

**The City of Calgary's Emergency Communication with Vulnerable Populations
Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic**

By: Lily Harris

Abstract

This paper examines the City of Calgary's response in communicating risk to vulnerable populations like unhoused individuals who utilize emergency shelter services. The use of secondary research on COVID-19 in Canada and government communication identifies the city's most at-risk groups, its risk communication and the relationship between these two elements. City of Calgary official communication documents along with work from scholars like Benham et al. (2021), De Vocht et al. (2016), Evans et al. (2021), Jadidzadeh and Kneebone (2020) and Tsatsou (2021) tailor the discussion specifically to Calgary. This paper argues that although the City of Calgary had a thorough approach to successfully conveying its public health agenda, some improvements could have been made to better target supports for vulnerable populations. The main argument proposed is that the City of Calgary needs to improve its risk communication strategies to better engage with, cater to, and support its most unprotected citizens. Specific recommendations for more targeted and effective communication in the future include: maintaining consistent key messaging, disseminating information through in-person methods and implementing a social and digital inclusion strategy built out prior to an emergency.

Research Question

Was the City of Calgary effective in its COVID-19 communications with vulnerable populations? How can the City of Calgary better implement a plan that effectively communicates risk while incorporating the needs of at-risk groups?

In January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced Canadian communicators to engage in risk communication to uphold a protective public health agenda. Coombs (2021) defines risk communication as a communication infrastructure where there is a “transactional communication process among individuals and organizations regarding the character, cause, degree, significance, uncertainty, control, and overall perception of risk communication” (p. 28). This paper explores the City of Calgary’s approach to communications throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with vulnerable populations who use emergency shelter services. It argues that although the City of Calgary had a thorough approach to successfully conveying its public health agenda, some improvements could have been made to target vulnerable populations better. While other at-risk groups are mentioned throughout this paper, this case study will hone in on the relationship between unhoused individuals and pandemic messaging in the years between 2020 and 2021.

With the growing prevalence of social media, vulnerable people worldwide are experiencing a growing digital exclusion in fragile social situations (Tsatsou, 2021, p. 2). First, this paper will map out a literature review that provides a foundational understanding of COVID-19 messaging, communication and the main topics that scholars have discussed. Next, it will bring together scholarly literature and trade sources to identify the gaps in governmental responses to communicating risk relating to COVID-19. Last, it will outline a number of recommendations for how the City of Calgary can improve its outreach with vulnerable populations and prepare for emergencies in the future.

Literature Review on Governmental Emergency Responses

Given the recency of the COVID-19 pandemic, few scholarly articles cover risk management and communication with vulnerable peoples in the City of Calgary directly. The

following literature review summarizes the work of Jadidzadeh and Kneebone (2020), Evans et al. (2021), and Burger and Gochfeld (2018) to summarize how governments structure their risk communications with vulnerable populations based on these groups' living patterns. The Calgary-specific articles engage in secondary research that focuses on a policy review and an analysis of emergency shelter data to conclude how to communicate risk to vulnerable populations. In order to support general COVID-19 facts and findings, this paper draws upon material created by Benham et al. (2021), who engaged in a qualitative study to reveal attitudes, current behaviors and barriers to public health measures directed at reducing COVID-19 transmission. The authors' content analysis and in-depth thematic analysis reveal the issues with conflicting public health messaging and the need for targeted and consistent communication distributed through social media (p. 1).

Jadidzadeh and Kneebone (2020) support the fact that unhoused individuals are particularly susceptible to COVID-19 because of the influx of this population entering and exiting emergency shelters. In doing this, the scholars identify a vulnerable population in the City of Calgary, with similar parallels in situation and experience to seniors (p. 164). Tsatsou (2021) similarly reinforces the information provided by Evans et al. (2021) by outlining the concepts of digital and social inclusion, along with three vulnerable population categories: ethnic minorities, older people and people with disabilities (p. 1). The researcher asserts that social marginalization is significant for these groups, emphasizing the need for solid communication on behalf of the City of Calgary. Expanding on this, Lehning et al. (2017) explain that many cities are building "friendly" initiatives to keep certain at-risk groups engaged and supported. The defined segments of the population are older generations, children and immigrants, with interventions for these respective groups being referred to as AFIs, CFIs and IFIs (p. 46). Finally,

the researchers address a gap in the research on vulnerable populations by gauging underlying goals and assumptions of community initiatives through critical policy analysis, adding to the current literature on crisis preparation (p. 49).

