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Organizational Responses to The Covid-19 Pandemic on Youth Sport in Canada and Scotland

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Introduction

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit different countries with varying intensity, responding to the crisis has presented an unprecedented challenge to most governments both in terms of scale and in the depth of impact on health, on the economy and on citizens' well-being. Many challenges remain if countries are to successfully recover and build back better the next time. Many countries are still trying to understand and respond to the impact of long Covid. Real-time sharing of lessons is critical for ongoing crisis response, for recovery efforts and for increasing organizational resilience in the long run. The qualitative analysis captured in this research provides an organisational voice and critical reflection upon what worked, what did not work and for whom in terms of sport for youth in Canada and Scotland.
2. The effects of COVID-19 continue to be felt by individuals, communities and organizations in Canada and Scotland. The emergence of Covid-19 served to create the conditions that led to a unique period of experimentation in the design and delivery of public services in both Scotland and Canada, including those public services accountable for the delivery of youth sport. The focus during Covid-19 reflected a need for short term outcomes linked to, for example, reducing direct health harms from the virus and maintaining vital public services. Yet in both Canada and Scotland the disproportionate effect of both the virus and the response to the virus was felt unevenly and disproportionately by individuals and communities on the margins.
3. There is evidence to suggest that some Covid-19 interventions may have widened pre-existing inequalities. In Canada, communities and individuals experiencing social and economic marginalisation and systemic racism shouldered the greatest burden of the covid-19 pandemic.¹ In Scotland evidence suggests that Covid-19 exacerbated many of pre-existing inequalities and exposed the vulnerability of some population groups.² The pandemic has also drawn out the effect of deprivation as a spatial focus for multiple inequalities and poor outcomes.
4. A smaller number of evaluations have examined how experiences in sport varied on the basis of equality characteristics, social economic disadvantage and geography.³ Evaluations have found lower levels of take up, barriers to access for youth on the margins and disproportionately negative effects on more disadvantaged groups.⁴

¹ Mishra, S. (2023). Use and Misuse of Research: Canada's Response to Covid-19 and its Health Inequalities. *BMJ* 382: e075666. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2023-075666> (Published 24 July 2023).

² Scottish Government (2021). *The Impacts of Covid-19 on Equality in Scotland*. Edinburgh. Scottish Government.

³ Aubin, K, Darnell, S, Jarvie, G, Simpson, K and Walker, R. (2023) *Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth sport in Canada and Scotland: A scoping review of literature*: Research report one.

⁴ Centre for Sport and Human Rights. (2021). *Children, sport and Covid-19*. [online] (cited on 11 April 2024). Available from: <https://sporthumanrights.org/library/special-podcast-series-children-sport-and-covid-19/>.

5. It is not the objective of this briefing paper to evaluate national Covid-19 responses in terms of sports provision but rather to provide useful insights in the hopes that these can feed into ongoing policy efforts and future resilience of sports organizations in Canada and Scotland. The conclusions and recommendations should be considered preliminary since national evaluations of the impact of Covid 19 are still ongoing in many communities. *Organizational Responses to The Covid-19 Pandemic on Youth Sport in Canada and Scotland* is the second of two substantial reports enabled through joint funding from the University of Toronto and the University of Edinburgh joint collaboration awards.⁵
6. The primary research question in this second report focuses upon the organisational capacity and capability for youth sport pre, during and post covid 19. The rationale for the focus emanated from the scoping review of literature that identified a gap in what we know about how sports organizations responded and coped with the pandemic. In the wake of the COVID 19 sports organizations have had to reflect upon their adaptability, operations, people and sustainability.
7. The report is structured around seven themes (i) a brief synopsis of impact of Covid 19 on youth sport in Canada and Scotland; (ii) a briefing note on the findings from national responses to the pandemic with a particular emphasis on Canada and Scotland; (iii) a critical reflection upon organizations and their state of readiness for the pandemic; (iv) a note on the methods used in this qualitative analysis of sports organisations; (v) the thematic findings from semi-structured interviews from Canadian and Scottish sports organisations; (vi) Key observations and recommendations from the two reports and (vii) a concluding remarks.

The Covid 19 Pandemic on Youth Sport in Canada and Scotland

8. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a global pandemic.⁶ Though the virus seemed indiscriminate and often gave rise of a sense that we were all in this together, the capacity to soften its impacts were not spread equally, either between or within countries. The pandemic produced immense health, social and economic challenges. Most people in the world experienced some form of lockdown as part of strategies of containment. More vulnerable regions, and deprived urban areas, saw higher infection and mortality rates than others. Covid-19 strained healthcare systems. But the effects were felt across every sphere of organizing including youth sport and the organizations responsible or accountable for delivering youth sport.

⁵ Aubin, K, Darnell, S, Jarvie, G, Simpson, K and Walker, R (2023). *Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth sport in Canada and Scotland: A scoping review of literature*: Research report one.

