefit from an expansion in the territorial economy this year bolstered by the resource extraction (mining) industry is one of particular concern for Yukon First Nations whose Settlement Lands

⁵⁰ Conference Board of Canada. (2020, July 29) *COVID-19: Implications for Canada and the economic impact*. [https://www.conferenceboard.ca/\(X\(1\)S\(5vi2ggc0wbz3aqiijn2dzwg\)\)/insights/covid-19?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1](https://www.conferenceboard.ca/(X(1)S(5vi2ggc0wbz3aqiijn2dzwg))/insights/covid-19?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1); Conference Board of Canada. *Canadian Outlook Summary: Summer 2020*. <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/focus-areas/canadian-economics/canadian-outlook-summer2020>.

⁵¹ Black, Meg. COVID-19 in Canada: Fears Mount That Indigenous Communities Could Be Left Behind

⁵² Meloney, Nic. (2020, May 8) Federal COVID-19 Indigenous business relief still leaves 'critical gaps,' says financial organization. CBC News. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/covid-19-federal-funding-indigenous-businesses-1.5556381>

⁵³ Conference Board of Canada. (2020, June 18) *Shielded From the Worst: Territorial Snapshot, Yukon*. <https://www.conferenceboard.ca/focus-areas/canadian-economics/territorial-snapshot/yukon>

⁵⁴ Ibid

often include mining sites, roads and other supporting things like transmission lines. Within the territorial state of emergency, the government of Yukon restricted access into the Yukon Territory unless individuals were, along with three other specific exemptions, entering to “provide critical or essential services in Yukon or in the BC-Yukon border area,”⁵⁵ which included mining staff (although they were required to self-isolate for 14 days upon entry). Notably, in the Ministerial Order 2020/14 signed on April 2, which laid out self-isolation requirements and exemptions, there was no exemption for individuals travelling for traditional use. It was only on April 7 that Ministerial Order 2020/16 *Civil Emergency Measures Self-Isolation Exception for Traditional Activities (COVID-19) Order* was signed, which included self-isolation exemptions for traditional activities. The five-day delay represents a real policy gap that excluded the lived experiences of Yukon First Nations and the impacts of making policy from the colonial definition of essential services.

Because mine workers are exempted from some travel restrictions, First Nations have workers travelling through their communities, which can potentially put citizens at risk for infection. Proximity to mines has a material effect on communities during a pandemic. For example, despite remaining case-free throughout the pandemic, on July 3 Nunavut announced a potential presumptive case from the Mary River Mine, followed by two others, all from the mine site.⁵⁶ Luckily, the cases are restricted to the mine site and Nunavummiut staff are not working at the mine site, meaning the disease has not spread; in October Nunavut remains the only place in Canada with no confirmed cases. These presumptive cases highlight that mine workers travelling to and around First Nations communities expose those communities to greater risk. A media report on global proximity to mine sites found that in one instance four people were killed “in local communities as a result of transmission from mining workers, according to the data. All four cases were connected to Canadian-owned mining operations — one in Ecuador and one in Canada — and all four people who died belonged to Indigenous communities.”⁵⁷ These two examples show how crucial it is for territorial governments to include First Nations in decision-making, since those communities are the most at risk for impacts of the disease. Since COVID-19 has had such wide-ranging effects on the global economy, for the Yukon Government this means specifically involving Yukon First Nations in policy conversations for resource development issues, as they can have potentially disastrous consequences for Nations.

11. TOURISM, RECREATION AND SERVICE

While the mining industry has been protected as an essential service, the tourism, recreation, and food service industries in Yukon have seen extreme declines during the pandemic. The tourism industry, in particular, is projected to face the biggest economic impact from the pandemic, with upwards of a 96% decline in operations this year and job losses ranging from 2,000 to 2,600.⁵⁸ Although the public health policy guidelines are crucial to maintaining the health of Yukon residents, additional supports are required to support this crucial industry. Indigenous tourism experts have developed proposed solutions to support this crucial industry, including:

- Extending relief money into 2021

⁵⁵ Ministerial Order 2020/19: Civil Emergency Measures Act. (April 17, 2020). Retrieved from the Government of Yukon website: <https://yukon.ca/sites/yukon.ca/files/ministerial-order-2020-19-civil-emergency-measures-border-control-measures-covid-19-order.pdf>

⁵⁶ Deuling, Meagan. (2020, July 15) Nunavut’s presumptive COVID-19 cases linked to a gathering in the south. *Nunatsiaq News*. <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/nunavuts-presumptive-covid-19-cases-linked-to-a-gathering-in-the-south/>

⁵⁷ Jones, Alexandra Mae. (2020, June 2) New report details spread of COVID-19 through global mining industry. *CTV News*. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/new-report-details-spread-of-covid-19-through-global-mining-industry-1.4966770>

⁵⁸ Windeyer, Chris. (2020, June 19) Yukon tourism industry faces grim outlook because of COVID-19, report suggests. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/covid-19-grim-season-yukon-tourism-1.5618279>

- Provide a tax deduction to southern Canadians travelling to the north
- Increasing communications between tourism businesses to ensure a coordinated response, taking into account territorial and First Nations communities' travel restrictions⁵⁹

In addition, the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada is lobbying for “\$20-30 million in short-term grants for tourism companies, combined with a further \$557 million in long-term lending offered through Indigenous financial institutions.”⁶⁰

Despite the need to support the tourism industry, however, there is also the need to protect First Nations communities both from overuse as well as from travelers coming in and inadvertently spreading the virus. On July 13, 2020, Kwanlin Dün and Ta’an Kwäch’än Nations released a press statement asking people to refrain from using their traditional territories. The joint press release calls on visitors to “support efforts to protect and preserve the cultural and environmental integrity of First Nation Settlement Lands.”⁶¹ The Nations recognize their lands are a destination for Yukoners and travelers to get on the land and participate in outdoor recreation activities, but asks people “to refrain from using Settlement Land sites in order to allow the land, water, and wildlife populations time to heal.”⁶² Especially for those Nations with lands along the Alaska Highway or close to urban centres like Whitehorse, this pressure from outside travelers is keenly felt.

First Nations have been stewards of their lands for thousands of years and know these lands best. As the world continues to monitor the pandemic and the increase in cases throughout the fall, there will need to be policy decisions made outlining proper use of the land, enforcement of those policies, and at what point travel restrictions may need to be tightened once again. As leaders in the tourism sector, First Nations are best suited to balance land protection with economic needs and, as such, must be equal partners when discussing tourism options for the current season and beyond.

12. HEALTH AND SAFETY

Thankfully, Yukon so far has been spared a significant COVID-19 outbreak, with only a small number of cases and almost all those cases recovered. The spotlight on health services has, though, highlighted some systemic issues that exist within health and safety that exist for Yukon First Nations across the territory.

As one Yukon First Nation Chief explained, some of the policy supports that were put in place to help to address pandemic-related challenges created some unexpected health and safety challenges for First Nations. For example, the territorial legislation that helped protect renters during the pandemic if under a public health order – for example, having lost their job during the pandemic, or caring for someone who had – exposed a gap around enforcing other pandemic-related requirements. With some RCMP members redeployed to enforce border controls, First Nations communities had limited enforcement ability to ensure community members were following public health guidelines like limits on gatherings (parties) and travel (inviting out-of-territory guests).⁶³ This one example shows the unintended consequences of

⁵⁹ Last, John. (2020, June 6). 6 experts' advice for saving the northern tourism industry. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/experts-tourism-advice-north-1.5600575>

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Ta’an Kwäch’än Council and Kwanlin Dün First Nation. (2020, July 13) *Press Release*. <https://www.kwanlindun.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2019-07-09-Joint-PR-Settlement-Lands-DRAFT-005-002.pdf>

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ Community interview, July 2, 2020

policies on communities that have been chronically underfunded and require health and safety supports year-round, not simply during emergency situations.

Yukon First Nations have also reported that their communities have experienced an increase in substance abuse, at least partly tied to the influx of money that has been sent to the communities with citizens accessing programs like CERB, but without any opportunity to spend that money constructively and with chronically underfunded social supports.⁶⁴ In this, the pandemic response has again created unintended consequence that serve to exacerbate challenges First Nations are already facing. Rather than focusing on one-time supports, it will be important in the future for the federal and territorial governments alike to work with Yukon First Nations to develop holistic solutions to systemic issues, like the intersections between unemployment, substance abuse and access to social programming.

