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## **Race, Income, and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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## Health Equity Essay – Lisa Shin

Although there are a tremendous number of different social determinants of health that are critical in combatting the effects of COVID-19 faced by Canadians, this essay will specifically focus on race and income. Race and income being closely knit through socioeconomic status, stereotypes, and cultural barriers, it will be a big obstacle to tackle, but a meaningful and necessary way to reduce social inequities.

As a result of being a visible minority, it was very easy, especially at the beginning of the pandemic to feel victimized, scorned, and just plain vulnerable while being one of the first people wearing a mask and socially distancing in public. This blatant toll on self-confidence, as well as portrayal in the media on issues such as violence against Asians and other ethnic minorities, affects one's mental health, and the quality of life for over 2 million Canadians, who identify as East Asians. (Statistics Canada 2021) To combat this issue, policies on increasing diverse methods of mental health support especially for different cultures is necessary. Many Asian countries are more conservative in the sense that mental health isn't treated like a real issue, which is where the government and health services should step in. With elevated resources and reachable materials that can adapt to each culture and individual and encourage individuals to try to willingly communicate and utilize the programs and services that are available in the community. This especially rings true for the older Asian population who face many more language and cultural barriers while already possessing stigma towards mental health and receiving aid.

A specific example of education that would be incredibly beneficial would be creating mandatory educational programs or experiences for politicians who wield a lot of power with their words. The amount of mishaps and apologies that were made throughout the pandemic due to politicians 'slipping their words' by blaming a specific sector of the city or visible minority populations were simply unacceptable and outrageous. (Villani 2020) The ripple effect that is created by media attention on such

scandals not only undermines the effects of the works of creating a more accepting and diverse country that embraces culture, but does the very opposite of it and ultimately affecting individuals' mental health.

From these unfair accusations made towards specific populations supposedly being the culprits of COVID-19 case numbers, there are so many reasons other than race on why that is the case. The biggest factor is that of employment. Many visible minorities and new immigrants have no choice but to work at minimum wage, frontline occupations that demand high-contact and extreme close proximities in a short time frame. Through understanding the background context and stories behind case numbers, programs for working on employment skills, outreach in improving employment credentials, and advancing education would be key.

While in the short term, the additional income from government subsidy programs help tremendously, it is also fair to say more could have been done to be proactive. The volunteer program for youth that the government proposed early in the pandemic was personally something that could have been very empowering and enriching for many. By starting to branch out into the community through giving back, spending time with community members, and becoming more friendlier with the city, great soft and hard skills in addition to fresh ideas can liven the workforce and future of cities and be a potential solution to brain drain which many towns and cities are facing. For this to work, accessibility through various methods of transportation and communication are necessary for everyone and anyone to access with mentors that can be empowering and motivation for developing youth.

Looking at the CESB program that was launched at the summer of the first wave of the pandemic, it was available to all youth without considering their socioeconomic status, race, etc. Although extra finances are definitely in need of use and important for many families, it is important to notice other factors impacting households of low-income families that can range from addiction

problems to food insecurity to domestic violence. Providing that additional layer of support that extends past the financials is so important and would only be accomplished through increased outreach services and social work professionals who are not over-worked themselves.

For many businesses that were hard-hit by the pandemic, the mixed messaging of the federal, provincial/territorial, and local governments were also an issue. No, they do not have to be the same but the essence and combination of the press conferences should exhibit similar importance on issues and enunciate the grave seriousness of the pandemic without attacking each other. To improve this part of policy, more communication between government levels would be key, although it is understandable with the vastness of the country as well as very different time zones. It would be ideal if political views were set aside, and health advisors' opinions and advice were followed universally.

Another important aspect of policy would be continuous surveillance of current resources and programs as there were many industries and services that severely suffered from the pandemic as they were already in poor conditions before March 2020. This includes the food-bank services all over Canada which were disrupted greatly who serve great need for low-income families. Although emergency food services should not be a solution but a temporary aid such as government financial help, it only repeats the importance of strong employment insurance, development, and sick day policies. (Higgins 2021)

Social determinants of health have been an important area of study since the beginning that has become extremely prominent due to the impacts of the pandemic and cannot be ignored anymore. Additional policies considering the deep impacts of the intersectional connections through culture, race, socioeconomic status, and income need to be considered when creating and mandating policies. This can only occur through diverse and open education, meaningful and respectful communication, as well as continuous reflection and reflexivity from an individual level.

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