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COVID-19 Island Insights Series

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Prince Edward Island

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The COVID-19 Island Insights Series is an initiative spearheaded by the Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law & Governance (SCELG) and the Institute of Island Studies (IIS) at the University of Prince Edward Island in collaboration with Island Innovation. The initiative brings together critical assessments of how specific islands around the world have performed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the extent to which their recovery plans can promote resilience and sustainability in the long term.

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Prince Edward Island (PEI) is the smallest of the 13 provinces and territories of Canada¹ and is the only one completely surrounded by water.

The Island is 5,620 km² (2,170 mi²) in size, making it the 104th largest island in the world².

The population (158,717 as of April 1, 2020) has been growing steadily over the past decade and in recent years has consistently surpassed the growth rate of other provinces in the country³. Most of this growth is as a result of international immigration.

COVID-19 data and timeline

(as of March 2021)

Number of cases 136⁴ [0.086% of the population]

Number of fatalities 0 [0% of the population]

Schools closed on March 17, 2020, and reopened September 8. Online learning was provided by public schools from April 5 to June 26, 2020⁵. There have been two "circuit breaker" periods recently that have closed schools for short periods of time.⁶

Travel restrictions which began on March 13 remain in effect to date with some easing from July to November, 2020. With a resurgence in cases elsewhere in Atlantic Canada, travel and quarantine restrictions were reimposed for those travelling from all other jurisdictions

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¹ Retrieved on September 16, 2020 from <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-largest-and-smallest-canadian-provinces-territories-by-area.html>

² Retrieved on September 16, 2020 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/conseil-executif/island-geography>

³ Retrieved on September 16, 2020 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/finance/pei-population-report-quarterly>

⁴ Retrieved March 02, 2021 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/health-and-wellness/pei-covid-19-case-data>

⁵ Retrieved September 9, 2020 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/news>

⁶ Retrieved Feb. 17, 2021 from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-high-schools-pandemic-changes-1.5868383>

⁷ <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/where-prince-edward-island>

COVID-19 on Prince Edward Island

“We will get through this pandemic *the Island way* – by taking the necessary precautions, by working together and by looking out for one another.” - Premier Dennis King (Government of Prince Edward Island, April 2, 2020)⁸

As of March 02, 2021, Prince Edward Island (PEI) had reported 136 cases of COVID-19. There have been no hospitalizations or deaths and no outbreaks in long-term care facilities for seniors. In March, the federal government of Canada banned all non-essential, international travel, including between Canada and the USA, and required all international travellers to self-isolate or quarantine upon arrival at their destination⁹. These orders remain in place¹⁰. In Canada, provinces have authority over health care and education. This means that as a subnational island jurisdiction (SNIJ), the PEI provincial government was able to make almost all decisions in regard to the island’s public health response to the global pandemic. A public state of emergency was declared on March 16, 2020, giving the public health officer authority over all public activity including health care, education, the economy and social behaviour¹¹. The restrictions on funerals were particularly challenging on an island with strong social networks, where paying respects at funerals and wakes is an important part of social life. Beginning March 21, 2020, anyone arriving on PEI from out of the province was also required to follow self-isolation guidelines, and enhanced screening measures were put in place at all main points of entry (i.e., Confederation Bridge, Charlottetown Airport and two ferries). By April 1, only those travelling for essential reasons (i.e., essential work, compassionate reasons) were allowed to enter the island¹². The combination of the timing of the travel restrictions prior to Spring school

holidays, closing of borders and a high level of compliance by the island population are likely key factors in what can thus far be considered a successful response. The strong sense of place and the perceived external threat of the virus intensified an ‘islanders versus outsiders’ mentality among some that resulted in public reporting of those breaking the public health rules¹³.

A four-phase plan for returning social and economic life on PEI was rolled out from May 1 through June 26. The island remained in phase four until a ‘circuit breaker’ was implemented December 18 after the first instance of suspected community spread of the virus in PEI¹⁴. A second temporary lockdown has just taken place (March 02, 2021) in response to several cases that could not be linked to travel¹⁵. Being a largely rural, cold-water island, the population is accustomed to the notion of isolation, a low population density and a slower pace of life. In the early days of restrictions, some islanders even expressed that they were looking forward to having ‘the island to ourselves’. At the same time, the main economic drivers of agriculture, fish processing and summer tourism meant that 21st-century island life and the island economy was linked closely to what was taking place in the rest of the world.

