

A Qualitative Study of COVID-19's Impact on Mental Health and Corresponding Alcohol and Other Substance Use among Indigenous Women in Toronto Canada

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Abstract : Purpose: We explore the unique and underrepresented experiences of Indigenous women living in Toronto, Canada, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study is to better document the impacts of COVID-19 on the mental health and well-being of Indigenous women in Toronto, Canada, in order to better understand unmet needs, as well as lay the groundwork for more targeted research and potential interventions based on these needs. Background: It has been fairly well documented that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased mental health concerns among various populations globally. There have also been numerous studies indicating increases in substance use and abuse in response to the stress of the pandemic. There is also evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted a variety of historically marginalized populations in Canada, the US, and globally, including Indigenous populations. While these studies provide some insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting the global population, much less is known about the lived experiences of Indigenous populations during the time of COVID-19. Better understanding these experiences will allow public health professionals, governments, and non-governmental organizations better combat health inequities related to the pandemic. Methods: In-depth qualitative semi-structured virtual (due to COVID-19) interviews with 13 Indigenous women were conducted during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by team members using Dedoose qualitative analysis software. Findings: COVID-19 negatively affected Indigenous females identifying participants' mental health and corresponding reported increases in substance use. In addition to the daily stress of the unpredictability of life in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants cited job loss, economic concerns, homeschooling, and lack of access to medical resources as primary factors in increasing their stress and decreasing mental health and wellbeing. In response to these stressors, a majority of participants cited coping mechanisms such as increased substance use to help deal with the uncertainty. In particular, alcohol and tobacco emerged as coping mechanisms to help participants cope with stress related to the pandemic (as well as its social and economic toll on respondents' lives). We will present qualitative data to be presented, including participant direct quotes, explaining their experiences with COVID-19, mental health, and increased substance use, as well as analysis and synthesis with the existing scientific evidence base. Conclusion: This research is among the good studies to our knowledge that scientifically explore the impact of COVID-19 on mental health and well-being and corresponding increases in reported substance use.

Keywords : mental health, covid-19, indigenous, inequity, anxiety, depression, stress

Conference Title : ICAPH 2022 : International Conference on Alcohol and Public Health

Conference Location : Rome, Italy

Conference Dates : August 30-31, 2022