⁶ OECD (2020). Territorial impact of Covid-19: Managing the crisis across levels of government. [online] (cited 13 April 2024):

<https://www.oecd.org/cfe/regionaldevelopment/Presentation%20Dorothe%20Allain-Dupre%20-%20ERSA%2026%20August%20-%20Territorial%20impact%20of%20COVID-19.pdf>

9. For much of 2020, countries closed their borders and ordered their citizens to stay at home. Sporting events were cancelled, sports clubs searched for alternative forms of delivery as gathering places closed. Employees in some sectors were able to work remotely from home. Other workers were furloughed or laid off. Most countries were ill prepared for the pandemic, underestimating the level of risk, while many countries lacked crisis plans for pandemics. The virus reasserted itself in late 2020, when a new more virulent strain arrived. The return of strict lockdowns at that point brought an overwhelming feeling of déjà vu. This pattern was repeated infections rose again, and a new strain, Omicron, was identified in late November 2021. On May 5th, 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared with great hope an end to Covid-19 as public health emergency while acknowledging the ongoing existence and effect of the virus.⁷
10. Understanding youth sport during the Covid-19 pandemic can help build the environment back better by improving current systems and learning lessons that can help reflect critically upon future preparedness. To do so, our collective knowledge of the context must be set forth before critically reflecting upon developments. Throughout Covid-19, researchers thought about youth sport's global fragility and challenged society to rethink of sport as a tool to protect and enable youth. In the first of our research reports we provided an integrative comparative overview of published research on youth sport in Canada and Scotland in relation to Covid-19.⁸
11. In a previous stage of this research project, we conducted a scoping review of the impact of COVID-19 on youth sport in Canada and Scotland. In general, the review found that multiple issues that existed previously in youth sport provision in the two countries (accessibility, affordability, deprivation, etc.) were exacerbated as a result of the pandemic.
12. In both countries, the pandemic had a direct and adverse impact on sport participation rates, on the mental health of participants and coaches/teachers, and forced sport organizations to become more creative in their delivery of sport and physical activity programming for young people. Differential access to sports, already stratified based on income and access to facilities, was further exacerbated by pandemic restrictions.⁹
13. Overall, we found that in both countries, the increasingly privatized and professionalized structure of youth sport meant that family income was already

⁷ United Nations (2023). WHO chief declares end to Covid-19 as a global health emergency. [online] (cited 13 April 2024): <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/05/1136367>

⁸ Aubin, K, Darnell, S, Jarvie, G, Simpson, K and Walker, R (2022). *Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on youth sport in Canada and Scotland- Research Report One*. [online] (cited 13 April 2024) : <https://www.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/atoms/files/uo-uo-ot - youth sport covid-19 pandemic report.pdf>

⁹ Heal, B., Sailofsky, D., Warner, M., Darnell, S. & Robinson, J. (2021). *Change the Game: A Study Focused on Youth Sport Access, Engagement and Equity Factors in the Wake of the Pandemic*. Maple Leafs Sport and Entertainment (MLSE) Foundation, Toronto, ON.

a primary driver of access to youth sport and Covid-19 restrictions put greater pressure on families, creating further income disparities.

Emerging National Responses and Future Preparedness

14. A number of national responses have been initiated in the aftermath of Covid-19 with a view to reflecting upon the lessons learned and future preparedness.¹⁰ Mental health has been identified by some international reports as a shadow pandemic of Covid-19.¹¹ A series of OECD reports reviewed 67 evaluations by 18 governments of the initial pandemic response. The report concluded that the existing evidence base provided decision makers with key insights that could be drawn upon in developing ongoing recovery efforts and future preparedness in relation to a nation's resilience.¹² Figure 1: outlines 14 key messages.

1	Investment in risk anticipation capacities and in critical sectors was insufficient in most countries for adequate pandemic preparedness.
2	Interagency co-operation requires commitment from leadership and fit-for-purpose governance structures with clear mandates.
3	To be effective, crisis management needs to rely on predefined internal communication and reporting channels, which can prove challenging between levels of government.
4	Scientific advisory bodies provided valuable evidence to inform decision-making during this complex crises, but could rely on more varied sources of expertise.
5	More targeted, informed and coherent messaging is needed to foster trust.
6	Governments could involve civil society, the private sector and local actors more to increase transparency in decision-making and facilitate the implementation of crisis management responses.
7	Tax measures have played an important role in supporting the liquidity of households and businesses, but did not always target the right beneficiaries.
8	Balance-sheet measures likely kept businesses afloat on the short term, but they come with risks linked to their longer term budgetary costs.
9	Measures aimed at households were generally successful at supplementing existing social safety nets.
10	Countries rapidly deployed measures aimed at supporting businesses but had to adapt them frequently, impacting their relevance and effectiveness.
11	Learning from the global financial crisis, countries massively deployed measures aimed at supporting self-employed workers.
12	To minimise the social impacts of the crisis, countries had to implement policies targeted at the most disadvantaged groups in society.
13	Countries encountered important implementation challenges in mitigating the health impacts of the crisis.
14	Countries were quick to close their border and implement travel restrictions, but encountered issues with coherence of, and compliance with, lockdown measures.

Figure 1. Key insights from national evaluations of COVID-19 responses

15. The Scottish Covid-19 Inquiry and UK Covid-19 Inquiry were set up to examine Scotland's and the UK's responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Scottish

¹⁰ Razak F, Shin S, Naylor CD, Slutsky AS (2022) Canada's response to the initial 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic: a comparison with peer countries. [online] (cited 11 April 2024) CMAJ2022;194: E8707. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.220316> .

