



POLICY BRIEF

LESSONS FROM NORTHERN ONTARIO: RURAL-PROOFING EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT IN CANADA

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Reducing the impact of emergencies in rural communities can be achieved through policy change that clarifies emergency management, broadens participation, aligns tools with needs, and invests in rural health and wellbeing.

SUMMARY

Health is shaped by conditions where people live^{1,2} and systemic inequities between rural and urban communities lead to significant health disparities.^{3,4,5,6,7} Additionally, overlapping emergencies in rural communities strain resources, affecting health.^{8,9,10} Because emergencies have both immediate and long-term health impacts, exploring ways to prevent and reduce their impact is essential for promoting health. A federally-funded research project examined rural municipalities' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic to find ways to reduce future disruption. This brief presents findings from a two-year study of seven rural Northern Ontario municipalities, using document review, 22 key informant interviews, and a participatory workshop with 13 participants. Governments, public health, and communities all have roles in addressing these findings.

BACKGROUND

Emergencies are becoming more frequent and severe, impacting communities across Canada.^{11,12,13,14} Rural areas face unique challenges from hazards like extreme weather, social crises, wildfires, landslides, and floods.¹⁵ Many responders in these regions have little experience, must act under intense pressure, and face major disruptions in their daily lives.

Early research during COVID-19 identified gaps in Ontario's emergency preparedness.¹⁶ While the response helped prevent the health system from collapsing and reduced virus-related deaths, it nonetheless caused severe health, social, and economic impacts.^{17,18} The pandemic exposed and worsened existing inequities, creating a syndemic where these issues intensified alongside the

virus.^{19,20} This is part of a larger poly-crisis, where global challenges in the economy, peace, health, and climate intersect, straining resources and health.²¹

Our current emergency management approach is insufficient. Had we been better prepared for the pandemic many impacts could have been avoided. A new approach is needed that emphasizes health and wellbeing, acknowledging disruption is inevitable in our social and governance systems.¹³

There is a strong push for place-based approaches in Canadian rural policy,^{22,23,7} focusing on using rural assets and strengths.^{3,24} Rural proofing, which applies a rural perspective to policy, works best when it encourages collaboration across government levels and departments.²⁵

A growing and diverse body of research has examined the pandemic (e.g.,^{16,26,27,18,28,29}). In 2021, Canada's Chief Public Health Officer highlighted the pandemic's health and social impacts and identified areas for public health renewal.³⁰ Later reports such as *Mobilizing Public Health Action on Climate Change in Canada*³¹ and *Creating the Conditions for Resilient Communities: A Public Health Approach to Emergencies*³² stress the need for system changes and highlight health promotion's role in emergency management. Ontario's 2022 Chief Medical Officer of Health Report similarly emphasizes the importance of system wide investment to prevent many of COVID-19's consequences from repeating.³³ This policy brief aligns and builds on these priorities through place-based research in rural Canada.

APPROACH AND RESULTS

This two-year project used the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study to assess and rethink Canada's approach to emergency management. Although the research took place in rural Northern Ontario, the findings aim to benefit rural communities nationwide.

The study focused on seven Northern Ontario municipalities, each with fewer than 10,000 residents. Researchers reviewed municipal documents, conducted interviews, and held a participatory workshop to examine how these communities managed the first six waves of the pandemic from a governance perspective. Council meeting agendas and minutes were analyzed to understand local impacts, which guided interviews with elected officials and municipal staff. These interviews then shaped discussions with local health units, a non-profit organization, a community health centre, and a municipal association. The study concluded with an in-person workshop to discuss action areas and develop recommendations.

KEY FINDINGS

Rural communities have unique governance, social and ecological conditions that require tailored

emergency management approaches. Decision-making and engagement are often shaped by the knowledge and beliefs of those involved, and awareness of this variation is critical in times of rapid decision-making. The research demonstrated that, even in rural Northern Ontario, global, national, and provincial factors influence local information, ecological, and economic systems. It also highlighted a gap between research, federal and global emergency management priorities, and local implementation. The study found inconsistent understanding of the emergency management cycle and uneven participation across its phases, with more focus on preparedness and response than on prevention, mitigation, and recovery. Additionally, it identified a mismatch between emergency management tools and the actual needs of prolonged emergency response.

