

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

COVID-19

**community
health
impact
assessment**

WHATCOM COUNTY

JULY 2021



executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our community in myriad ways and exacerbated long-standing health inequities. As a public health crisis, it has tested our public health and health care system as never before. It put strain on our economy, our education and child care systems, and the social fabric of our community. The Whatcom County Health Department (WCHD), along with the Public Health Advisory Board, initiated this assessment to better understand exactly how this pandemic affected our community's health and well-being. WCHD's last Community Health Assessment was conducted in 2018, and this COVID-19 Community Health Impact Assessment serves as a timely update. It looks beyond the direct disease impacts of COVID-19 and focuses on five foundational community health priorities, identifying a mixture of positive and negative health effects due to the pandemic.

assessment scope and process

The pandemic occurred within a broader context of social, economic, political, and environmental turmoil. Climate change, political polarization, violence, growing income inequality, and impacts of racial inequity and injustice all shaped the experience of and response to the pandemic. These broader determinants of health are outside the scope of this assessment and yet inevitably affected the local experience.

To strike a balance in the breadth of the assessment's scope, the focus was intentionally limited to the priority areas identified through the county's community health improvement process. There is community-wide recognition of the importance of these issues and ample quantitative and qualitative data illustrating their significant role as key determinants of community health.

The priority areas examined in this assessment are:

- **Kindergarten readiness** (an indicator of child and family well-being).
- **Child care** (an indicator of employment and economic opportunity).
- **Housing security** (ability to retain safe and stable housing as a health determinant).
- **Homelessness** (crisis intervention for unhoused individuals and families as a health determinant).
- **Behavioral health** (a health outcome).

This assessment is a compilation of quantitative data that were drawn from secondary sources, and qualitative data that were collected both from the work of others and by the COVID-19 Community Health Impact Assessment Core Team. Additional information was compiled on the following topics to inform pandemic recovery:

- **Strategic plans and recommendations** from coalitions, task forces, and community groups that are already in place, or currently being developed.
- **Examples from other cities, counties, and states** about how they are planning for COVID-19 recovery.
- **New funding streams** becoming available for COVID-19 recovery.

A team of WCHD staff, plus a group of community experts, reviewed and provided feedback on the report. Their comments and perspectives were integrated into the final product.

How do child care, education, and housing relate to public health?



Health is determined by more than just medical care received or the individual choices each person makes. Health is also determined by social and economic factors like income, employment, education, and housing. When taken together, these social and economic drivers of health account for 40% of what makes a community healthy. ([Learn more about how WCHD measures community health.](#))

summary of systemic impacts of COVID-19

The following summary presents the major themes that emerged from this analysis of COVID-19 impacts. **These are systemic issues that cut across all five of the community health priorities that were studied.**

Negative Impacts at the System Level:

- The pandemic put significant stress on the systems that we already knew were broken, further exposing and increasing health disparities, and heightening awareness of racial inequities and injustices for many in our community.
- The closures of schools and consequent strain on child care programs had a direct impact on families' employment, income, housing and food security, and our county's economic health.
- Many people delayed seeking health care at the height of the pandemic, exacerbating behavioral and physical health conditions, and deferring identification and treatment of developmental delays for young children.
- The shift from in-person to remote school, work, and services of all types, magnified existing inequities in internet access.
- Workforce shortages are a major issue, straining the capacity of organizations to respond to increased needs for support.
- The cascading pandemic impacts across the areas in this assessment have manifested for some in behavioral health issues such as anxiety, depression, and substance use.

Positive Impacts at the System Level:

- The pandemic created momentum behind linking community change-related activities to removing racial inequities.
- There has been increasing collaboration across many service systems.
- Natural social supports have been an essential complement to professional services for helping people through the pandemic.
- Many people working in positions that allowed the flexibility to work from home have come to appreciate the flexibility and autonomy this provides, especially parents/caregivers. Employers have seen benefits to family-friendly scheduling as well.
- Schools and early care and education programs have demonstrated the essential role they play in access to services for children and families, as well as in supporting parental employment.
- Organizations utilized opportunities to try new ways of delivering services and value to their communities. Some of these practices will be permanently adopted.
- Virtual meetings and telehealth increased access to services and opportunities for community engagement.
- Federal and state funding to date has been essential for mounting an effective response to COVID-19 and the community has put those funds to good use.

There are many agencies, coalitions, task forces, and community groups that have been working on these persistent systemic challenges and they have identified research-based interventions known to make a difference. They have documented their work in strategic plans and recommendations for how to strengthen community health. Compiling these existing resources has been a significant part of this COVID-19 Community Health Impact Assessment.