¹¹ Reid, C, Grant, L, Jarvie, G, Kerr, G, Brockett, C, Morris, J, Banda, D, Murray, A, Almuhammad, M, Taminen, K, Reardon, C, Simpson, K (2022). Sport for mental health: A global strengths-based change system. Doha, Qatar: World innovation summit for health

¹² Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2022) First lessons from government evaluations of COVID-19 responses: a synthesis. [online] (cited 11 April 2024)- <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/first-lessons-from-government-evaluations-of-covid-19-responses-a-synthesis-483507d6/>

COVID-19 Inquiry is investigating the devolved strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2022. The UK Covid-19 Inquiry is investigating the period to 28 June 2022.¹³ A total of 12 sessions held between 16 January and 1 February 2024 gathered evidence about the UK response to the pandemic and to learn lessons concerning future preparedness. Both inquiries are obliged to take steps to minimise any duplication of evidence gathering, investigation and reporting, and continue to liaise in this regard.

16. In Scotland as of January 2024 more than 18,000 people had died from Covid. The rates were very similar Scotland and England and slightly lower in Wales and Northern Ireland.¹⁴ In Canada as of March 2024 more than 53,000 people died and nearly five million contracted COVID-19.¹⁵ In November 2023 The Scottish Government released *Learning to inform Scotland's recovery from COVID-19*.¹⁶ The report complemented and reinforces the recommendations of the Social Renewal Advisory Board Report,¹⁷ the Citizens Assembly¹⁸ and the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery. There were also frequent references to the recommendations of the Christie Commission on the Future of Public Services.
17. As pressures to return to previous patterns of 'normal' a number of observations, short of recommendations, can be garnered from these reports including: (i) the need for better evidence on how policies are experienced by disadvantaged and marginalised groups, (ii) that some Covid-19 interventions had widened pre-existing inequalities, (iii) that public trust was central to building resilience and future preparedness, (iv) that trust between organizations was crucial for effective policy delivery, (v) that a greater clarity of purpose was needed around shared outcomes where cross sector activity was necessary, (vi) the observation that public and third sector services could be mobilised quickly and flexibly if red tape was reduced, local decisions were devolved more and targeted local crisis funding was made available, (vii) in some cases collaborative working forged during the pandemic has resulted in attitudinal change and more resilient relationships in some instances, (viii) that greater levels of autonomy given to local third sector organizations with flexible funding enabled local leaders to meet outcomes that mattered locally, (ix) the huge leap in the use of digital technology across sectors and (x) the importance of reflecting upon the risks of inaction as well as action.

¹³ Scottish Covid-19 Inquiry (2024). [online] (Cited 11 April 2024)- <https://www.covid19inquiry.scot/>

¹⁴ Summers, L (2024). Covid inquiry turns spotlight on Scottish decisions. [online] (11 April 2024) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-67985184>.

¹⁵ Government of Canada (2024). Covid 19 epidemiology update- current situation. [online] (cited 11 April 2024) <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/covid-19/current>.

¹⁶ Scottish Government (2023). *Learning to inform Scotland's recovery from Covid-19*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government Publications (November 2023).

¹⁷ Scottish Government (2023). *Coronavirus (COVID-19): Learning and Evaluation Oversight Group - expert reviews*. Scottish Government [online] (cited 11 April 2024) <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-learning-and-evaluation-oversight-group-expert-reviews/> .

¹⁸ The Citizens Assembly of Scotland (2021). *Doing politics differently*. [online] (cited 11 April 2024)- <https://citizensassembly.theapsgroup.scot/summary/Citizens-Assembly-Summary-Report.pdf>

18. Yet the most striking lesson to be learned was concerning the impact the pandemic on equality in Scotland. Before the pandemic there was already evidence of an inequality crisis in Scotland. Something that has only been exacerbated as result of the pandemic, Brexit and cost of living crisis in which available family income to spend is less and the cost of consumables has increased. In line with other national evaluations there is certainly a need for a new 'common sense' if not a renewed social contract.
19. The Scottish evidence points to the fact that socio-economically disadvantaged people are more likely to experience poorer mental and physical wellbeing, lower life satisfaction, and feelings of loneliness, all of which either have already been impacted by Covid or are likely to be impacted by an economic downturn and increased poverty.¹⁹ Children and younger people seem to have taken one of the hardest hits to mental health as result of the pandemic. Older people continue to be at a higher risk of death while disabled people are also experiencing higher rates of death. People of minority ethnicities are experiencing the economic effects of the crisis harder.²⁰ Women are experiencing significant mental health impacts from the pandemic and across the UK continue to be lonelier than men. Women are also the vast majority of lone parents.²¹
20. It is crucial to also recognise the importance of not just a human rights approach but an intersectional approach to inequality. While many of these groups overlap, for example in Scotland women, disabled people and those of many minority ethnicities are all more likely to be low earners; there are more older women than men; minority ethnic people are younger than the White population on average; and the vast majority of lone parents are women. The Scottish evidence strongly suggests that Covid-19 has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities therefore it is vital that future preparedness takes account of overlapping disadvantage.
21. A series of evaluations reported in the BMJ held Canada's government to account for its response to Covid 19.²² The contradiction and tensions in the Canadian Governments approach to the pandemic are posed through a number of questions.²³ Was and is there a contradiction between domestic and global health priorities? Did the nature of the pandemic make it impossible for the government to deliver on good intentions? Was it business as usual for a trade dependent country tied to a world economy dominated by powerful transnational corporations?

