

**Key findings:**

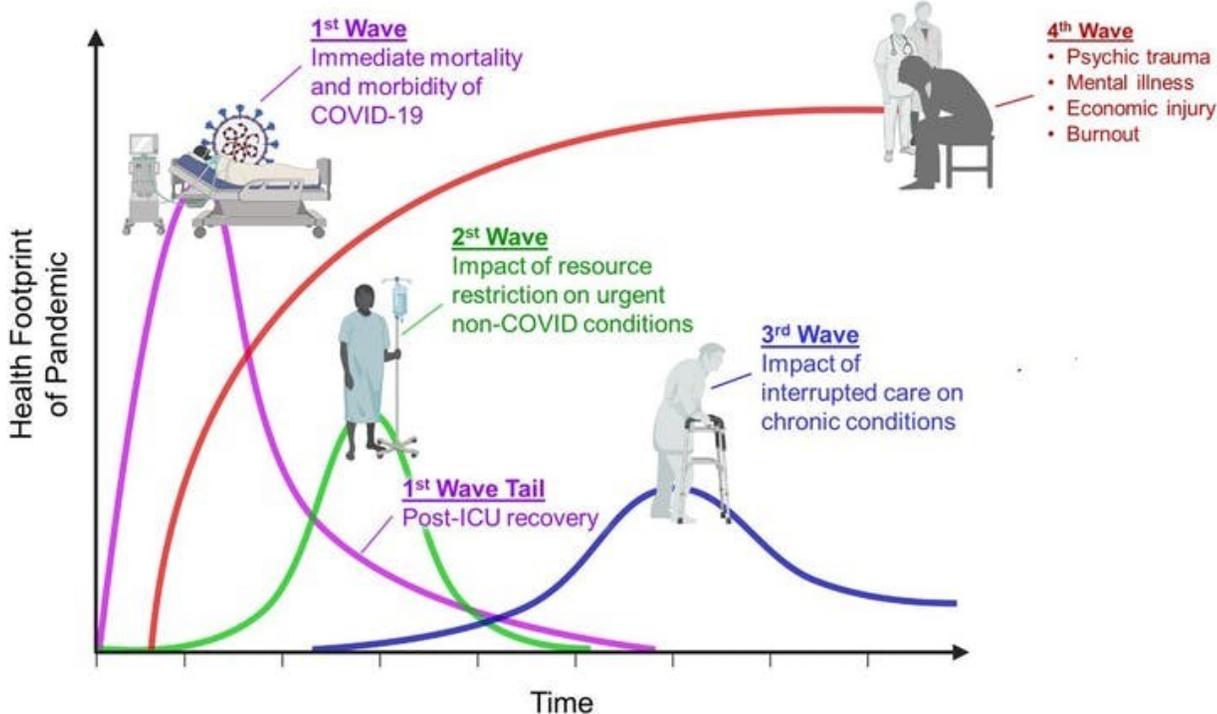
- ◆ **The effects of the global pandemic are not over and will persist for all society, for some time to come.**
- ◆ **Persons and groups already experiencing inequality are seeing the most acute effects of the pandemic.**
- ◆ **Social justice principles must be centred in COVID-19 response efforts, and modernizing our social safety net for the most vulnerable should be at the top of the list of actions, otherwise inequality and suffering in our city will increase.**

The two previous bulletins in this series demonstrated the severe and unequal social impacts of COVID-19 in the City of Hamilton. The unemployment rate is higher than it's been in the last 20 years, at over 12% of the population, and the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities, with the largest employment impacts falling on younger workers, women, part-time workers, and racialized workers. COVID-19 is also magnifying inequalities —high rates of the virus occur in Hamilton neighbourhoods with high rates of material deprivation and greater proportion of racialized residents. COVID-19 rates double between neighbourhoods with low and high rates of material deprivation and proportions of racialized residents.

The social and health impacts of the pandemic are not over and will continue to grow. The conceptual image below by an American COVID-19 researcher, shows various longer-terms impacts of the global pandemic on our entire society, not just those infected with COVID-19, especially in the areas of mental health, physical health, and economic well-being. Such impacts include increased trauma, burnout, and interrupted care for chronic health conditions. And as with the first impacts of COVID-19, we can expect these longer term impacts to be experienced most acutely by those most marginalized in our society, which means that embracing an equity and anti-oppression lens is vital to all strategies to support residents affected by COVID-19 and its aftershocks and rebuild our economy.