Evans et al. (2021) use a biopolitical framework to analyze governmental responses to homelessness and unpack the meaning behind the term “reticent state,” a concept that describes a state that intervenes only when necessary (p. 4). The information is laid out in a historical progression that gives context to the problem of homelessness in Canada, particularly during local emergencies like those established in Edmonton and Calgary during COVID-19 (p. 9). The details provided in this source inform the background and recommendation sections of this paper. This information, combined with the findings and 10 recommendations by Hyland-Wood et al. (2021), give detailed insights on the direction that the City of Calgary might want to go with its risk communication in the future. In combining their knowledge of crisis and risk communications literature, Hyland-Wood et al. (2021) suggest crucial recommendations for promoting two-way communication between the government and diverse groups (p. 1). While the Evans et al. (2021) article focuses on only one vulnerable group, unhoused individuals being the ones in question, this source tells a story about how Alberta addresses at-risk populations.

While the research conducted by Burger and Gochfeld (2018) is not directly applicable to COVID-19 or the City of Calgary and its risk communication response, it can be used to understand individual motivations when it comes to emergency preparedness (p. 541). The authors held interviews with subjects following Hurricane Sandy to gain insight into which groups and policymakers promoted safety and security (p. 543). Health and safety were high on the list of concerns for those who lived through Hurricane Sandy, suggesting that these are primary concerns in emergencies (p. 550). Furthermore, groups required up-to-date information

about risks, emergency response and shelters when emergency struck (p. 552). Information dissemination is vital for those who have socioeconomic barriers, pointing to a need for improved communication between cities and their homeless populations (p. 552).

COVID-19 Case Study & Homelessness

In December 2019, the first COVID-19 cases arose in China and quickly spread to countries worldwide (World Health Organization, n.d.). By January 2020, Canada had received its first case of the virus and cities across the nation had established local states of emergency, Calgary included (City of Calgary, 2020). Government communicators at all levels were tasked with engaging in risk communication processes to properly inform Canadians of their risk relating to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Calgary, relaying information about emergency preparedness and community response is a primary responsibility of the Calgary Emergency Management Agency (CEMA) (Calgary Emergency Management Agency, 2015, p. 1).

Vulnerable Populations

In communicating with vulnerable groups like unhoused populations and seniors, the City of Calgary utilized an approach that relied heavily on dissemination of information through shared and owned media channels like social media accounts, newsletters and organizational websites (C. Yung, personal communication, November 19, 2021). City councilors worked closely with community support organizations to educate at-risk groups on the spread of COVID-19, the risks and the supports available. While the Government of Alberta primarily controlled the public health messaging and communication, the city advocated for vulnerable groups to enhance funding for aid and services. Additionally, many COVID-19 documents were translated into various languages to accommodate the needs of newcomers to Canada, another “vulnerable” group (City of Calgary, n.d.; Tsatsou, 2021).

Public health scholars Ali Jadidzadeh and Ron Kneebone (2020) stated that social distancing and self-isolation were two primary safety instructions throughout the global pandemic (p. 160). However, this was not an easy task for many unhoused individuals—known as those who do not have accommodation or shelter (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Due to the transient nature of shelter populations, houseless individuals experienced a higher level of risk as threats for this group compounded over the course of the pandemic (Jadidzadeh & Kneebone, 2020, p. 160). This is demonstrated by the fact that “86 per cent of shelter users are classified as transitional shelter clients who stay at an emergency shelter an average of just 1.7 times for 8.4 days per stay” (Kneebone et al., 2015, as cited in Jadidzadeh & Kneebone, 2020). Statistics Canada also reports that roughly 235,000 suffer from homelessness each year (Strobel et al., 2021, para. 1). Communicating with this category of Calgarians is necessary for the City to reduce the spread of COVID-19, primarily due to the way in which the virus is rapidly transmitted through emergency shelters (Jadidzadeh & Kneebone, 2020, p. 164). These scholars also draw comparisons between permanent emergency shelter users and seniors, as both live in institutions that significantly increase their exposure to illnesses like the flu and COVID-19.