¹⁹ The Scottish Government (2022). *The Impacts of Covid-19 on equality in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

²⁰ The Scottish Government (2022). *The Impacts of Covid-19 on equality in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

²¹ The Scottish Government (2022). *The Impacts of Covid-19 on equality in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

²² Houston, A, Liu, J, Habibi, R, Murthy, S and Madhukar, P. (2023). Canada's role in covid-19 global vaccine equity failures. [online] (cited 11 April 2024) PMID: 37487600 DOI: [10.1136/bmj-2023-075149](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2023-075149).

²³ Kelly, L. (2023). Domestic health security requires more than talk about global equity. [online] (cited 11 April 2024) *BMJ* 2023;382: p1622. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.p1622> (Published 24 July 2023)

22. The report concludes that the reasons behind the disparity between Canada's talk and actions may never be fully explained given the diminishing prospects of a public inquiry on the country's pandemic response. At least three beliefs are highlighted as hindering progress: (i) The first belief is that equity is harmful to national self-interest when there is global scarcity of an essential good like vaccines; (ii) that equity is viewed as charity and that in a globally interconnected world, mitigating the conditions in which outbreaks are more likely to occur, or preventing them from becoming epidemics and pandemics, is a collective action problem requiring shared investment not charity; and (iii) the final belief being that domestic political success means not championing global equity too loudly for fear of alienating voters with conservative values.²⁴
23. The danger with this that in an unequal world, it is inequity that breeds disillusion, and division and ultimately public distrust in political processes and political elites. One of the main takeaways from the national responses is the importance of policies targeting the most disadvantaged groups in society and strengthening social safety nets to protect the fabric of societies before, during, and after a pandemic. Despite irrefutable evidence of how inequities hindered the pandemic response meaningful commitment to equity as a core principle remained a key sticking point for many governments in relation to any pandemic treaty with their citizens.

Organizations and the Pandemic

24. The arrival of the virus and its devastating pandemic compel us to ask what this meant for the organizations responsible for the delivery of youth sport during and post pandemic and how this compares to pre-pandemic levels of sport for youth.
25. An analysis of one local authority sport and leisure trust in Scotland between March 2020 and October 2022 revealed that gym and fitness memberships had recovered to 97% of pre-covid levels; visits to leisure centres had recovered 95%; community sports customers had recovered to 88%; and public swimming had recovered 96%.²⁵ High tech organizations were one of the winners from the pandemic as Health authorities recommend digital tools for home-based sport and exercise routines to stay active and healthy during the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁶ Participants engaged in a variety of fitness workouts, most frequently practiced with the help of publicly accessible fitness videos from video-sharing platforms. The pandemic not only forced sport organizations, but also consumers, including parents and guardians, to think of youth sport and physical activity participation in new and different ways thus potentially modifying sport habits of youth.

²⁴ Kelly, L. (2023). Domestic health security requires more than talk about global equity. [online] (cited 11 April 2024) *BMJ* 2023;382: p1622. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.p1622> (Published 24 July 2023)

²⁵ The Board Minutes of one sport and leisure trust in Scotland at March 2023.

²⁶ Mutz, Muller, J and Reimers, A. (2021). Use of Digital Media for Home-Based Sports Activities during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Results from the German SPOVID Survey. *International journal of environmental research and public health*. Published online 2021 Apr 21. [online] (cited 13 April 2024): doi: [10.3390/ijerph18094409](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18094409) .

26. For sport organizations to not only recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, but also become stronger sport providers, proactive actions must be taken to understand how the pandemic might have affected youth sport.²⁷ The pandemic has important implications for community sport. Understanding how the pandemic affected participation in sport and physical activity and associated shifts in preferences and consumer behaviour could inform how sport organizations respond post pandemic, and possibly improve their sports programming and offerings to better meet the needs of youth living on the margins.²⁸
27. Yet we continue to live in uncertain times and the pandemic has been a painful reminder of how breakdowns in trust and in cooperation, among and within nations, can constrain what could be achieved together. At the same time the political right has been pushing to establish its own neo-liberal common-sense narrative around the bolstering and in some case re-starting of markets.
28. At this point it might be helpful to recall to Naomi Klein's thesis in *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*²⁹ in which it was argued that neo-liberalism is capable of exploiting national crisis in order to further establish controversial and questionable policies as citizens are too distracted to engage and develop an adequate response and resist effectively. At the core of disaster capitalism is the use of cataclysmic events to advance radical privatization combined with the privatization of the disaster response itself. By capitalizing on crises, created by nature or war, Klein argues that the disaster capitalism complex now exists as a booming new economy, and is the violent culmination of a radical economic project that has been incubating for more than fifty years. Klein wrote in 2020 that a "Pandemic Shock Doctrine" was beginning to emerge from Covid-19 and called it the "Screen New Deal in which technology organizations and companies profited from the accelerated invasion of public spaces. The intervention pointed to a post-covid future, accelerated by Covid experiences in which our homes would never again be exclusive personal spaces but are also, via high-speed digital connectivity, our schools, our doctor's offices, our gyms, and, if determined by the state, our jails.³⁰ A future every move, every word, every relationship was trackable, traceable, and data-mineable by unprecedented collaborations between government and tech giants.³¹