**Conceptualization of aftershocks and collateral damage of COVID-19**

by Dr. Victor Tseng (@vectorsting), Emory University Hospitals. Atlanta, GA



This series of bulletins focussing on issues highlighted in the *Hamilton's Social Landscape* report and bringing attention to more recent trends. These bulletins are published by the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton and funded in part by the United Way Halton Hamilton and the City of Hamilton Enrichment Fund.

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Looking at the social determinants of health (SDOH) provides some context for the inequitable impacts of COVID-19. SDOH include demographic categories such as gender, socio-economic position, race, and disability. As Public Health Ontario writes, these are “factors beyond an individual’s biology and behaviours—those that form the conditions in which people are born, grow up, live, and work.” SDOH play a role in people’s health every day by affecting access to care, intergenerational health conditions, access to healthy food and clean water, and more, but COVID-19 exacerbates and further reveals their impact.

In Hamilton, social determinants of health have been part of the public conversation for sometime, including The Hamilton Spectator’s *Code Red reports from 2010 and 2019* which detailed clear connections between health and wealth at the neighbourhood level. These trends are evident again in the context of COVID-19. Recognizing and addressing SDOH and structural social inequities in research, assessments, and recovery plans is, as Public Health Ontario says, “essential for an equitable COVID-19 response.” These SDOH factors are important to consider:

- **Work:** Especially part-time workers, younger workers, people who are precariously employed, frontline workers, racialized workers, migrant workers, low-income workers, and women.
- **Racialization:** People of colour face a number of biological, social, and environmental risk factors created by historic and ongoing oppression that negatively influence health outcomes.
- **Economic status:** People receiving social assistance (OW, ODSP), or experiencing poverty, homelessness, or unemployment are often unable to secure basic needs such as food, shelter and necessary social and health services.
- **Gender:** Women are overrepresented in care work occupations, may be experiencing increased domestic violence due to more time at home, and/or may also be taking on more child care responsibilities and be unable to return to work.
- **Indigeneity:** Existing barriers due to the legacies of colonization, including intergenerational trauma, higher poverty rates, lack of access to quality health care, lack of clean and accessible drinking water, and precarious employment may contribute to a greater impact of COVID-19 for many Indigenous peoples and communities.
- **Age/health status:** Older adults and those with pre-existing health conditions are often at greater risk of COVID-19 and less likely to recover. Retirement homes and care homes have seen disproportionate outbreaks of COVID-19.
- **Incarceration:** Incarcerated people, who are disproportionately racialized and experience poverty, have restricted movement in crowded and confined spaces, with reduced opportunity for physical distancing and hygiene.

These factors overlap and intersect, people might be experiencing more than one of these factors, and factors like these often even influence each other. An equity-informed recovery plan is essential to account for the unequal impacts of the pandemic and promote a safe and successful recovery.

The previous bulletin, *Employment Impacts of COVID-19 in the Hamilton CMA*, highlighted some examples of targeted measures to remove employment barriers for groups most affected by job losses. Other Hamilton residents who are pushed to the labour market, experiencing discrimination in hiring, and/or relegated to low wage, precarious work, and not able to benefit from “shovel ready” job-focussed strategies, will benefit from recovery strategies that also include strengthening the provincial and national social safety nets. A modernized social safety net will help these residents retain some amount of stability as employment and economic conditions hobble back to pre-COVID levels. Otherwise, the disparate impacts of COVID-19 will increase leading to even greater inequality and suffering in our city and in communities across Ontario and Canada. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Canadian Labour Congress, Ontario Nonprofit Network and other organizations across Canada have made specific recommendations in this area:

- Require all employers to provide **paid sick time** for their workers and reform **Employment Insurance (EI)** to protect low-wage workers and those participating in the gig economy
- Bring **social assistance rates** up over the poverty line and increase **minimum wage** to match living wages
- Provide universal **public child care**
- Extend **rent freezes** and **eviction bans**
- Extend **emergency benefits** for Ontario Works (OW) and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) as long as cost of living continues to rise above the paltry annual increase in social assistance rates.
- Create a stabilization fund for the **non-profit sector**, which would support housing, health care, job training, child care access, and mental health supports.