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## Laurier researchers studying mental health impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on Canadian workers

WATERLOO – As Canadians implement social distancing measures to minimize the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), researchers at Wilfrid Laurier University are studying the effects of social isolation on Canadian workers in real time.

[Simon Coulombe](#), assistant professor of psychology, is leading a study entitled “Overcoming the unseen: The effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the mental health of Canadian-based workers.” Coulombe and his research team aim to determine how factors related to the COVID-19 outbreak, especially social distancing measures like working from home, impact individuals’ mental health, family relationships, finances and overall wellbeing. They also seek to provide recommendations on workplace policies and government legislation that could minimize the negative impacts.

“We are in an unprecedented moment. Canadians are not used to this level of social isolation,” said Coulombe. “This is a unique opportunity to study how workers are affected by such a drastic change in their routines. How does being home together all day strain family relationships? How does taking care of children while working impact the quality of work? And what are the ripple effects on mental health?”

Coulombe is collaborating with two professors at the Université du Québec à Montréal and Tyler Pacheco, a graduate student in Laurier’s Community Psychology program. It was Pacheco who conceived the idea for the study, inspired by the upheaval he has observed in the personal and professional lives of his loved ones since the COVID-19 outbreak began.

“We want to find ways to help employees cope with this unexpected shift,” said Pacheco. “How do we best support workers in such a complex and dire situation?”

Coulombe’s research team began by surveying 700 Canadian adults who were working at least 20 hours per week before the COVID-19 outbreak. The survey included questions about how changing work arrangements have affected their productivity; the functioning of family and romantic relationships; the financial impacts of the crisis; household disaster preparedness; and anxiety generated by constant coronavirus news coverage. The same sample group will be surveyed again in two weeks, then after two months to assess how their attitudes, wellbeing and routines have evolved.

The researchers are also conducting a social network analysis to study how participants’ online behaviours may change in relation to reduced opportunities for face-to-face interaction. As participants lose their ability to engage with friends, family and co-workers in person, Coulombe’s team will determine if they seek more engagement with people online and whether that engagement sufficiently meets their social needs.

“Since we don’t know how long this situation will last, our goal is to find results as soon as we can to help support workers during this trying time and, if needed, improve our response to future crises,” said Coulombe.

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