²⁷ Teare, G.; Taks, M. (2021) Exploring the Impact of the Covid19 Pandemic on Youth Sport and Physical Activity Participation Trends. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 1744.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su13041744>

²⁸ Teare, G.; Taks, M. (2021) Exploring the Impact of the Covid19 Pandemic on Youth Sport and Physical Activity Participation Trends. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 1744.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su13041744>

²⁹ Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism*.

³⁰ Klein, N. (2020). Screen new deal. *The Intercept*. [online] (cited 13 April 2024):
<https://theintercept.com/2020/05/08/andrew-cuomo-eric-schmidt-coronavirus-tech-shock-doctrine/>
May 8 2020.

³¹ Klein, N (2020). Screen new deal. *The Intercept*. [online] (cited 13 April 2024):
<https://theintercept.com/2020/05/08/andrew-cuomo-eric-schmidt-coronavirus-tech-shock-doctrine/>
May 8 2020.

29. Studies of the impact of the pandemic on the capability and capacity of organizations are still emerging. The managerialist response can be found in a number of state-of-the-art reports. Since the pandemic, about 90 percent of organizations have embraced a range of hybrid work models that allow employees to work remotely from off-site locations (including home) for some or much of the time.³² Such reports highlight a number of common factors that organizations need to adapt to post-Covid including: the need to strengthen resilience, the new balance of in person and remote working, making way for applied AI, new rules of attracting and retaining workers, closing the capability gap in integrating technological and digital capability, leadership that is self-aware and inspiring, making meaningful progress on equity, diversity and inclusion, refocusing efforts to address the root causes of mental health and well-being in the workplace and the need for efficiency.³³
30. Studies of the impact of the pandemic from an organizational studies perspective can be found in some of the leading organizational journals. Many of these focus upon shifting meanings and frameworks for reflecting upon organizations in the light of the virus.³⁴ Such studies invite questions about language, reality, subjectivity and technology and while not generally offer lessons or solutions but rather final words on epistemic disruption and instability; the generation of ongoing spaces for future inquiry into organizations viruses.³⁵ Others talk of the crisis of organizational life and the response of public sector organizations in the light of Covid. The spectre of Habermas is ever-present in the notion of a crisis being a turning point not simply in terms of illness but also public sector organisations such those primarily responsible for the delivery of sport in local communities.³⁶ Grounding the idea of crisis whether it be health, medicine or sports provision generates the search for remedies and the quest for prevention. In this way as Habermas put it when the crisis is resolved the trapped subject is liberated.³⁷
31. Several ideas can be drawn from the organizational crisis literature including: (i) crisis bring a threat to organizational survival; (ii) organizational crisis are characterised by unexpectedness; (iii) crisis are preventable and (iv) resolving organizational crisis can be concave to organizational advancement and improvement.³⁸
32. The problem with Covid is that it remains an open question as to whether the provision of sport for youth broke any potential social contract with youth on the margins or whether we need a new social contract that needs organizations to

³² McKinsey and Company (2023). *The state of organizations 2023*. New York: McKinsey and Company.

³³ McKinsey and Company (2023). *The state of organizations 2023*. New York: McKinsey and Company.

³⁴ Riad, S. (2023). The virus and organization studies: A changing episteme. *Organization Studies*, 44 (6), 1003-1020. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406231157015>

³⁵ Riad, S. (2023). The virus and organization studies: A changing episteme. *Organization Studies*, 44 (6), 1003-1020. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406231157015>

³⁶ Habermas, J. (1973). What does a crisis mean today? *Social Research*, 40, 643–667.

³⁷ Habermas, J. (1973). What does a crisis mean today? *Social Research*, 40, 643–667.

³⁸ Orr, K. (2023). Uncanny Organization and the Immanence of Crisis: The public sector, neoliberalism and Covid-19. *Organization Studies*, 44 (12), 2009-2030. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406231185959>

listen to the needs of those on the margins. Regardless of the environment Canadian research looking at youth sport access, equity and engagement in the wake of the pandemic has observed that there is demand for a system that provides a variety of options for sports programmes that are accessible, fun, social and safe.³⁹