For some communities, the main challenge they faced was supporting the mental health of their citizens.⁶⁵ All of a sudden, people were required to work through the fear of a pandemic, the fear of stores running out of products and parents were now required to work from their homes, parent and take on the role of educator – often simultaneously. These compounding pressures highlighted something that has been a constant challenge for Yukon First Nations communities: there is not enough monetary support for mental health from any form of government.⁶⁶

Yukon First Nations once again innovated and created strategies to address these gaps, for example, setting up informal phone check ins with vulnerable members of the community. In this particular example, however, due to the pre-existing lack of support the Nation “quite literally ran out of people” who were available and trained to conduct the skilled work that was required.⁶⁷ This lack of support for mental health in the north has been widely discussed, largely within the narrative of suicide rates across the region, and the pandemic has shown once again how detrimental those gaps can be during an emergency.

Jordan’s Principle, a series of federal funding programs, was designed to ensure that “all First Nations children living in Canada can access the products, services and supports they need, when they need them,” including speech therapy, educational supports, medical equipment and mental health services.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, however, there continue to be challenges accessing funding through Jordan’s Principle for self-governing First Nations and their citizens as the program is focused on First Nations children ordinarily resident on reserve.⁶⁹ Jordan’s Principle is available for communities during the pandemic to help with the added pressures, including providing support for laptops, however, this gap between “ordinarily resident on reserve” and self-governing First Nations creates an additional hurdle for some Yukon First Nations.

For Yukon First Nations, health and safety is one of the main areas in which the pandemic exposed gaps in existing support that First Nations experience across sectors. To combat these challenges, once again, it is imperative that First Nations are included in decision-making avenues, be they for enforcement, programming, or funding in general.

⁶⁴ Community interviews, July 2 and 16, 2020

⁶⁵ Community interview, July 8, 16 and 23

⁶⁶ Community interview, July 8

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Government of Canada. *Jordan’s Principle*. <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1568396042341/1568396159824>. Accessed July 29, 2020

⁶⁹ Community interview, July 2, 2020

13. HOUSING

We know that COVID-19 is transmitted through close contact with infected people, and public health guidelines for the pandemic have focused on advising people to reduce contact with others and to sanitize (wash hands or use hand sanitizer) frequently. If sharing a household with someone who is sick, the official Yukon government recommendations are to:

- Stay and sleep in a room with good airflow away from other people.
- Use a separate bathroom if you can.
- Wear a face mask if you are in the same room with anyone.
- Avoid face-to-face contact.
- Do not share towels or face cloths.
- Have friends and family drop off food outside your room or home.
- “If you live with an Elder, senior or someone with a chronic health condition, it would be best if those people could stay in the home of other family or friends”.⁷⁰

Unfortunately, for some Yukon First Nations, these guidelines are impossible to follow in houses that are overcrowded or in need of repairs. According to the most recent (2016) census, Indigenous communities face additional barriers to housing than other communities across the country. These include:

- One in five Indigenous people live “in a dwelling that was in need of major repairs”
- While the proportion of Indigenous people living in housing in need of major repairs declined between 2011 and 2016, “the lone exception was on reserve, where the proportion of First Nations people with registered or treaty Indian status living in a dwelling that needed major repairs went up by 0.8 percentage points.”⁷¹
- 18.3% of Indigenous people lived in housing that was crowded
- One in ten Indigenous people live in housing with a one-bedroom shortfall, “4.0% lived in housing with a two-bedroom shortfall; and 2.8% lived in a dwelling with a shortfall of three or more bedrooms.”
- One quarter of First Nations people lived in overcrowded housing⁷²

The need for housing in Yukon is the third highest in Canada, faring better compared only to the other two territories.⁷³ The costs associated with housing are also higher in Yukon than in southern communities. For example, eight years ago, it cost between \$250,000 and \$500,000 to construct a 1,000-square-foot housing unit, not including the cost of land, fuel, power, water and ongoing repairs.⁷⁴ Costs have only risen in the ensuing years, and so Yukon First Nations who have inherited old and out of repair housing units are facing an uphill battle while they try to provide adequate housing for their members.

