



Purpose of the Note

This briefing note examines how the emergence of COVID-19 influenced media coverage of selected social justice issues. We compare media coverage six months prior to the crisis, which includes the time of the Canadian federal election, to six months after the onset of COVID-19. The note also includes polling data that explores public opinion on racism in Canada. This briefing note focuses on selected terms; it is not intended to be an exhaustive account of the issues.

This note represents one aspect of a larger research project we are undertaking. For more context on the emergence of COVID-19 and the response of the Government of Canada, please refer to Appendix 1. For more information about the framework we used, please see Appendix 2.

About the MacEachen Institute

The MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance at Dalhousie University is a nationally focused, non-partisan, interdisciplinary institute designed to support the development of progressive public policy and to encourage greater citizen engagement.

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The COVID-19 Pandemic in Canada: Social Justice Issues and Media Coverage Before and During the Pandemic

Key Observations and Recommendations

- Media coverage that included search terms such as racism, Indigenous, disability and homeless experienced peaks and troughs over the last 12 months: Justin Trudeau / black face story, Wet'suwet'en protests and the death of George Floyd, for example, generated spikes in coverage.
- During the onset of the pandemic in March and April, the social justice topics that we tracked generally received less coverage than at other times in the 12-month period.
- The majority of Canadians agree that racism is a problem in Canada, and 50% feel that government has not done enough to fight racism.
- LGBTQ largely trended downward over the course of ten months but experienced a resurgence in May.

Methods

We identified articles in which the following terms appeared in the title or body of the media article: Indigenous, Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ¹, homeless, racism, and disability. We selected these terms because they represent some of the historically disadvantaged populations in Canada. We also identified articles that mention universal basic income and affordable housing to complement our analysis of media coverage of homelessness.

For the period of July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020, we accumulated articles published in the front-sections of the *Toronto Star* and *National Post*, and by CBC News using the database NexisUni and analyzed them using Excel. We excluded the other sections of these publications and did not do a detailed content analysis of individual articles.

Selected Equity-Seeking Groups²: Race, Disability and Sexual Orientation

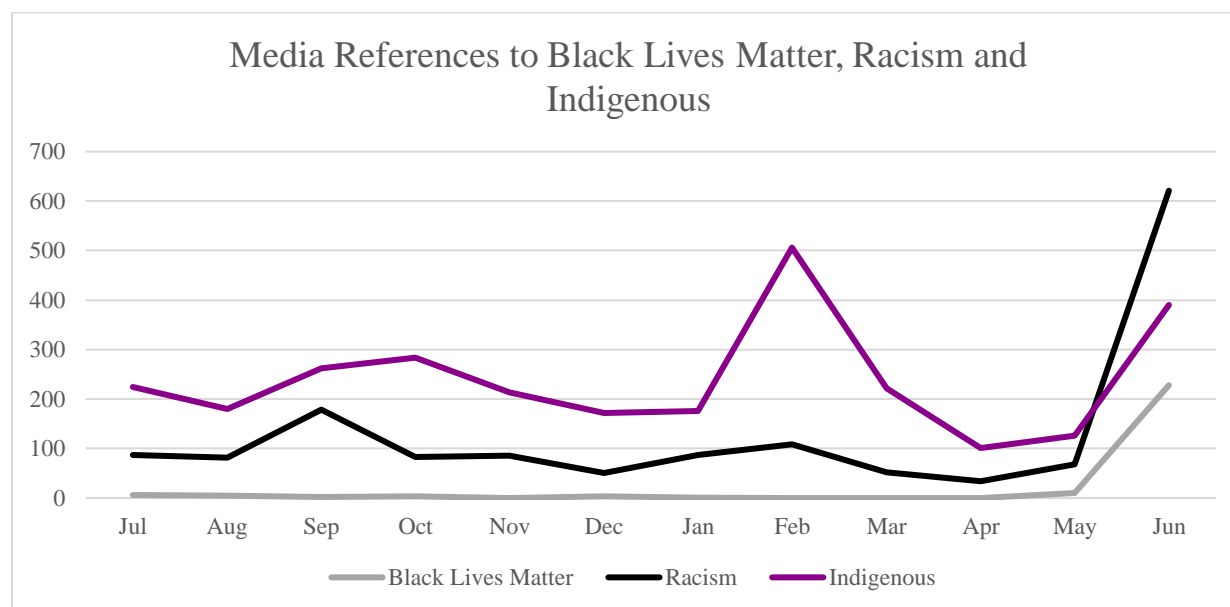


Figure 1: Number of articles mentioning the terms Black Lives Matter, racism and Indigenous published between July 2019 and June 2020.

Table 1: Articles mentioning the terms Indigenous, Black Lives Matter and racism published by CBC News, *Toronto Star* and *National Post* in 2019 (July–December) and 2020 (January–June).

