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Résumé de l'article

Cet article examine les impacts de la COVID-19 sur la prestation des services sociaux dans la région centrale de l'île de Vancouver, sur une période de 18 mois à partir du moment où la pandémie a été déclarée. Des changements externes et internes ont été apportés pour répondre aux exigences des ordonnances de la santé publique, assurer la sécurité des services et répondre aux besoins accrus de certains secteurs de la population. Des impacts différents sont observés pour chaque tranche de six mois étudiée. Les leçons à tirer au-delà de la COVID-19 sont les suivantes : favoriser le passage d'une priorisation du micro-système vers le macro-système, permettant une adaptation rapide; faciliter l'inclusion, notamment des personnes les plus marginalisées; et assurer une réflexion constante et continue. Cela implique de garder à l'esprit les besoins des utilisateurs-rices de services, des prestataires de services sociaux et de la communauté.

HOW LOCAL SOCIAL SERVICE DELIVERY PANDEMIC LESSONS MIGHT SHAPE POST-COVID REALITIES

Jeanette Schmid
Holly Bradley

Abstract: This contribution considers the ways in which COVID-19 impacted social service delivery in the central Vancouver Island region over 18 months after the declaration of the pandemic. Significant shifts in the external and internal environment were made to accommodate requirements of public health orders, ensure safety in service, and respond to the heightened needs of certain sectors of the population. The impact had a different character for each of six-month tranches studied. Lessons for a post – COVID-19 future include: make micro- to macro-level shifts that allow room for rapid adaptation; facilitate inclusion, especially of those most marginalized; and ensure ongoing reflection. This involves keeping in mind the needs of service users, service providers, and the community.

Abrégé : Cet article examine les impacts de la COVID-19 sur la prestation des services sociaux dans la région centrale de l'île de Vancouver, sur une période de 18 mois à partir du moment où la pandémie a été déclarée. Des changements externes et internes ont été apportés pour répondre aux exigences des ordonnances de la santé publique, assurer la sécurité des services et répondre aux besoins accrus de certains secteurs de la population. Des impacts différents sont observés pour chaque tranche de six mois étudiée. Les leçons à tirer au-delà de la COVID-19 sont les suivantes : favoriser le passage d'une priorisation du micro-système vers le macro-système, permettant une adaptation rapide; faciliter l'inclusion, notamment des personnes les plus marginalisées; et assurer une réflexion constante et continue. Cela implique de garder à l'esprit les besoins des

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utilisateurs-rices de services, des prestataires de services sociaux et de la communauté.

We acknowledge the privilege of conducting this research on the unceded territories of several Coast Salish Peoples including the Snuneymuxw, Snaw'naw'as Mustimuxw, Qualicum, and Kw'amutsun.

IN THE EARLY WEEKS OF THE PANDEMIC, we, as social work faculty at Vancouver Island University, began to hear that social service organizations were urgently adapting service delivery to accommodate the crisis. These reports piqued our interest in understanding the impact of COVID-19 on regional social service delivery. We embarked on a study to learn about initial emergency responses, medium-term adaptation, and, we thought, post – COVID-19 realities. Additionally, our intention was to elicit the collective social delivery narrative rather than only individual organizational experiences (Schmid & Bradley, 2022). Despite focusing on social service delivery under pandemic conditions, this study might offer pointers for a post – COVID-19 context.

Relying on the social work department's relationships with local social service organizations in the mid-island region of Vancouver Island, we recruited 12 organizations, yielding 13 representatives. These social service organizations offered rich diversity, representing four government services and eight non-profit agencies, as well as services addressing food security, mental health, housing, criminal justice, older persons, immigrants and refugees, Indigenous issues, and family and child welfare.

For this phenomenological study, which was guided by a critical – contextual social work lens (Schmid et al., 2020), we chose semi-structured interviews that permitted exploration of this complex issue with participants. The interviews focused on changes experienced, potential factors driving or impeding adaptation, service-provider experience, and interviewees' thoughts regarding the future, reflections on service-user experience, and field placement observations. We conducted interviews at three six-month intervals in September 2020, March 2021, and September 2021. We used content analysis to highlight themes. In addition to allowing participants to revisit their transcripts, we also developed a summary report after each round. This encouraged reflection on effective collective practice and offered agencies a statement for advocacy purposes.

Regarding limitations, we could only explore participants' reflexions on organizational post – COVID-19 needs, given the enduring pandemic. Nevertheless, this 18-month review highlights the phased nature of adaptation and thus offers clues beyond the medium-term impact of this pandemic on social service delivery. Our research additionally does not highlight service users' direct voices, these instead being mediated

by the service providers interviewed. The regional context is also quite specific: there is a strong presence of Indigenous peoples; older adults are a significant part of this community; and issues of homelessness and substance use are particularly acute. Although this regional profile is reflected in the services offered, it does not seem to have directly impacted the collective experience, allowing some research transferability. We turn now to the findings.