Future Response & Recommendations

When it comes to public health messaging, many researchers have underscored a need for consistent communication in order to instill trust in the minds of audience members and encourage adherence to public health measures (Benham et al., 2021; De Vocht & Cauberghe, 2016). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, city councilors worked closely alongside CEMA to roll out an appropriate emergency response plan that would address all Calgarians with varying levels of access to services (C. Yung, personal communication, November 19, 2021). Examining the City of Calgary’s approach to message dissemination among vulnerable groups reveals that

the government was thorough and prepared. The City of Calgary did not have many answers throughout the pandemic. In light of the rapid change in information, inconsistency in messaging was inevitable. As stated previously, government communicators considered the needs of diverse groups by implementing an integrated media approach that harnessed the power of shared, owned and traditional media (C. Yung, personal communication, November 19, 2021). The City of Calgary utilized community partnerships to spread awareness of COVID-19 among hard-to-reach groups and distributed official documents in multiple languages for accessibility purposes. Although the city had a thorough plan for carrying out its public health agenda, some improvements can be made for the future.

After careful analysis of CEMA's community preparedness booklet titled *Calgary Emergency Management Agency: is your community prepared*, it is clear that only one specific group of the Calgary population is being effectively targeted—that being well-integrated home-owning Calgarians (2015, pp. 1-9). Despite the city's best efforts, many changes in COVID-19 messaging and policies created a level of distrust among the public, resulting in misinformation circulated online (Benham et al., 2021, pp. 14-15). Hyland-Wood et al. (2021) outline 10 recommendations for effective communications in the COVID-19 era, of all which can apply to future emergencies and risk management situations (p. 7). To enhance public solidarity and resilience, communicators must engage in clear, consistent communication, strive for credibility, communicate with empathy and honesty, consider diverse community needs and accommodate different levels of health literacy.

Messaging & Framing

For future emergencies, the City of Calgary would benefit from framing public health messaging in a way that considers different audiences and provides the reasoning behind public

health measures (Tsatsou, 2021, pp. 1-15). In addition, government officials will be able to better understand different life perspectives if they work with trusted community leaders who inclusively advocate for their communities and implement population-friendly initiatives (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Tsatsou, 2021). Finally, above all else, the city should ensure that its key messages and risk communication efforts are clear and concise, garnering trust and understanding from the public (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021, p. 3).

Empathetic messages displaying emotion and relevance to vulnerable publics will result in the proper internalization of public health messaging (p. 4). As a result, these stakeholder groups will be more inclined to follow public health messaging, as the information has properly “inoculated” or prepared the audience for future adverse effects (De Vocht et al., 2016, pp. 317-322). In addition, posting information within community hubs like emergency shelters and libraries will allow at-risk groups to engage with public health information regardless of their access to online technologies. Over time, the City of Calgary should ensure that this messaging communicates the “why” behind specific public health mandates and their applicability to homeless groups. This approach is built on the social sciences’ understanding of humans being intrinsically motivated to look after their in-group and their need for relevance in messaging (pp. 5-6).

Promoting Social and Digital Inclusion

Current communication research states that communication resources are imperative for the participation and exercise of citizenship (Baum, 2014, as cited in Tsatsou, 2021). The United Kingdom currently has a Digital Inclusion Strategy that helps address equality, social, health, and well-being issues during times of emergency (p. 1). Intersectionality has also been shown to significantly impact the opportunities that an individual is given, especially in emergencies (p.

2). From this information, one can deduce that the City of Calgary would benefit from communicating risk in a way that genuinely engages unhoused individuals into the discussion. In creating a social and digital inclusion strategy, the city should receive counsel from community reference groups in each target demographic to create sustainable programs and relationships with communities (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Lehning et al., 2017).

Conclusion

As one can see from the contents of this paper, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges for communicators in 2021. In an increasingly technological world, vulnerable groups like unhoused individuals, newcomers to Canada and seniors are excluded from global discussions and social policy (Lehning et al., 2017, p. 46). Although this is a prevailing trend, it is something that governments at all levels should be working to combat to keep all Canadian citizens aware and engaged with their respective communities. This paper identifies gaps in the communication methods used by the City of Calgary throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as the municipality worked to engage the public on the periphery in society. A literature review and a careful analysis were first established to build a comprehensive understanding of the risk communication at play during the years from 2020 to 2021.

In addition to analyzing the City's COVID-19 communications, this paper outlines key recommendations for the City of Calgary to implement in future emergencies. Based on the literature provided, the City of Calgary will primarily benefit from a concise, consistent and honest communications approach that "inoculates" the public to emergency effects in the future (De Vocht et al., 2016, pp. 317-322). In addition, it should frequently liaise with community reference groups to fully understand the needs and wants of different societal groups

Title: [TBA]
Author: [TBA]

(Hyland-Wood et al., 2021, p. 7). Ultimately, the city should implement an approach to communication that engages all citizens, regardless of socioeconomic status, race or age.

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Title: [TBA]
Author: [TBA]

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