Key Terms	2019 mentions	2020 mentions	Total	% Change
Indigenous	1337	1521	2858	13.8
Black Lives Matter	20	239	259	1095.0
Racism	558	979	1537	75.4

Table 2: Percentage of Canadians polled between July 8-10, 2020 who agree with the statements outlined in the table (Bricker, 2020)

	Racism is an issue in Canada today	I agree with the Black Lives Matter movement	Canada has not done enough to ensure all Canadians have the same rights ³
18-34 years old	70%	72%	58%
35-54 years old	60%	65%	56%
55+ years old	52%	53%	42%
Women	66%	70%	56%
Men	57%	55%	46%
≤ High School	53%	52%	49%
Post-secondary	64%	68%	54%
University Grad	64%	75%	59%
Average	61%	63%	51%

Consistent referencing to the terms Indigenous and racism appear in the media in 2019 with a spike occurring in the run-up to the 2019 federal election when UNDRIP, the Indian Act, the economic development of Indigenous communities and the Justin Trudeau blackface incident were under scrutiny. Another spike in articles occurred in February during the Wet’suwet’en

blockades and protests. There was a decrease in articles mentioning racism and Indigenous issues (see Figure 1) at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the government’s first significant national interventions in Canada (March to May). Despite considerable media attention on COVID-19, racism and Indigenous issues continued to receive some media attention, driven largely by Wet’suwet’en protests. Mentions of Black Lives Matter were almost zero between July 2019 and May 2020. In June 2020, references to all three terms increased significantly in response to the killing of George Floyd, which sparked protests against police brutality and racism in many parts of the world (Dunn, 2020).

In Canada, 60% of people see racism as a problem, up from 47% in 2019, and 28% say that they have personally experienced racism in the past year; around 50% feel that the government should do more to fight racism (Bricker, 2020). Polling data published by IPSOS on July 24, 2020 shows that two out of three Canadians expressed support for the Black Lives Matter movement with women, university graduates and young individuals showing the strongest agreement (see Table 2).

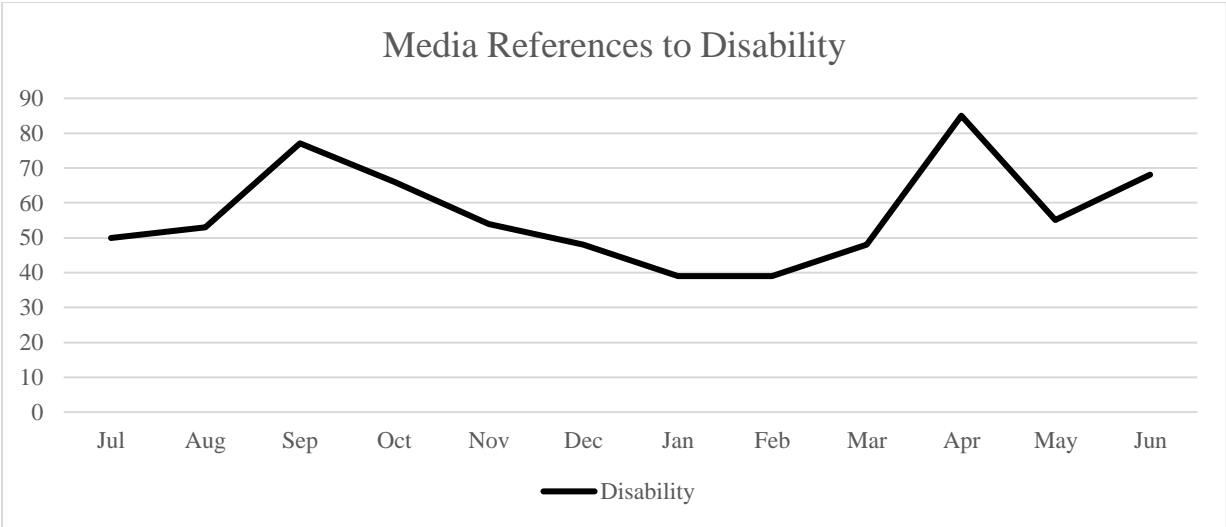


Figure 2: Number of articles mentioning the terms disability and LGBTQ published between July 2019 and June 2020.

Table 3: Total number of articles mentioning the term disability published by CBC News, *Toronto Star* and *National Post* in 2019 (July–December) and 2020 (January–June).

Key Terms	2019 mentions	2020 mentions	Total	% Change
Disability	348	334	682	-4

The number of articles referencing disability peaked both in the run-up to the election and after the emergence of COVID-19 (see Figure 2); overall, the total number of articles reporting on disability in 2020 seems to equal that of 2019 (see Table 3).