Key sectoral pressures in Prince Edward Island during COVID-19

As a SNIJ, the island was flooded with announcements from both the federal and the provincial governments of the numerous support programs available to islanders. By mid-June the provincial programs alone were estimated to total \$200 million CAD in commitments¹⁶. PEI’s Premier lobbied the federal government

⁸ Italics added.

⁹ Retrieved on September 21 from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/canada-u-s-border-travel-restrictions-covid-19-1.5689249>

¹⁰ Retrieved on September 21 from <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/latest-travel-health-advice.html>

¹¹ Retrieved on September 9 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/news>

¹² Retrieved September 9 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/news>

¹³ Retrieved September 9 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/news>

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/govpe/>

¹⁵ <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/covid19>

¹⁶ Retrieved September 21 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/finance/budget-address-2020>

for modifications to its COVID support programs to ensure that they captured the ‘special’ needs of islanders dependent on seasonal employment, including the federally regulated fishery.

Although PEI has historically been highly dependent on transfer payments from the federal government, the province entered the pandemic in a relatively strong fiscal, demographic and employment position¹⁷. This was a change from the long-held perception of the island as a quaint and pastoral tourist destination, but also a relative economic backwater, to a jurisdiction viewed as being vibrant, creative and innovative. Early action by the provincial government and a focus on economic stability speaks to an understanding of the connectedness and vulnerability of the island to external shocks. It also speaks to a sense of social and economic resilience; that as an island community “we can and we will overcome” this challenge as we have overcome them in the past - the Island way, by working together and focusing on one another¹⁸.

In 2019 PEI’s tourism industry had set records for tourist visitations (1.6 million) and revenues (\$505 million CAD), with cruise ship traffic up 29.5%¹⁹. Despite these records, the island’s economy had been diversifying from a reliance on primary industries, tourism and public administration to one that is now experiencing significant growth in biotechnology, IT and the aerospace sectors²⁰.

While the provincial government’s response to COVID may not have always been framed as relief for the tourism industry, much of it was indirectly linked to this sector. For example, in June, seasonal residents (many of whom had

island relatives and owned summer homes on PEI) were allowed to return provided they self-isolated for 14 days upon their arrival. They were monitored daily and, where appropriate, tested for the virus²¹. Although this move was met with some opposition, it was defended as allowing “home” those who were really islanders in spirit. By July, an Atlantic bubble, consisting of neighbouring jurisdictions with similar restrictions and successes in controlling the virus (i.e., PEI, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland & Labrador, and New Brunswick) was created, allowing residents from these provinces to travel throughout the region without self-isolating for 14 days. Within the first three days of the announcement of this policy, 5,200 applications for travel to PEI were received and the Premier himself greeted the first visitors at the Confederation Bridge²². Given the exponential growth of cases in neighbouring provinces and the presence of newer, more infectious variants, this bubble ‘burst’ in late 2020 and has not yet reopened.

Passenger air travel to PEI was reduced to one flight by one airline (Air Canada, Charlottetown to Montreal) late in 2020 after passenger travel declined 96% between April and November²³. While the full economic impact in the tourism sector has not yet been calculated for 2020, total visitation and accommodations indicators are down by about sixty percent year over year²⁴. This sector and others indirectly linked to tourism have undoubtedly been adversely affected by the pandemic. However, despite the impacts on these sectors, much of the manufacturing, farming, fishing, construction and public administration continued, and early projections are that the relative financial impact on PEI may not be as severe as elsewhere in Canada. Net domestic immigration is up, as are

¹⁷ Retrieved September 23 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/finance/gross-domestic-product-gdp-income-and-expenditure>

¹⁸ Retrieved September 23 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/finance/budget-address-2020>

¹⁹ Retrieved September 9 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/news/another-record-breaking-year-visitation-and-tourism-revenues>

²⁰ Retrieved September 16 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/finance/gross-domestic-product-gdp-industry>

²¹ Retrieved September 16 from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-seasonal-residents-arrive-testing-1.5588308>

²² Retrieved September 16 from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-atlantic-bubble-opens-1.5636175>

²³ <https://www.theguardian.pe.ca/business/local-business/air-canada-temporarily-cancelling-flights-between-charlottetown-and-toronto-528895/>

²⁴ <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/publication/monthly-tourism-indicators-0>

housing prices²⁵. Further, the unemployment rate in PEI is only 0.3% greater in January 2021 than one year earlier²⁶. The current projection is for a \$172.7 million CAD deficit in 2020-21, but this does not include the \$200 million in pandemic support already committed to be received from the federal government as of June 2020²⁷. The response to date suggests that federal and provincial governments will continue supporting those sectors most in need.