33. The rolling lockdowns and public health restrictions of the pandemic meant a shift to remote and virtual work for many organisations. Organizations need to consider what the future of work looks like for them in the aftermath of the pandemic and how they might be better prepared. Post-pandemic, few organizations are maintaining an all-virtual presence as hybrid models become established as part of a new organisational common-sense mode of working.⁴⁰ The post-pandemic, the world of work will probably never be the same again. And that's probably a good thing. We now have an opportunity to make it better. For those teams returning to the office, it is important to protect the benefits of remote working: uninterrupted time for strategically important projects, respect for personal preferences while not diminishing the opportunities and or the capacity and capability to deliver for youth sport.
34. All key stakeholders, including sporting organisations, local and national governments, education systems, civil society organisations, private sector sponsors, community organisations, and development assistance agencies should continue to consider how they can continue to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on youth and children in sport. All stakeholders need to identify measures to make sport more resilient to future crisis and to use sport to enable society's resilience to crisis. Yet in order to do this we need to continue to substantiate an alternative narrative to that of any neoliberal organizational market lead response that conceals contradictions, amplifies individual responsibilities at the expense of the state and prioritises the primacy of markets while disguising ethical questions such as retrenchment of public sector sports provision, or the possibility of statutory sports provision.
35. Overall, a series of calls were put forth for sport organizations to consider when building back better from COVID-19. These included: articulating a renewed vision for sport; identifying key roles for sport organizations; pursue increased resources; commit to robust monitoring and evaluation; ensure an ambitious plan for gender equality; ensure participants' human rights are protected; and enhance national, regional and international partnerships.⁴¹

Methods

³⁹ MLSE Foundation (2021). *Change the game research. A study focused on sport access, engagement and equity factors in the wake of the pandemic.* July 2021.

⁴⁰ Spiztmuller, M. (2021). How to create effective, engaged workplace teams after the Covid-19 pandemic. *The Conversation.* June 15, 2021.

⁴¹ Donnelly, P., Darnell, S. & Kidd, B. (with Michael Armstrong) (2021). *Policy Analysis Tool for Community Sport and Sport for Development in Response to COVID-19.* Prepared for: Social Policy Development Section, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, UK.

36. Yet in order to do this we need to continue to substantiate how organizations operating in the sports space for youth experienced and responded pre, during and immediate post pandemic phases. The research that has informed this second of the joint University of Edinburgh and University of Toronto reports on Covid-19 and youth sport in Canada Scotland has resulted from (i) an update on the first report which provided for a integrated scoping review of research on sport covid and youth between March 2020 and March 2022; (ii) an analysis of select national responses to the pandemic in Canada and Scotland which have looked to consolidate lessons learned and future preparedness; (iii) a review of 20 studies which have specifically looked at organizational responses to the pandemic and (iv) completing the ethics approval process for both Universities and (v) as of April 2024 conducting 15 semi-structured interviews with sports organizations in Canada and Scotland in order to gather organizational responses to and lessons learned from the pandemic in relation to youth sport in Scotland and Canada.
37. The semi-structured interviews for both Canada and Scotland utilized the same set of themes and questions. The aim was to elicit empirically grounded data from lived experiences and first-hand knowledge of subject matters. The questions utilized for the section on youth sport and impact during the pandemic were organized around 4 themes which were adaptability, operations, people and the role of sport. The questions utilized for the section on youth sport and impact post pandemic were organized around 3 themes which were impact, sustainability and building back better.
38. The organizations involved in the study provided a broad range of organizations involved in delivering youth sport pre, during and post-Covid-19. The organizations covered a broad range of factors including indoor/outdoor sports; sports delivery in public/private facilities including schools, leisure centres and club facilities; youth from different age ranges from children to teenagers; to youth of contrasting backgrounds such as high- and lower-income families; to youth of opposing demographics including those with mental/physical disabilities; and youth involved in high performance and recreational sport.
39. The thematic analysis procedure followed Braun and Clarke⁴² alongside Thomas⁴³ six-step process: familiarisation; coding; generating themes; reviewing themes; defining; and naming themes; and writing up research. The information's accuracy and reliability were reflected by implementing frequentative analyses processes which helped defend the overall validity of the data analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen to aid the comparison of sources and case studies through using ciphers, improving patterns, and establishing themes whilst synthesising data, building towards answering the research questions by providing contextual meaning.

⁴² Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

⁴³ Thomas, D. R. (2006). A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237-246.

Sport Organizations, Youth Sport and Covid-19

Adaptability

40. During the pandemic, activity levels dropped dramatically, and it was the role of the organisations and clubs to keep promoting sport and to keep people updated with the guidelines and to change their environments to allow people to do so in which safety was the foremost priority above all else
41. In more national organisations, sport operations were given the freedom to help in their local areas through an individualistic approach around what they needed as these bodies recognised that each areas experiences differed, and local knowledge was more positively impactful for the community that one overarching generalised set of guidelines.
42. Various organisations depending on their organisational capacity, established emergency teams and moved to more charitable efforts, offering helplines for people in need to contact whilst delivering care and food packages to vulnerable youth and families in local communities. Larger bodies such as sportscotland were deployed depending on the manner in which society needed them to operate.
43. A key part of the adaptability was recognising the need for a phased return where rather than reintroducing sport within the nature that it was pre-covid-19, organisations have been doing it in stages. For example, active schools have done so by starting with a 4-week block before then progressing youth to a 6-week one.
44. One key element of adapting programmes was recognising the increased financial impact the pandemic was having on people, families and thus youth, and so numerous organisations attempted to remove the financial burden of sport and where possible, made it free so that nobody was priced out of participation in which with the delivery of sport generally moving online, this removed operational costs and thus enabled the price to be lowered or removed.
45. During the adaptability process, engagement was more important than the activity and some one sport specific organisations and youth found themselves indulging in other activities as it tapped into youths more deeper-rooted sense of identity and community and desire to simply be involved in something.