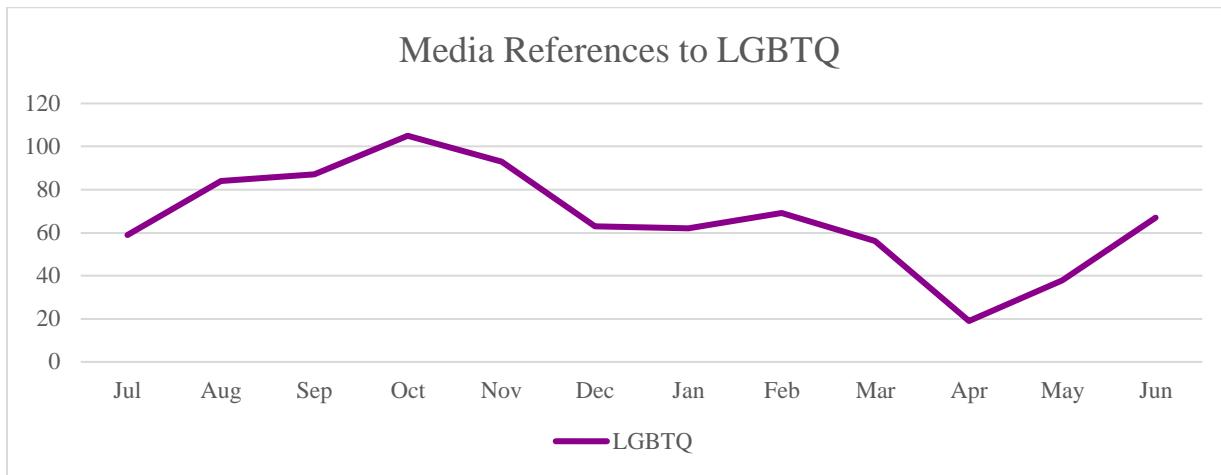


Figure 3: Number of articles mentioning the term LGBTQ published between July 2019 and June 2020.

Table 4: Total number of articles mentioning the term LGBTQ published by CBC News, *Toronto Star* and *National Post* in 2019 (July–December) and 2020 (January–June).

Key Terms	2019 mentions	2020 mentions	Total	% Change
LGBTQ	491	311	802	-36.7

In the run-up to the elections, media references to LGBTQ peak (see Figure 3), after which they continue to decline at a steady rate especially at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in Canada. In May, we see references beginning to increase again; in the first 6 months of 2020, references to LGBTQ decreased by 36.7% compared to the last 6 months of 2019.

Overall, media coverage of issues related to equity seeking groups seem to follow a peak and trough pattern with coverage increasing in the run-up to the election and otherwise declining until an event / controversy stirs up the media’s attention again.

Vulnerable Populations and Related Policies⁴: Homelessness, Affordable Housing and Universal Basic Income

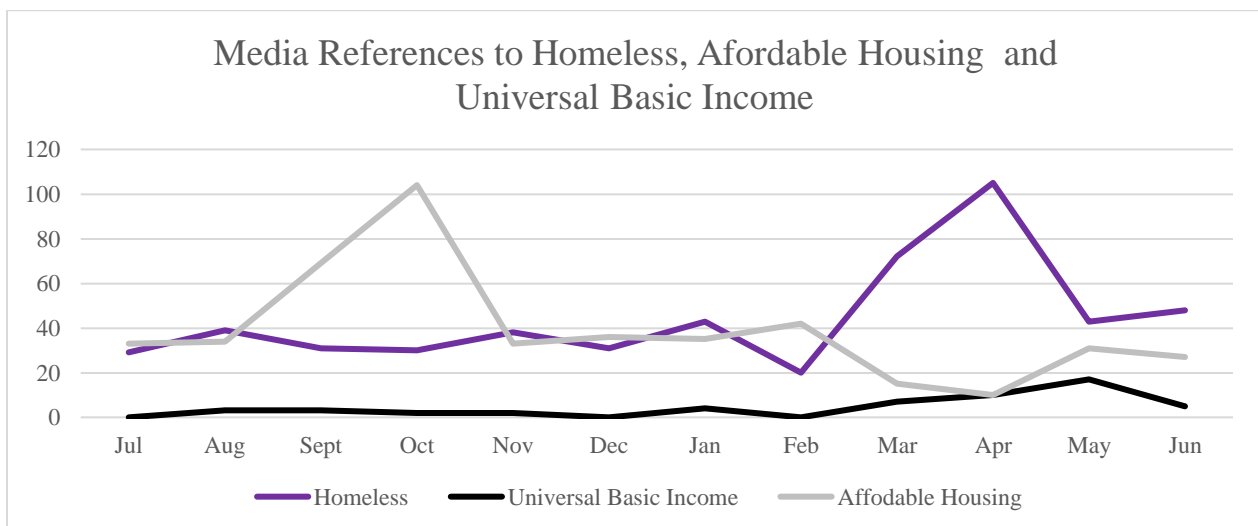


Figure 4: Number of articles mentioning the terms homeless, affordable housing and universal basic income published between July 2019 and June 2020.

