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NARRATIVE REVIEW

BC COVID-19 Actions and Restrictions on Physical Activity

Shannon N. Field^{1,2}, Shannon S. D. Bredin^{1,2*}

1 Laboratory for Knowledge Mobilization, School of Kinesiology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T1Z3

2 Cognitive and Motor Learning Laboratory, School of Kinesiology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T1Z3

*Corresponding Author: shannon.bredin@ubc.ca

Abstract

Background: At the start of 2020, a novel corona virus disease (COVID-19), began sweeping across the world. Canada took numerous measures to reduce transmission, and provinces additionally implemented their own strategies. The province of British Columbia (BC) instated several strategies including “lock-down” type procedures resulting in the closure of businesses, schools, community centres, playgrounds, and exercise and recreation sites. **Purpose:** The purpose of this narrative review and interactive timeline is to provide an overview of the numerous actions and restrictions impacting physical activity in BC. **Methods:** A search was conducted from the dates of March 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021 on the BC Government News Archives, COVID-19 archive records from the Vancouver Coastal Health authority, and municipality websites for the City of Vancouver and the City of Surrey. Total case numbers of COVID-19 in BC were downloaded from a data set on the BC Centre for Disease Control website. This data was combined to produce an interactive timeline using H5P. **Results:** From March 2020 to June 2021, there were at least 34 dates on which actions and restrictions were taken in BC that impacted physical activity. Restrictions ranged from closing facilities, such as community centres, ice arenas, gyms, and fitness studios to parks and playgrounds, while actions included the reopening of these facilities and the provision of funding. **Conclusion:** These restrictions, while meant to control the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure the health and safety of the population, also restricted people’s ability to engage in their usual physical activity.

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Introduction

At the start of 2020, a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) (World Health Organization, n.d.), began sweeping across the world. The rate of transmission and the severity of the disease led to the World Health Organization calling for a state of a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). In Canada, numerous measures were taken to reduce transmission which included such

measures as restricting international travel, physical distancing between individuals, and self-isolation (Government of Canada, 2020).

Additionally, the provinces within Canada implemented their own strategies. The province of British Columbia (BC) instated several strategies including “lock-down” type procedures resulting in the closure of businesses, schools, community centres, playgrounds, and exercise and

recreation sites. The uncertainty of the times and social isolation had a negative effect on mental health (Brooks et al., 2020; Caputo & Reichert, 2020). As such, physical activity was recommended as a coping tool (Amatriain-Fernández et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020) as it has been linked to many health benefits for physical, mental, and social well-being (Warburton et al., 2006).

Despite this recommendation, the restrictions greatly impacted many fitness programs, sports, and outdoor activities. The purpose of this narrative review and related interactive timeline is to provide an overview of the numerous actions and restrictions that impacted physical activity in BC in the first 15 months of the pandemic.

Methods

A search was conducted of the BC Government news archives (<https://archive.news.gov.bc.ca/>) through the dates of March 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021. March 1, 2020 was chosen, based on the announcement of the global pandemic by WHO in the month of March. As the world was already becoming aware of the virus prior to the announcement, this ensured that early considerations from the BC government were not missed. The following terms were used for the search: “COVID-19” or “COVID-19 restrictions” and “sport”, “physical activity” (which also returned results for alternate phrases like active, activities), “fitness”, and “recreation”.

A general internet search was also conducted for news articles relating to COVID-19. Additionally, all of the COVID-19 archive records from the Vancouver Coastal Health authority (<http://www.vch.ca/covid-19>) were also reviewed for physical activity related announcements. Further searches were

conducted on municipality websites for the City of Vancouver and the City of Surrey based on known additional strategies these cities were taking due to particularly high rates of COVID-19 transmission versus other jurisdictions.

Total case numbers of COVID-19 in BC, were downloaded from a data set found on the BC Centre for Disease Control website (<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/data>). The data were summarized in a simple graph to show trends over time and aligned with key public health actions and restrictions that may have influenced physical activity.

Results

The timeline of activities is presented as an interactive H5P timeline (see [INTERACTIVE TIMELINE](#)). From March 2020 to June 2021, there were at least 34 dates on which actions and restrictions were taken in BC that impacted physical activity. Restrictions ranged from closing facilities, such as community centres, ice arenas, gyms, and fitness studios to parks and playgrounds, while actions included the reopening of these facilities and the provision of funding. The first few months of the pandemic saw the heaviest restrictions where “lock-down” type procedures were applied widely and closed most facilities, services, and even outdoor spaces, but were eased as case numbers dropped.

COVID-19 case numbers began rising again in the Summer of 2020, but restrictions were not put in place again until November 2020 when COVID-19 case numbers were much higher than originally seen in the first lock-down (<70 cases per day versus upwards of 500 cases per day in early November). These restrictions included ceasing most sport programs and

fitness classes. These restrictions continued to remain in place for much longer than the first lock-down as cases remained high.

Finally, on May 25, 2021, the province of BC began to ease restrictions with a 4-step “restart plan”, which allowed for outdoor sports and low intensity indoor fitness classes to resume with COVID-19 safety protocols in place. While case numbers were still higher than in the beginning of the pandemic (nearing 200 cases per day), BC continued to move through their restart plan in June of 2021, stating that the residents of BC have received high enough vaccination rates to continue to open up safely (Office of the Premier, 2021).

Discussion

Physical activity has many health benefits for both children and adults, including physical, mental, and social well-being (Engelen et al., 2013; Warburton et al., 2006). As such, physical activity was recommended as a coping tool during the COVID-19 pandemic (Amatriain-Fernández et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020). However, the many restrictions throughout the pandemic impacted access to physical activities for most people.

Lesser and Nienhuis (2020) found varying impacts to Canadians and their physical activity behaviour during the pandemic. They classified participants as inactive or active (participating in <149.9 minutes or >150 minutes of moderate-vigorous physical activity per week, respectively). They found that 40.5% of inactive individuals and 22.4% of active individuals became less active. While 33% of inactive individuals and 40.3% of active individuals became more active. However, it is important to note that the top three activities their participants engaged in were walking, running, and cycling which

would have been lesser impacted by the restrictions.

Accessibility and motivation for physical activity are impacted by numerous factors. This interactive timeline does not consider how personal factors were influenced by the pandemic response. The City of Vancouver and the City of Surrey were the only municipalities examined in addition to provincial and regional orders and guidelines. There were also numerous strategies taken in other regions of BC to control COVID-19, which are not included in the present timeline. For example, numerous First Nations limited access to their communities from outside travellers (Union of BC Indian Chiefs, 2020).

Conclusions

Physical activity is an important contributor to health and wellness. Over the course of 16 months, there were actions and restrictions taken on at least 34 dates in BC that impacted physical activity for all people at unprecedented levels. These restrictions, while meant to control the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure the health and safety of the population, restricted peoples’ ability to engage in usual levels of physical activity which contribute to their health and well-being.

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Authors’ Qualifications

The authors’ qualifications are as follows: Shannon Field, BKin; Shannon S. D. Bredin MSc, PhD, HFFC CEP.

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