⁷⁰ Government of Yukon. (2020, July 29) *Common Questions: COVID-19 in Yukon*. <https://yukon.ca/en/health-and-wellness/covid-19-information/common-questions-covid-19>

⁷¹ Unfortunately, it is difficult to discern whether those on-reserve statistics include Yukon First Nations citizens in self-governing First Nations. This discrepancy is expanded upon in Section 3, where one of the recommendations for Yukon First Nations is to advocate for better data collection from and financial support for self-governing First Nations.

⁷² Statistics Canada. *The Aboriginal population in Canada, 2016 Census of Population*

⁷³ Falvo, Nick (2012). *Poverty Amongst Plenty: Waiting for the Yukon Government to Adopt a Poverty Reduction Strategy*. Toronto: The Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press. Pp. 15

⁷⁴ Ibid

Federal government supports cannot be expected to solve the challenges associated with access to housing in Indigenous communities during the emergency pandemic response, however, the pandemic has highlighted the fact that while broad-based public health instructions are attainable for the majority of southern, urban communities, they are sometimes impossible for First Nations.

While Yukon benefits from a more stable housing base than the other two territories, there are still challenges that the pandemic has exposed. Like many other challenges identified in this paper, housing supports must become a priority for systemic financial and resourcing supporting from the federal government to ensure the safety of Yukon First Nations during the pandemic and beyond.

14. FOOD SECURITY AND TRADITIONAL ACTIVITIES

As the Yellowhead Institute points out, “in the best of times, access to goods can be difficult to obtain on reserve, which tends to lack commercial infrastructure, forcing communities to engage in retail in neighbouring municipal communities.”⁷⁵ Although most Yukon First Nations are not on reserve, the same difficulties exist: should the Alaska Highway become inaccessible either from travel restrictions, accidents or natural disasters, the supply chain would be irrevocably damaged.

During the early days of the pandemic, communities around Canada were dealing with “panic buying”, where staple groceries including bread, flour, milk, household paper products (toilet paper and paper towels) and disinfectants were in limited or no supply. For Yukon, this meant that community members often travelled to Whitehorse, which in turn decreased or eliminated the supplies in the city’s stores as well.⁷⁶

First Nations are leading the way in providing food security supports to their citizens by, for example, supporting hunters at the beginning of the pandemic to harvest meat and fill community freezers in the event that food security was compromised.⁷⁷ This support in one community provided not only food security, but it also created an opportunity for people to spend time out on the land. As a Yukon First Nation the Chief of that Nation explained, in a pandemic that has stripped the community’s ability to gather together, being able to spend time on the land “created an opportunity for the transmission of culture, which is the most efficient solution for this situation.”⁷⁸

The federal government does have a role to play in these solutions, and in fact was able to provide funding for that community harvest through Jordan’s Principle for three on-the-land camps, however, the success of the program was dependent on the First Nation being able to make the decisions on how the money was spent. The important thing to remember is that the Nation was able to mobilize that funding for community-based solutions that directly benefitted their citizens.

Yukon First Nations recognized that food security may play an important role during the pandemic. Early on, whether by leveraging resources (funds or otherwise) their Nations hand on hand or by operationalizing the funding provided by the government of Canada, Yukon First Nations were able to provide food security quickly and decisively for their communities. These community-led solutions are the most crucial to recognize and continue as Yukon First Nations, Yukon territory and the rest of the world move forward into the next phase of pandemic response.

⁷⁵ Pasternak and Houle

⁷⁶ Community interview, July 2, 2020

⁷⁷ Community interview, July 16, 2020

⁷⁸ Ibid

SECTION 3: OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

The pandemic and associated federal and provincial-territorial responses to it have exposed inequalities and governance blind spots in First Nations communities that have existed in Canada since colonization.