IMPLICATIONS

These findings suggest four areas for improvement: better understanding of emergency management, supporting rural communities, encouraging complete participation in emergency management, and matching tools to current emergency needs. These conclusions align with existing research on health governance and emergency management and may apply to other rural areas with similar governance, geographic, or social features, such as population size or distance from urban centres.

The challenges mentioned—such as small local governments’ limitations and uneven investment in emergency preparedness—are common in many rural Canadian communities.^{3,34,6,25} Policies that address varied access to health and social services, low population density, unique leadership dynamics, communication infrastructure limitations, and resource availability, are key to supporting rural residents. Rural communities would also benefit from urban policymakers better understanding rural life and emergency management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To rural-proof emergency management in Northern Ontario, the following steps are recommended:

1. Clarify Emergency Management Framework

- **Review and standardize documents:** Review and standardize emergency management documents to ensure clear definitions and consistency for each phase.
- **Integrate social emergencies:** Include social emergencies in the existing emergency management framework.
- **Define roles clearly:** Clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved, including local public health agencies, municipal governments, and non-profit organizations.

2. Increase System Capacity for Emergency Management

- **Continuous training:** Regularly update and deliver training on the entire emergency management cycle, focusing on decision-making, risk communication, healthy public policy, and health inequities. Improve health and social media literacy.
- **Centralized support for rural communities:** Provide centralized resources, expertise, and a deployable team to assist rural communities during crises. Strengthen policy support for municipalities.
- **Reform funding:** Redesign funding models to encourage collaboration, reduce barriers for small communities, recognize higher costs in rural areas, and allow flexible access to loans. Ensure ongoing funding for rural emergency management, including dedicated roles, infrastructure, and investments across all emergency management phases
- **Whole-of-society approach:** Engage civil society as active participants in emergency management.
- **Strategic communications:** Standardize communication tools and language, build trust in spokespeople, use diverse channels, and ensure consistent messaging. Provide accurate, locally relevant emergency information to the public.
- **Legislative support:** Strengthen local public health initiatives, expand the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act* to incorporate additional partners and phases, and ensure compliance with the Ontario building code regarding fire and safety standards.

3. Enhance Understanding of Rural Emergency Management

- **Specialized training for rural contexts:** Develop training programs that address the unique challenges of rural emergency management. Ensure that regional and provincial actors understand these specific issues.
- **Promote regional collaboration:** Create a regional emergency management community of practice to share skills, experience, and knowledge. Conduct joint exercises and use shared Community Emergency Management Coordinators, taking a multi-community approach.
- **Strengthen networking and communication:** Foster regular networking and information exchange among organizations to build relationships, understand rural needs and strengths, and improve emergency management effectiveness.

4. Modernize Emergency Management Strategies

- **Integrate asset-based approaches:** Use asset-based and strengths-based methods throughout the emergency management cycle.
- **Include an Indigenous lens:** Support local Indigenous organizations, consider the impact of hazards and emergencies on Indigenous people and on the land.

- **Prevention:** Invest in factors that reduce vulnerability, such as transportation, housing, healthcare, and Internet access. Promote healthy environments and support local efforts on issues like climate change. Encourage communities to identify risks and prioritize prevention in Community Safety and Well-Being plans.
- **Mitigation:** Include social risks and vulnerabilities in risk assessments, considering impacts on individuals, communities, societies, and ecosystems. Ensure mitigation efforts address these risks at all levels.
- **Preparedness:** Plan for community-specific needs during emergencies, like transportation and healthcare, and anticipate supply chain challenges. Engage vulnerable populations in planning and share plans with the community. Regularly conduct exercises with diverse partners, focusing on complex scenarios, and practice using response tools like the Incident Management System.
- **Response:** Adapt regional or provincial strategies to rural community characteristics. Update tools to: address complex emergencies, facilitate diverse perspectives, identify and mitigate short- and long-term consequences of response measures, support learning and reflection, adapt to varying levels of participation and knowledge among participants, and address power dynamics and equity issues.
- **Recovery:** Require debriefing sessions and thorough documentation of lessons learned. Conduct collective debriefs across organizations or regions to promote shared learning and improvement.

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