

A COMMITMENT TO ACTION DECLARATION

| By the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation's COVID-19 Impact Committee

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The COVID-19 global pandemic announced by the WHO in March 2020, forever changed the lives of millions around the world. While the virus threatens the health and well-being of the entire planet, the pandemic has unequally and unjustly affected diverse communities.

Canada has a long-standing commitment to equality and respect for human rights, but the pandemic has exposed and amplified fundamental inequities, structural injustice, and systemic discrimination. If “the true measure of a society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members”, then Canada’s pandemic response does not stand up to the scrutiny of Gandhi’s challenge.

More than a year on, the pandemic continues to have a deeper and more devastating impact on communities that have historically been disadvantaged. It shows how existing social, health, and economic structures push certain people and populations to the margins of society, inhibiting and even preventing equitable access to the opportunities and benefits available to others.

With the loss of human life, we must not lose our humanity.

The deep social disruption caused by the pandemic represents an immediate opportunity to directly address issues of inequity by taking steps to reform, where possible, and dismantle, if needed, those features of our society that contribute to these inequities. It is time to address these components of the social contract, correct fundamental injustices, and strengthen the fabric of our society. Our post-COVID world should not go back to the ‘normal’ we previously knew.

The way forward should include more than marginal and superficial changes that rebuild on old foundations. We should make room for new structures, rooted in Canadian values, and based on notions of solidarity, equity, fairness, human rights, compassion, humanity, belonging, and well-being.

This action must begin with urgency, right now. These challenges are the challenges of all people living in Canada. We must move forward in a focused and organized way. This will require partnerships between government(s), civil society, and individuals. No one can do it alone.

With this Declaration, we call on decision makers and the Canadian public to engage in this effort. We call on all to take part, play a role, express their views, raise their voices, and undertake the work necessary to effect needed change.

While our call is not limited in scope to specific dimensions to the exclusion of others, this Declaration highlights the urgent need for profound change in certain prominent priority areas:

Older people:

No group in Canada has been harder hit by the pandemic than older people, particularly those living in congregate care settings. Canada has one of the highest rates of institutionalization of older people in the world. Years of neglectful, ageist public policies created the ideal conditions for an infectious disease to spread in the crowded and chronically understaffed settings of institutional care. Many Indigenous communities have not been receiving funding needed to safely house Elders in their communities, forcing Elders away, disrupting their quality of care and the transmission of traditional knowledge and languages to the next generation. The pandemic exposed glaring holes in the social safety net that is supposed to ensure the care and safety of vulnerable older people. *Post-pandemic, we call to not just patch these holes, but create a better net, adapted to our new demographic realities.*

First Nations, Inuit, Métis communities:

Multi-generational impacts of colonialism, systemic racism, and chronic deficits in public services for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, including federally funded services on reserves and in Yukon, such as water, housing, and healthcare services, results in Indigenous communities being particularly vulnerable to the pandemic. These circumstances contribute to higher rates of tuberculosis, diabetes, and other health issues that make people more vulnerable to COVID-19. Service deficiencies force many to live off reserve, where they face a shortage of culturally appropriate services. To combat systemic racism, we need an active and informed public that rejects government failures, in favour of a just society. *We call on all orders of governments and institutions to implement the many recommendations already on the books, to end systemic discrimination, and affirm Indigenous rights in Canada.*

The drug overdose epidemic:

Fatal and non-fatal drug overdoses have surged dramatically during the pandemic, highlighting the ongoing failure of the pre-COVID-19 substance use-related policies and practices in providing respectful and accessible care for people who use drugs in Canada. The pandemic provides an opportunity to implement a holistic and human rights-based approach to improving the health of those affected. *We call for meaningful, practical, evidence-informed, interventions aimed at the root causes of poor health and social outcomes among people who use drugs.*

Domestic violence:

Responses to the pandemic have resulted in high unemployment and economic insecurity, as well as stay-at-home orders, remote work, and school closures. These measures increased stress factors and time spent in physical proximity with abusers. This led to increases in the frequency

and severity of domestic violence, made it harder to escape, harder to detect, and harder for the state to protect women and children. These impacts were unequally distributed, affecting particularly women and children from marginalized populations. *We call for future policy responses to proactively tackle these issues, based on lessons learned from the previous and current experience.*

Immigrants and refugees:

Canada is a world leader in welcoming migrants and protecting the most vulnerable refugees. But the pandemic exposed how structural inequalities shape the socio-economic and spatial integration of immigrants, refugees, and temporary residents. Many became sacrificial workers, filling out essential jobs while living in the most affected areas. Improving migrants' and refugees' living conditions must be a post-pandemic priority given their significant contributions. As immigration is vital to the present and future of Canada, *we call for policy responses that ensure better, safer working conditions and income for immigrants and refugees, as well as new pathways for accessing permanent resident and citizenship status.*

Other groups at greater risk due to social, economic, or institutional status:

The pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on additional vulnerable groups, such as certain racialized and ethnic communities; people with disabilities, particularly those living in congregate settings; those who are incarcerated; people who are homeless; those who have mental illness; and those suffering from poverty. *We call for future policies and social interventions to address the underlying causes of ongoing discrimination.*

Access to justice

Our system of justice, built on a 19th-century model of in-person encounters, was brought to a virtual halt with the profoundly disruptive impact of the pandemic. But justice is essential to all, especially victims, people in prison, people seeking bail, and people who need immediate resolution of desperate issues, such as the treatment and custody of children. Inability to deliver justice results in profound breaches of rights and sometimes tragedy. This disruption has thus been leading governments, lawyers, and judges to ask how we can reform the justice system to better meet the needs of 21st century Canada. *We call on governments, the courts, and the legal profession to rethink our justice system and support measures to make the legacy of the pandemic a modernized system that promotes access to justice.*

Inequity is not inevitable. It flows from the political, economic, and social policy choices we make. It is a problem that can be solved. With this Declaration we call for:

- a systematic account to document the ways in which this pandemic has shone a light on inequities;
- immediate targeted actions to support the most marginalized;

- a way forward that uses this teachable moment to dismantle the long-standing root causes of inequity.

Difficult times await us. Times in which our resilience and post-crisis long-term solidarity will be tested. We call on decision-makers and the Canadian public to leverage this unprecedented opportunity to reshape our social contract to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable amongst us.

List of signatories, members of the COVID-19 Impact Committee of the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation:

Vardit Ravitsky, Chair of the Committee and Fellow 2020
Cindy Blackstock, Mentor 2012
Nathalie Bondil, Mentor 2018
Timothy Caulfield, Fellow 2013
Carlo Handy Charles, Scholar 2019
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Disclaimer

The named individuals have signed this Declaration in their professional capacity as members of the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation COVID-19 Impact Committee, not on behalf of the organizations or institutions with which they are affiliated.