This discrepancy has not only been noticed – and noted – by Indigenous communities and leaders, it has also been acknowledged by federal officials. In a public statement in May, Indigenous Services Canada Minister Marc Miller acknowledged that permanent change is needed to solve issues about overcrowding, underfunding and disproportionate negative health indicators among Indigenous communities in Canada.⁷⁹

As the country moves away from the fast-paced, unprecedented climate that marked the first months of the pandemic and into reopening and planning for a second wave, there is an opportunity for Yukon First Nations to not only highlight the inequities that exist between First Nations and non-First Nations communities, but also to advocate for Indigenous-led and collaborative decision-making. As one Yukon First Nation Chief points out: “We have created innovative solutions. More resources would only mean more successes. The current federal approach is holding back the whole country.”⁸⁰

15. THE PATH FORWARD

This paper has benefitted greatly from the expertise provided by Yukon First Nations Chiefs who gave their time to interviews. This section, especially, synthesizes the information provided during those interviews to provide specific recommendations for Yukon First Nations and their federal and territorial counterparts as the policy landscape shifts into reopening and preparing for living with the pandemic.

16. ACCESS TO PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES

Even before the pandemic, Yukon First Nations leaders were raising alarm bells about the blind spot around self-governing First Nations and unequal access to federal programs and resources. For example, in November 2019, Kwanlin Dün Chief Doris Bill told federal leaders that when funding is announced, it is “geared towards on-reserve people, and often Yukon First Nations will get left out because we, of course, are not on-reserve.”⁸¹ The implications of this omission are tangible and some have argued that the inadequate funding levels to Yukon First Nations “has slowed their legislative development, limited their ability to meet obligations and forced them to focus too closely on fundraising instead of implementation.”⁸²

The unique status of Yukon self-governing First Nations presents an opportunity for Yukon First Nations to change the relationship with federal and territorial governments to be considered partners rather than stakeholders. With the infrastructure that has been created through the pandemic, there is an

⁷⁹ Taylor, Stephanie. (2020, May 17) ‘Raise the bar’: Researcher hopes COVID-19 means new policies for Canada’s Indigenous. *The Canadian Press/Global News*. <https://globalnews.ca/news/6954248/coronavirus-indigenous-peoples-canada/>. Accessed July 29, 2020.

⁸⁰ Community interview, July 16, 2020

⁸¹ Gignac, Julien (2018, Dec. 5) First Nations funding, housing top-of-mind at meetings in Ottawa. *Yukon News*. <https://www.yukon-news.com/news/first-nations-funding-housing-top-of-mind-at-meetings-in-ottawa/>. Accessed July 29, 2020.

⁸² Falvo, Nick (2012), Pp. 11

opportunity for Yukon First Nations to provide First Nations-designed solutions in a unified way to federal and territorial government representatives in a way that perhaps has not existed before.

Unfortunately, and as discussed throughout this paper, current programs have not accounted for self-governing First Nations. This omission is not only limited to programs, but also statistics that are used for research and policy considerations. For example, some of the housing information used for this paper was extrapolated from on-reserve statistics (see footnote on page 21).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Leverage the Yukon Forum and other forums to advocate for the inclusion of self-governing First Nations in funding and program supports
2. Where appropriate, issue public statements on the impact of exclusionary policies, funding programs and research statistics that do not account for self-governing First Nations
3. Apply for funding to create Yukon-focused research projects that can in turn be used to inform future policy and funding decisions

17. A COORDINATED APPROACH

At the outset of the pandemic, during the first fast-paced days where information was constantly shifting, there was an identified gap in a coordinated approach among Yukon First Nations.⁸³ At the outset, Yukon First Nations “struggled to find a coordinated effort... that led to some in-filling by the other governments, both YG and Canada.”⁸⁴ Quickly, Chiefs came together and a forum was created for Yukon First Nations to develop a coordinated approach among themselves, and also to provide feedback and input directly to the territorial government on important policy measures moving forward.