Table 5: Total number of articles mentioning the terms homeless, affordable housing and universal basic income published by CBC News, *Toronto Star* and *National Post* in 2019 (July–December) and 2020 (January–June).

Key Terms	2019 mentions	2020 mentions	Total	% Change
Homeless	198	331	529	67.2
Universal basic income	10	43	53	330
Affordable housing	309	160	469	-48.220065

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an increase in references to the word homeless in the media; coverage of this issue peaked in April (see Figure 4). In 2020, references to homelessness in our selected media increased by almost 70% (see Table 5). Despite the increase in media coverage of homelessness during the pandemic, coverage of universal basic income and affordable housing, both of which are policies that could address issues related to homelessness, remained limited; references to affordable housing decreased by 50% in 2020 after peaking in the run-up to the 2019 federal election, while those to universal basic income averaged only seven articles a month in 2020 (see Table 5).

Endnotes

- 1 The terms “gay” and “queer” were also included in the media search.
- 2 Equity-seeking groups are communities that face collective challenges in participating in society and actively seek social justice and reparation. Their marginalization could be due to attitudinal, historic, social and environment barriers based on age, disability, ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation and economic status (Canada Council for the Arts, n.d.).
- 3 The full statement reads: “Canada hasn’t gone far enough in making sure all Canadians, regardless of ethnic, racial or religious background, have equal rights” (Bricker, 2020).
- 4 Vulnerable populations are groups at a higher risk of poor health outcomes due to barriers they experience to social, economic, political and environmental resources (National Collaborating Center for Determinants of Health, 2020).

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Appendix 1

On December 31, 2019, a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China, was reported to the World Health Organization (WHO); these are now known to have been caused by the novel coronavirus (or COVID-19). On January 3, 2020, WHO issued a public warning regarding the virus, and on January 30, it declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of international concern (WHO, 2020a). Canada first took action on January 15 when the Public Health Agency of Canada activated its Emergency Operation Centre to support the country's response to COVID-19 (Government of Canada, 2020a); by February 9, Canada had implemented screening requirements for travellers returning from all areas affected by the virus to 10 airports in six provinces throughout the country (Government of Canada, 2020a; Staples, 2020). On March 11, 2020, WHO declared the global outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic. Following this announcement, the Canadian Government advised Canadians to avoid all non-essential travel outside Canada, required all Canadian travellers entering the country to self-isolate for 14 days, and banned foreign nationals from all other countries, except the United States, from entering Canada (Government of Canada, 2020a). In response to increases in COVID-19 cases throughout the country, one after another, provinces began declaring states of emergency in mid-March (Dawson, 2020). The first case of COVID-19 in Canada was detected in Toronto, Ontario, on January 25, 2020 at which point there were over 1,300 cases confirmed globally. As of August 31, 2020, there have been 128,948 confirmed cases in Canada (114,227 recovered and 9,126 deaths), and over 25 million cases worldwide (848,203 deaths) (Government of Canada, 2020b).

Appendix 2

This briefing note is extracted from a larger research project examining the social and economic pressures exerted on government as a result of COVID-19. Hood, Rothstein and Baldwin (2001) hypothesize that social and economic context shapes the manner in which government regimes act. They define regimes as “the complex of institutional geography, rules, practice and animating ideas that are associated with the regulation of a particular risk or hazard” (p. 9). There are three lenses that Hood et al. use to explore context: (1) the market dynamics, which examine the law, insurance and information and opt-out costs (2) the public's opinions and media's coverage of the risk, which examine polling data and leading media coverage and (3) the role of interests, which examines the concentration of power and influence in affected sectors. The research in this briefing note examines aspects of the second lens, media and public opinion. According to this lens, we seek to determine the extent to which government reaction can be understood as a response to public preferences and attitudes.

More from the MacEachen Institute

The Institute is working to create resources and policy discussions around the COVID-19 crisis. These include briefing notes like this one as well as panel discussions, videos and media commentary. You can find [all resources related to COVID-19 on our website](#).

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- [Labour Issues and COVID-19](#)
- [Quarantine and COVID-19](#)
- [People with Disabilities and COVID-19](#)
- [Health Care and COVID-19](#)
- [Economy and COVID-19](#)
- Climate Change and COVID-19
- The Rise of COVID-19 Terminology