Operations

46. Depending on the nature of a staff members job or the organisations product, some staff were furloughed until the time when sport was able to return. Although, in some instances, this was not possible and some staff never

returned to their positions and left the sport industry to seek alternative employment or joined another organisation in sport.

47. Organisations who remained up and running also adopted the online hybrid way of working, moving to working from home and utilising Microsoft Teams or Zoom as their point of group contact. Many have since reported that this kind of working format has actually made their operations far more efficient and their work rate more productive, although the hybrid style made staff more eager to return to face-to-face contact, especially with the delivery of youth sport being interactive and about building relationships and trust with people which is difficult to do online.
48. When sport was allowed, organisations struggled to get it up and running as they constantly had to keep changing the delivery style in accordance with the governments guidelines whilst further adaptations had to be made to prevent close-contact and with participants placed in 'bubbles' or additional volunteers were not allowed to help where they normally would such as in school sport due to being perceived as non-essential and a risk to the spread of Covid-19 despite the fact that these youth were permitted to have close contact with other members of the public in public spaces, but not during and for sport in which the rules thus caused some confusion and conflicted advice from the government. At the start, the focus was on keeping people safe. However, every week or month when government guidelines were updated, organisations had to regroup to decipher how to proceed and respond such as putting in hand sanitiser and one-way systems. This led to some disparities between sport organisations as there were sometimes different rules for a club group or school group for example.

People

49. All age groups have been impacted in some degree. The following are main ones identified:
50. Teenage girls: Issues with girls existed pre-pandemic and work was being done specifically on that area to get them more involved and so when they hit the teenage years, they have a good attitude towards health and well-being, but now it is more prominent than ever before with various athletes speaking out to support and talk about taboo subjects with girls more empowered to talk about these areas and barriers in and to sport than ever before. They have been one of the slowest groups to return to sport because they have missed a few integral years of access and involvement in sport which organisations identified as being some of the most crucial in determining whether they stay or leave sporting environments and thus through not having access, many opted not to return. To get them to return organisations are now changing the message to informing girls of the benefits of being active as they have found success in doing so with girls more motivated to partake if it serves a higher purpose. Yet, girls were actively more active than males during the pandemic as it was found that they enjoyed working out from home and being active with family such as their mother as they felt more comfortable doing it behind a screen and this is

why those who have returned are opting for the more modern 'girls-only' classes and sessions with many opting for individual classes rather than team sports.

51. Infants-children: Their entire introduction to sport has been disrupted and done online or through specific guidelines such as non-contact and now that is the perceived norm for them and how they think life is lived and are now confused and struggling to adapt after having developed a routine during Covid-19. They have grown-up in a world where sport has not been introduced to them or integrated as part of a routine and is now not at the forefront of their minds and is having to be reintegrated at a different developmental stage in life.
52. Youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds: could not afford the cost of additional equipment or resources to partake... this caused the gap between rich and poor to widen and forced many youth to be unable to return to sport or to not partake as depending on their family circumstances, they could not always afford extra-curricular activities whilst access via school was not always available ... these youth also found it harder to be involved in online sessions as they did not have regular or stable access to the internet or the necessary technology which excluded them further. One key area the pandemic has really shown a light on is the societal inequality and the true extent of how poverty impacts families and youth and sport has really teased that out.
53. Youth with disabilities: One of the groups most adversely affected by the pandemic. Kids with physical disabilities had much more regulations which impeded them due to access and equipment and resources whilst children with mental disabilities equally had similar issues due to requiring more personal contact but this was not always allowed. Due to the increased health risk, youth with disabilities were the last to be allowed to return to sport in which many stakeholders now believe that through this experience, the sport sector could do more work with and for youth with disabilities. The difficulty with working with these groups was that sport organisations often require support volunteers or to work with other industries in social care to provide support in order to participate in sport and depending on national guidelines around social distancing, key workers and so forth, this was not always possible.
54. Overall, the protected groups were the hardest hit, if you were a girl from a minority background with a disability then your opportunities were much less compared to a white male.
55. Young males: Males struggled in general because they like structure of attending and team sports, however, for that reason, they returned the quickest as they liked being part of a sport environment.

Role of Sport

56. Sport, no matter in what capacity was a good release for mental health during the pandemic.

57. The simplest and most significant result of the role of sport was the benefits of being active that youth pre-covid-19 took for granted such as the social connection sport provides.
58. Organisations believe that getting access to sport was vital to the sport and their organisations “road to recovery” whilst it also helped reinclude people from protected groups who had felt even more isolated during the pandemic than ever before, helping give them a sense of worth and desire, reintegrate back in schools and communities and sport.
59. Sport also helped those develop and continue to improve upon soft skills such as cooperation, teamwork and resilience and communication, coordination.
60. We noticed clubs being quite an important network for students to still have that sense of community.
61. Sport was a source of companionship and community for people, it gave them meaning and something to look forward to in day-to-day life and to be an escape of the negativities of the lockdowns and pandemic.
62. The role of sport highlighted that it was not just a nice activity to do, but it was essential to the lives and wellbeing of youth.

