

# Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Sexual and Reproductive Health of Adolescents in Alberta, Canada

Dr. Salima Meherali, University of Alberta, Faculty of Nursing; **Mariam Ahmad, MPH**; Dr. Bisi Adewale; Samar Kauser, BComm; Aamna Ismail Rehmani, MSc

## Introduction

A range of intersecting barriers already exist preventing adolescents from accessing appropriate sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. The pandemic imposed additional barriers further reducing access to SRH services. Understanding the effects of these measures is a crucial step towards informing effective services, supports, and strategies to improve adolescents' access to SRH services during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Methods

A qualitative study using an interpretive description (ID) approach and community-based participatory research principles was conducted to capture the subjective experience and perceptions of adolescents and service providers. With the collaboration of the Adolescent Advisory Group and community partners, 18 adolescents and 15 service providers were recruited for the study through purposive sampling. Findings from the qualitative interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis.

## Participants

Participants were Albertan adolescents aged 15-19 years old who were seeking or had accessed SRH services in the past five years or healthcare professionals who provided SRH care to youth who are fluent in English. We used a purposive sample of 18 adolescents and 15 healthcare providers from various backgrounds and socioeconomic standing (e.g., low-income, newcomers, black indigenous and people of colour, transgender and gender-incongruent).

**Results** Three broad themes emerged from the adolescents' and service providers' qualitative interviews:

### 1) COVID-19 SRH Experience

Adolescents had both positive and negative experiences regarding SRH services during the pandemic. Majority of adolescents reported changes in their SRH before and during the pandemic. These were challenges in accessing reliable information and walk-in clinics, as the pandemic led to the switch to remote consultation and longer times to seek professional SRH services. Service providers commented on how SRH services were de-prioritized during the pandemic. Several adolescents reported the easy accessibility of using online services for their SRH needs and frustrations regarding the complicated process of booking online appointments and accommodating the reduced clinic hours with school or other commitments.

### 2) Barriers to SRH

Many adolescents experienced challenges that were brought on by the closure of schools, limited hours of stores, and the absence of a support system. Service providers also stated that COVID-19 restrictions impacted their ability to facilitate SRH education sessions in schools.

### 3) Adolescent SRH Strategies

During this study we inquired about adolescents' perceptions regarding the development of a mobile application as a method to access information and resources on SRH and what strategies proved to be useful to them during the pandemic. Most of the participants expressed that they would use a mobile application to access SRH information. Participants also provided strategies they believed would be more beneficial for the adolescents such as anonymous forums, SRH helplines, menstruation tracking, and SRH social media advertising.

## Acknowledgements

Adolescent Medicine Clinic and Birth Control Centre in Edmonton.

## Contact Details

[Meherali@ualberta.ca](mailto:Meherali@ualberta.ca)

## Purpose

To investigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health measures on SRH of adolescents in Alberta, Canada.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on adolescents' access to SRH education and services. School closures, limited store hours, and a lack of social support contributed to an overall decline in SRH well-being. Adolescents faced numerous barriers in obtaining essential SRH products and services and experienced a knowledge gap. Service providers also experienced barriers in reaching adolescents for sexual and reproductive health education and services. Most participants supported a mobile application development to increase SRH resources access. By incorporating these insights, targeted interventions can be developed to enhance SRH well-being and empower adolescents to navigate their SRH confidently during public health crises.

## References

- UNFPA. *Not on pause: Responding to the sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescents in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.* (2020). Available from: [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Not\\_on\\_Pause.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Not_on_Pause.pdf)
- Vass E, Bhanji Z, Adewale B, Meherali S. Sexual and reproductive health service provision to adolescents in Edmonton: a qualitative descriptive study of adolescents' and service providers' experiences. *Sexes.* (2022) 3(1):98-114. <https://doi.org/10.3390/sexes3010009>
- VanBenschoten H, Kuganatham H, Larsson EC, Endler M, Thorson A, Gemzell-Danielsson K, et al. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on access to and utilisation of services for sexual and reproductive health: a scoping review. *BMJ Glob Health.* (2022) 7(10):e009594. doi: 10.1136/bmjgh-2022-009594.