Post COVID-19 recovery - A different approach

PEI has taken a staged and controlled approach to reopening the island's society and economy and this appears to be minimizing the spread of the virus, keeping most businesses solvent and making most islanders feel safe and confident to participate in everyday activities while still following public health directives. PEI is a strong example of leveraging its island characteristics - bounded, connected, tight-knit - to minimize the virus and shelter its economic and social way-of-life. Given the small number of cases and no hospitalizations, images of viral waves may seem out of place on PEI. However, given the clusters of cases emerging in surrounding jurisdictions, the government and general population have remained vigilant and cautious. The few small outbreaks make everyone realize that the situation can change drastically on short notice.

This staged effort to build capacity for restarting the economy began by defining hundreds of seasonal foreign workers, needed in the fish and farm processing sectors, as essential work-

ers. They were supported and monitored for viral infections²⁸. Subsequently, allowing for the return of seasonal residents, and then visitors from Atlantic bubble jurisdictions, were the next elements of this cautious, staged approach to reopening. In the summer of 2020, the capital city of Charlottetown successfully hosted a national professional soccer tournament with security surveillance and testing²⁹. Essentially, this was a smaller version of the bubble approach taken by several of the professional North American sports leagues. As each of these stages of reopening passed without an outbreak, the island's leaders encouraged islanders to be kind and welcoming while maintaining all COVID-19 precautions. It is possible that the government's communications narrative of "working together", "looking out for one another" and the "Island way" may have fuelled existing tensions to view those 'from away' with suspicion, to say nothing of bolstering a false account of an island that is or could be self-sufficient. However, it seems as though the more aggressive approach, including the required and enforced 14-day self-isolation for all non-essential visitors including international and Canadian students, has so far been effective from a public health perspective and, at least partially, from an economic recovery perspective.

Post COVID-19 recovery and the Sustainable Development Goals

On Prince Edward Island, sustainability language has been used primarily in relation to initiatives related to the natural environment and action on climate change³⁰. More recently, the term "sustainable communities" has been used

²⁵ <https://www.apec-econ.ca/publications/view/?do-load=1&publication.id=407>

²⁶ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410028703>

²⁷ Retrieved September 23 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/finance/budget-address-2020>

²⁸ Retrieved September 23 from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-temporary-foreign-workers-quarantine-1.5548804>

²⁹ Retrieved September 23 from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-soccer-players-arrive-cpl-season-1.5681368>

³⁰ Retrieved September 21 from <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/corporate/transparency/briefing/prince-edward-island-environment-profile.html>

in provincial government priorities. Despite being aligned with them, none of these initiatives appear to be tied explicitly to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). When the provincial government tabled its 2020-21 budget in the legislature it framed the global pandemic as a catalyst for awareness and action on priorities such as climate change and noted that the unforeseen downturn was an opportunity to “reset”, to “reimagine our future” and, in particular, to be “sustainability leaders”³¹.

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³¹ Retrieved September 23 from <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/finance/budget-address-2020>

Published COVID-19 Island Insights Papers

- #1. Malta. November 2020
- #2. Egadi Islands. November 2020
- #3. Grenada. November 2020
- #4. Trinidad and Tobago. November 2020
- #5. Shetland Islands. November 2020
- #6. Åland Islands. November 2020
- #7. Guam. December 2020
- #8. Okinawa Islands. December 2020
- #9. Mauritius. February 2021
- #10. Seychelles. February 2021
- #11. Aotearoa New Zealand. February 2021
- #12. Hawai'i. February 2021
- #13. Barbados. March 2021
- #14. Jamaica. March 2021
- #15. Newfoundland and Labrador. March 2021



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