Observations and Recommendations

RO1: One key learning is the recognition by sport bodies that access to sport for youth should be free or made available in a way that is affordable and accessible to all and there should not be anyone seeking to charge extra and profit from it because of its importance to youth and how non-altruistic motivations can be harmful to youth. Sport must be made equal for all youth so that everyone can take part and get the opportunity to experience it

RO2: In the aftermath, an increased and improved partnership approach has been more extensively utilised by organisations as they realised that in the sport industry, they do not always have the knowledge, resource or capacity to achieve the standards and goals that they wish to offer for youth and that by greater collaboration with other sporting and non-sporting organisations, they can achieve both their organisational goals and improve operations for the future. A joined-up approach for many is the future of their organisational operations.

RO3: The learnings around inequality, poverty and wellbeing are giving organisations new direction to pursue and head in the future alongside the motivation to engage and reach these groups more extensively than they have done before ... there is a greater desire around the notion of ‘duty of care’ and what that means which is looking after the youth of today and helping them overcome life’s challenges through sport

RO4: Safeguarding measures require implementation in both respective and national organisations to prevent possible adverse effects whilst preparing for potential worst-case scenarios.

RO5: More person-centred opportunities need to be created locally, regionally and nationally to cater to the specific desires and needs of different demographics to ensure that they are getting the support they require.

RO6: Data requires collection based on the various groups and age-ranges of the contemporary youth impacted by Covid-19 so that in the future, when they reach different developmental stages, the information can be utilised to create tailored approaches and programming derived from how they developed through Covid-19 rather than returning to the one-size fits all generalised approach to youth sport which is recycled by organisations on mass year on year.

RO7: Consistent and sustainable mechanisms must be introduced to support youth's wellbeing, especially around mental health, much of which is new to sport organisations and would be advisable to partner with external non-sporting entities who can provide assistance to ensure optimal practices for youth.

RO8: Staff require training to effectively and successfully provide that support for youth as Covid-19 has changed the landscape in which sport practitioners operate, yet policies, practices and systems have not been fully adapted or changed to accommodate this transformation. This inability largely stems from organisations lacking funding, resources and support to do so, which means they have little choice but to return to their previous means of operation which in the post-Covid-19 era are now outdated.

RO9: National bodies could implement educational programmes to help educate the enablers and facilitators of youth sport as part of the building back better process must be to effectively and productively improve the system by integrating and applying the lessons acquired from Covid-19. This infrastructure and underpinning builds momentum for positive and sustainable change.

RO10: While governments and national organisations should be responsible for the growth and recovery of youth sport, the landscape through the individual organisations at the grassroots level can progress itself and reinvent themselves. To move forward, organisations must survey their remit alongside their participants to gather insights and respond accordingly.

RO11: It would be beneficial for various stakeholder groups to collate information from both bottom-up and top-down actors to help inform their decision-making, improve their environmental understanding and local knowledge whilst ultimately looking towards joint-up working. Through bringing diverging insights together from opposing backgrounds, this develops diverse ideas around how to improve systems for youth betterment.

RO12: Going forward, a hybrid approach represents the future delivery of youth sport whilst providing resolutions to issues around programming and connectivity alongside accessibility. For example, some organisations continue to use online elements of

programming to connect to remote areas whilst reaching more people on mass whilst increasing inclusivity and maintaining activity levels with many young girls during Covid-19 exercising with their mothers at home in which they now favour and are comfortable with this method. This dual strategy serves duplicity because it can capably meet the needs of youth whilst achieving the objectives of funders and governments. Doing so allows these domains to align and develop unilaterally.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has critically synthesized the Covid-19 experiences of organisations delivering youth sport in Canada and Scotland. It has identified a series of differences and similarities between the countries and organisations whilst providing learning outcomes for both nations alongside the broader global sport sector. The evidence presented in this research calls for the reinvention and renewal of youth sport. Countries and governments alongside national and international organisations should embrace a philosophy and strategy which places sport at the centre of public policy and provision rather than making it peripheral or secondary to alternative measures. Given the negative narratives shared by organisations due to the impact of Covid-19 and reduced sporting opportunities alongside the positive role that sport did play, society cannot afford to not invest and support youth sport locally, regionally, nationally and globally.

A strength of this research surrounds its uniqueness which sought to document the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth sport through the experiences of the organisations responsible for the organisation and delivery of youth sport. Doing so provides a voice to some organisations who would otherwise not have the opportunity to share their experiences. This helps strengthen our conceptual understanding of the broader sport industry with a view to more collaborative working through bringing these various bodies data together in one paper. Likewise, it also helps bridge theory with practice as the findings from the practical element of sport can be connected in future research to the theoretical to advance both domains.

The limitation of this research surrounds the breadth and depth of the empirical research. Through only interviewing 16 organisations in total, the researchers acknowledge that the findings are not applicable and reflective of every organisation's and country's experiences, but they do provide indicative insights into the broader environment whilst providing preliminary insights which can be further expanded or explored in future research. The issue with not being able to include a broader range of organisations is due to accessibility and availability due to the failure of various bodies to opt into the study.

Within research, three gaps require attention in future research: experiential dimensions of Covid-19 and youth sport; the shortage of innovative methodologies in investigating youth sport and Covid-19; alongside research ethics in relation to studying youth sport and Covid-19.