This cohesive approach to emergency solutions was an opportunity for First Nations leadership to share their community-led solutions, as well as to identify those gaps that needed to be filled by territorial and federal responses. This coordination was integral to getting Yukon First Nations needs included in territorial policy decisions, and, as one Chief put it, it was “Important that chiefs worked together at the beginning, and that is going to remain.”⁸⁵

This coordinated approach must also include ongoing public communications to ensure people continue to follow public health guidelines, despite the territory’s reopening strategy. Yukon was lucky to have been spared a large outbreak, but questions still remain about whether the territory’s health system has the adequate resources to treat a large number of COVID-19 cases.⁸⁶ Yukon First Nations have noticed that “safeguards are being ignored” – especially by younger people.⁸⁷ To help the territory avoid an outbreak of the virus, Yukon First Nations, along with the territorial government and private organizations need to “remain consistent on messaging” and encourage people to follow public health guidelines, despite the appearance that the risk has abated.⁸⁸

⁸³ Community interview, July 2 and 8, 2020

⁸⁴ Community interview, July 8, 2020

⁸⁵ Community interview, July 23, 2020

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Community interviews, July 8 and 16, 2020

⁸⁸ Community interviews, July 16 and 23, 2020

Yukon First Nation Chiefs have a positive, productive relationship with the Yukon Government⁸⁹ that has resulted from “an ongoing rebuilding” of the relationship between the two levels of government⁹⁰. For the territory, despite the gaps that have been highlighted in this paper, this relationship has meant that most territorial policies have reflected the needs of those Nations in coordination with territorial priorities. Moving forward, this relationship must continue as part of a coordinated approach that allows all levels of government to “respond in unison and operate in cohesion.”⁹¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue regular Yukon First Nations leadership meetings to align priorities, share solutions and advocate for change; where Yukon First Nations and the Government of Yukon differ, ensure a unified approach to advocate for change
2. Share communications key messages among Yukon First Nations leadership to ensure Nations are aligned
3. Continue the ongoing relationship-building work with the Yukon Government

18. COMMUNITY-LED SOLUTIONS

Throughout the pandemic, what has been successful for Yukon First Nations is the ability to take the supports provided by the federal and territorial governments and apply them to their citizens at their own discretion. Unrestricted funding programs, rather than shipments of supplies, allowed Nations to make decisions that worked best for their communities, without needing to wait for approval.⁹²

The goal moving forward must be to preserve that flexibility and self-determination on behalf of Yukon First Nations. In the words of one Yukon First Nation Chief, the goal is to reinvent a self-sufficient society that was destroyed by colonial practices:

“Without that proactive approach, what they are doing is destabilizing our ability to continue as a self-reliant community. We have been around for 30,000 years – we are the experts. We need to be respected as such. Climate justice, COVID recovery and Indigenous rights coalesce together in empower communities to be self-reliant. This is the future and it would help us in future pandemics or any other national or regional emergency.”⁹³

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Use the Yukon Forum to advocate for self-determining program criteria, including funding formulas
2. Leverage public communications opportunities to show the benefits of self-directed funding
3. Advocate that the territorial government invite First Nations to lead the conversation about settlement-area specific policies, e.g. access to settlement area territory near the City of Whitehorse

⁸⁹ Community interview, July 16 and 23, 2020

⁹⁰ Community interview, July 8, 2020

⁹¹ Community interview, July 16, 2020

⁹² Ibid

⁹³ Ibid

19. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research conducted and feedback provided during interviews with Yukon First Nations Chiefs and senior staff, this paper made the following recommendations with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on Yukon First Nations:

1. Leverage the Yukon Forum and other forums to advocate for the inclusion of self-governing First Nations in funding and program supports
2. Where appropriate, issue public statements on the impact of exclusionary policies, funding programs and research statistics that do not account for self-governing First Nations
3. Apply for funding to create Yukon-focused research projects that can in turn be used to inform future policy and funding decisions
4. Continue regular Yukon First Nations leadership meetings to align priorities, share solutions and advocate for change; where Yukon First Nations and the Government of Yukon differ, ensure a unified approach to advocate for change
5. Share communications key messages among Yukon First Nations leadership to ensure Nations are aligned
6. Use the Yukon Forum and to advocate for self-determining program criteria, including funding formulas
7. Leverage public communications opportunities to show the benefits of self-directed funding
8. Advocate that the territorial government invite First Nations to lead the conversation about settlement-area specific policies, e.g. access to settlement area territory near the City of Whitehorse

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