Some of the interventions recommended by local groups include:



- **Prioritizing capacity building, service delivery, and community health initiatives in those communities hit hardest by the pandemic**, particularly among Black, Indigenous, and people of color, people with disabilities and their families, and those living in poverty.
- **Expanding permanently affordable housing availability**, including permanent supportive housing developments.
- **Building an early care and education system with the capacity to support the diverse needs of families, as well as employers.**
- **Expanding timely access to behavioral health services for all age groups.**
- **Supporting workforce development** across all priority areas, including staffing levels, competitive wages and benefits, and adequate training, to increase capacity and resilience and reduce turnover.
- **Addressing the technological divide that exists among communities.** Closing this divide is a systemic fix that has clear economic, educational, and health benefits.




The COVID-19 pandemic has been enormously challenging and our community has rallied to meet the challenge. The many agencies, businesses, organizations, and community groups who have worked together to respond to this crisis should be commended. But there is still much to do as the pandemic continues simultaneously with recovery from its effects. Our community must be vigilant and responsive, allocate resources wisely, and cultivate compassion, inclusion, and ingenuity in order to come out of this crisis stronger and healthier in the years ahead.

summary of current and projected long-term impacts by priority area

This COVID-19 Community Health Impact Assessment presents current and projected impacts of the pandemic, focusing on the five priority areas included in this assessment: kindergarten readiness, child care, housing security, homelessness, and behavioral health.

Some of the impacts have increased health inequities and hardship (referred to as “negative impacts” and symbolized with ↓), and others are positive innovations that should be maintained indefinitely (referred to as “positive impacts” and symbolized with +). These impacts are summarized in the following chart.

PRIORITY AREA	CURRENT IMPACTS	PROJECTED LONG-TERM IMPACTS
 <p>KINDERGARTEN READINESS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ Growing social, racial, and economic disparities, which negatively affect school readiness. ↓ Less access to early care and education (ECE) programs. ↓ Delays evaluating and addressing children’s special health care needs, especially for low-income and immigrant families. ↓ Staffing shortages in early intervention services. + Adaptations by schools and ECE programs to ensure access to services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ Widening gap in longer-term educational outcomes between children with and without resources. ↓ Larger cohorts entering schools with greater need for educational support services. ↓ Not enough early learning and early intervention staff to meet need. + Innovations in education resulting from adaptations put in place during the pandemic.
 <p>CHILD CARE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ Child care and school closures impact families’ finances, behavioral health, housing, and food security. ↓ Financial hardship for child care operators. ↓ Gap between child care need and availability; inadequate staffing. + Collaborative and creative efforts to address child care shortage. + Benefits of flexible work schedules. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ Parents need wage increases, expanded child care capacity, and/or child care subsidies. ↓ Widening gap between needed and available spots. + Working from home changes child care needs. + Creative, new child care models. + Federal funding and policies address child care shortage.

PRIORITY AREA	CURRENT IMPACTS	PROJECTED LONG-TERM IMPACTS
 <p>HOUSING SECURITY</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ Worsening lack of affordable housing for rent or purchase. ↓ Large debts from unpaid rent/mortgages and other bills. ↓ Insufficient workforce in housing support programs. ↓ Increased costs and length of time to develop additional housing. + Eviction moratoriums and rental assistance kept people housed. + Increased awareness and momentum to address housing issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ Worsening trends in housing affordability and availability. ↓ Unpaid debts may result in evictions/homelessness. ↓ Increasing gap between need for housing services and housing support system capacity. ↓ Ongoing delays and increased costs for housing projects.
 <p>HOMELESSNESS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ Tenuous living arrangements with family/friends ended; surge in homeless families with children temporarily housed in motels. ↓ Housing assistance programs stagnate, limiting access to services. ↓ Reduced homeless services to ensure COVID-19 safety. ↓ Need for more housing support staff. + Increased urgency, funding, and action to address and prevent homelessness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ Temporary funding and housing support programs may end; homelessness may increase. ↓ Continuing low inventory of affordable and transitional housing options. + Resumption of homeless outreach services.
 <p>BEHAVIORAL HEALTH</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ Increased incidence of behavioral health (BH) issues for all age groups. ↓ Increased demand for BH care and ongoing shortage of providers; limited services and long wait lists. ↓ Persistent inequities in access to community based BH care + Telehealth helped bridge access to BH services; need equitable access to broadband service. + Community collaborations and natural supports help meet needs. + Many teens feel hopeful; some benefit from remote schooling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ Long-term residual BH issues after the pandemic. ↓ Inadequate BH care capacity until the workforce issues are addressed. + Schools, churches, and other community organizations resume social support role.

For access to the complete report, please visit:
whatcomcounty.us/covidimpact