Phased Experience

A first finding relates to the phased impact of and adaptation to the pandemic. There were clear qualitative differences in the innovation and change that emerged for each six-month tranche. The first six months, requiring immediate and crisis-oriented responses, were especially intense. Most service delivery was interrupted, with stoppages lasting from days to months. Organizations that resumed in-person programming focused on implementing health and safety measures. For many agencies, there was a prompt switch to virtual measures for service-user contact (both phone and online programming), though the original palette of services mostly could not be offered.

In the second round of interviews, one year after the pandemic announcement in British Columbia, interviewees felt buffeted by the ever-changing shifts in the pandemic conditions and associated public health orders. Service providers were fatigued by professional demands, along with personal worries. Even so, there was some routinization of service delivery. Virtual programming was available, and most service users had access to services.

The third round of interviews in September 2021 revealed that, despite leaders' exhaustion and ongoing stress, there was optimism: good weather enabled outdoor contact and significant increases in in-person engagement; the prospect of a vaccinated population suggested there could be a proximal future of safe face-to-face encounters; and staff felt increasingly competent and effective in delivering new forms of service and had become used to regular pivoting. Indeed, the innovation, creativity, and flexibility regarding programming stood in the foreground.

Factors Shaping Service Delivery during COVID-19

The findings suggested four key factors that impacted social service delivery, though how these played out was unique to each organization represented in our study. The first was that of policy. External policies, including public health orders — for example, orders about social distancing — and funding expectations, most clearly shaped service delivery. Funders and policy-makers were unusually willing to address

complex service-user needs, creating important policy windows. These external policies also influenced new internal policy-making, especially about health and safety issues, but also regarding working conditions.

A second factor was funding, which had inconsistent impacts on social service delivery. While many organizations were reassured that funding would remain both stable and responsive, others encountered rigid criteria that impeded adaptation. New monies became available for critical projects, though the multiple sources complicated administration and accountability, came without assurances for sustainable funding, and overlooked some service groups. There were sometimes funding delays, which caused difficulties as community needs shifted. Many organizations could not or chose not to count on public donations in the earlier phase of the pandemic, but such support was available mostly after the first pandemic year.

A third issue related to partnerships. New or revitalized partnerships based on reciprocity were, for many, crucial for combining resources and being able to offer responsive programming in the first six pandemic months, and many aimed to sustain these. For others, the pandemic isolation meant that partners were not meeting regularly; one interviewee felt that their organization was quite alone. Others found collaboration and consensus-building to be complex.

Finally, the ongoing changes required concomitant shifts in logistics. Interviewees conveyed that such labour was seldom evident as an adaptation cost. Sourcing and budgeting for appropriate spaces was a particular concern. In many cases, space was no longer available, or social distancing measures led to fewer people being able to be together simultaneously. In some cases, organizations had to decide how to use space that had been freed up because staff worked from home.

Service-Provider Experience

Service-provider experience shifted throughout the 18-month period. Concerns about the effects of COVID-19, job security, and service users' well-being were prominent after the pandemic announcement. Many practitioners initially felt ineffective in delivering services remotely, though their self-assurance and trust in virtual methods had increased by the second six-month period of the pandemic. The workforce remained relatively stable with minimal layoffs, and those who were laid off often were recalled to their original positions. Indeed, most interviewees commended employers for the multiple support strategies used. These included flexibility regarding work hours, location, and use of vacation; improved sick leave; increased internal communication; affirmation of tasks well done; and additional mental health supports. However, new funding for expanded service did not necessarily extend to increased wages or expansions in staff complements, which caused personnel to

become overloaded. Further, staff were impacted by COVID-19 fatigue (Zoom fatigue, together with a depletion of personal resources), and interviewees noticed that potential new hires were dealing with mental health issues. By the end of the 18 months reviewed, practitioners were insisting on greater work – life balance and were seeking opportunities with improved job conditions. Management mostly could not offer better pay and watched in frustration as positions remained unfilled and staff moved elsewhere.

Volunteers, who in this region were mostly older adults, often stepped out of these roles in the initial pandemic months. Organizations also did not have the emotional and practical capacity to engage them. After the first year of the pandemic, volunteers were again being drawn into service delivery, and indeed, trained to provide online services. Agencies also were diversifying their recruitment to include younger volunteers.

Social service agencies also had limited resources to dedicate to social work practicum students. Significantly fewer field instruction offerings were available during the first six months, though some online options were created. While such innovation ultimately expanded practicum resources, interviewees agreed that students were unable to work directly with particular populations and could not hone their relational skills in the same way as in in-person encounters. Interviewees recommended that the preparation of students for practicum during COVID-19 include familiarity with virtual service delivery and management of the heightened emotional tenor at placements.

In sum, COVID-19 increased professional stressors, though service providers largely responded with resilience and creativity. However, interviewees suggested that the potential fragility of service providers in the longer term should not be overlooked.

Service-User Experience as Mediated by Service Providers

The interviewees observed that — with many services being shut down at the pandemic onset, and some continuing to be closed or being by appointment only — service users, especially those most marginalized, lacked service access. While new funding led to further programming, and virtual services' expanded reach was convenient for many, those without appropriate technology or familiarity with technology and those desiring in-person service were un- or under-served. Remote service delivery was found to compromise the relational, and as the pandemic progressed, service providers and service users alike stressed the value of face-to-face engagement.

Service-user needs that had been acute pre-pandemic were frequently exacerbated by the pandemic. Those traditionally drawing strength from collective societal practices, particularly Indigenous communities, felt increasingly isolated and effectively lost trust in the offerings of service

providers. Existential issues increased for immigrants and refugees who could not access governmental services to confirm settlement formalities. Service providers maintained that the incidence of family violence increased at the same time that essential support services were restricted. Racism, particularly against Asian and Indigenous persons, sharpened. Service providers also observed a shift from an initial sense of societal togetherness in the face of COVID-19 to increased acrimony and polarization, with unhoused people in particular being targeted by such discontent.

Visions of the Future

Throughout the 18-month period, articulations about the future changed. Initially, interviewees identified the future as being focused on resolving the immediate emergency through the development of remote service delivery or social distancing measures, and ultimately, the introduction of hybrid or blended work modes. As COVID-19 continued, some interviewees suggested that the future involved understanding how to respond to emergencies, anticipating that this would not be the last such crisis. In the final round of interviews, the role of frequent and ongoing evaluation was stressed as essential to sustainable and meaningful adaptation in the future.

A Post – COVID-19 Future

The lessons from this study allow us to anticipate the post – COVID-19 future of social work delivery. The research highlighted several positive and negative ways in which service delivery had been impacted by COVID-19. For example, the effects of policy, funding, partnerships, and logistics had created new dialogical spaces and policy windows in the conceptualization of and response to complex service-user needs. The pandemic environment also resulted in the adoption of virtual service delivery options, as well as program expansions, broadening the service delivery palette. It simultaneously underlined that face-to-face engagement was fundamental to effective relational social work and thus in-person interactions needed to anchor the work. There was greater flexibility in the workplace around hours and location, but for many service providers, this was insufficient in creating the work – life balance sought. Furthermore, service-user needs and social marginalization had been exacerbated, with those most vulnerable struggling for access to services in a way that those more resourced did not. One interviewee summarized this very difficult time as one that nevertheless pulled social service organizations "into the future." In having them test out approaches that had seemed fixed, it had become a period of innovation, flexibility, and creativity.

The findings also point to a possible entrenchment of neoliberal perspectives. For example, the government seems to have downloaded services onto the non-profit sector, maintaining a focus on efficiency without offering required supports. Funding was often tied to short-term goals without clarity about longer-term financial sustainability. Moreover, even as interviewees reflected on a new relationship with policy-makers and funders, they worried that the flexibility and deviation from orthodox approaches was motivated by the view that the pandemic crisis affected everyone — a position not extended to pernicious societal issues such as the toxic drug crisis or poor service-provider remuneration, thus limiting future action on these issues.

Conclusion

When we began this research, we naively anticipated that, two years after the pandemic announcement, we would be in a post – COVID-19 era. The study nevertheless offers insights for a post – COVID-19 future. First, the phased adaptation demonstrates that not only has COVID-19 mutated into different forms, thereby creating different health realities, but that how society engages with the pandemic and indeed, constructs its engagement, also changes. This means that post – COVID-19 social work needs not only to be responsive to policy changes, but should track and be responsive to how communities, service users, and service providers interpret a post – COVID-19 environment. Second, social (service) work delivery can be adapted and even markedly changed. To do so effectively, service-user needs must be prioritized, appropriate and sustainable funding must be in place, organizations need to be open to change, policy-makers must be flexible, and service providers meaningfully supported. Anecdotal evidence suggests that social services in this area currently face enormous human resource challenges, being unable to fill needed positions. In a post – COVID-19 context, decision-makers may wish to take cognizance of the factors that will induce both immediate, mid-term, and sustainable change. A third lesson is that those most vulnerable and marginalized are the first to lose service and typically the last to be reincluded. Also, existing societal fissures may initially appear to close, but as hardship continues, societal gaps become both more extreme and more entrenched. Leaders in the social service sector (including policy-makers and agency directors) must be attuned to these dynamics and consider how to facilitate inclusion, recognizing that the most significant social conditions ultimately affect us all, even if the issues are cast as impacting only a few individuals who are treated as "unworthy." A further lesson is that change and flexibility without review and reflexion impedes sustainable service delivery outcomes. The flipside to this is that future crises (whether health, environmental, or other) should be anticipated and planned for. The most important insight, though, is that

service delivery that constrains the relational is simply a poor substitute, and that in-person engagement is essential to meaningful service delivery.

Our research of the pandemic experience thus flags service-user and service-provider issues as challenges that will impact a post – COVID-19 context, and that the effects of social polarization and on mental health may not only extend into this context but may be exacerbated if adequate resourcing is absent. Policy-making, funding, partnerships, and logistics must be addressed. A post – COVID-19 context allows us to learn from the pandemic experience and to offer service that takes on a range of delivery forms, that potentially reaches more service users, and is grounded in the relational.

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