

Vaccine Inequality, Explained

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Do you remember when there were empty shelves in grocery stores and big box stores at the beginning of the pandemic?

There was mass panic at the thought of not having access to essentials (including toilet paper, but also medicine and food). High levels of anxiety caused many people to buy these items in bulk. As a result, those with less money, who could only afford to shop from week to week, struggled to find these items, and some had to go without.

This example shows just how much one's wealth affects the way they have experienced the pandemic, and this inequality is much more extreme on a global scale. If wealthy countries like Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom are the people filling their minivans with essentials, then middle-income and low-income countries are the ones walking from store to store looking for them. Now replace "essential items" with "COVID-19 vaccines", and that gives you an idea of the current situation where countries with different levels of wealth are competing for limited resources.

This article will start by representing global vaccine inequality in numbers, which are up-to-date at the time of writing. Then, it will explain why vaccine inequality is making the pandemic last longer and what Canada has done so far to address it. As always, at the end of the article, there will be suggestions for what you can do to be part of the solution and contribute to the eventual end of the pandemic.

What is vaccine inequality? Canada's place in the global picture

Vaccine inequality refers to the significant difference between high-income countries and the rest of the world when it comes to the amount of vaccines that they own.

Recent figures show that, out of all the countries in the world, Canada has the *highest* percentage of fully and partially vaccinated people relative to its population (70.42%).* What's more, when it comes to the percentage of fully vaccinated people relative to its population, Canada is in third place (51.5%), only slightly behind the United Kingdom (53.39%) and Spain (52.07%).*

Admittedly, this global position is partly due to our country's relatively small population, but it's also thanks to Canada being wealthy enough to secure millions of vaccines.

At the same time, countries that can't afford vaccines are much further behind. According to [Our World in Data](#), only 1.1% of people in low-income countries have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.* Overall, only 26.6% of the world's population have received at least one dose, and 13.2% are fully vaccinated.*

In contrast, earlier this week, the Government of Ontario shared [the most up-to-date data](#) about its vaccine rollout. Out of the 13 million people in the province who are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine, 79.1% (over 10 million people) have received at least one shot, and 62.6% (over 8 million people) have been fully vaccinated.* Even though these numbers are high, the province's chief medical officer has expressed concerns that they aren't high enough to achieve community immunity (also known as [herd immunity](#)) from the Delta variant.*

The fact that Canada is ahead of the rest of the world in administering vaccines doesn't invalidate his concerns. It just goes to show that a large amount of the population needs to be fully vaccinated for protection against variants of COVID-19, which are evolving to become more easily transmissible and resistant to just one dose of the vaccine.* In fact, recent data from the World Health Organization (WHO) states that the Delta variant is spreading about 55% faster than the Alpha variant.* “This is the most contagious version of the virus we have seen throughout the whole pandemic,” said Ashish Jha, dean of the Brown University School of Public Health.*

How does vaccine inequality prolong the pandemic?

Mutations, or variants, of the original COVID-19 virus are widely considered one of the main factors that are prolonging the pandemic, like how the Delta variant is considered to be the cause of the third wave in Ontario (and the potential fourth wave). The more time populations have to wait to be vaccinated, the more time the virus has to mutate.*

That said, “part of the resolution [of the pandemic] is a more equitable distribution of vaccines around the world, because what is hindering us [is] the variants and those will be coming from the low-resource countries,” says Dr. Ivar Mendez, provincial head of surgery at the University of Saskatchewan and Saskatchewan health authority.*

It's clear to see that, no matter how quickly wealthy countries race to get everyone vaccinated, variants of concerns will continue to appear in countries without access to vaccines. This suggests that distributing vaccines to middle-income and low-income countries is the only way for the world to get ahead of the pandemic once and for all, not as individual players competing against each other for the #1 spot, but as a united front.

On the topic of the international competition to purchase and distribute vaccines, Alison Thompson, a public health ethicist at the University of Toronto, said: “I wouldn't want to be doing the best at it right now, because that would mean that you are behaving in a way that is so nationalistic that it's just sidelining everybody else.”*

Anna Marriott, Oxfam's health policy manager, has said that: "Unless something changes dramatically, billions of people around the world will not receive a safe and effective vaccine for covid-19 for years to come."* It's estimated that, at this rate, the pandemic will continue in developing countries for another 57 years due to a lack of access to vaccines.*

In December 2020, the international medical journal [BMJ](#) compiled research from international aid groups saying that "Many poor countries will see almost no vaccine next year."* Journalist Julia Belluz with [Vox Media](#) wrote: "If these glaring inequities in vaccine access continue, it will take at least two years for the world's poorest countries, which couldn't afford to compete for early doses of vaccines, to immunize the majority of their populations."*

Another part of the problem is that many of the countries that haven't been able to access COVID-19 vaccines are also facing other public health crises like Ebola, tuberculosis, and HIV.* "That also speaks to the legacy of colonialism and racism and these structural inequities that are really, really impacting global health," says Thompson.*

If wealthier countries donated vaccines to countries that couldn't afford them, it would reduce a significant amount of death and suffering.

Another benefit is that it would prevent new variants from evolving, which benefits people everywhere, even in countries that have already vaccinated most of their population. Addressing global vaccine inequality would also protect people who are unable to get vaccinated, including people with specific health conditions and children below 12.

What has Canada done to reduce vaccine inequality?

On Sunday, June 13th, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau pledged to donate 13 million surplus vaccines to other countries.* He didn't specify when they would be sent, just that "a number of these doses are on their way as we speak, more will come in the coming months."* Trudeau added that Canada has also paid for the purchase and distribution of 87 million doses through the ACT-Accelerator.* COVAX is part of this ACT-Accelerator as its pillar related to vaccines.* The purpose of COVAX "is to accelerate the development and manufactur[ing] of COVID-19 vaccines, and to guarantee fair and equitable access for every country in the world."*

According to the Government of Canada's website, "The Government of Canada is committing approximately \$220 million to the [COVAX] facility to procure up to 15 million vaccine doses for everyone in Canada. An additional \$220 million will be channeled through the COVAX Advance Market Commitment to purchase doses for low and middle income countries, increasing their access to a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine."*

As you can see, the federal government has both donated to COVAX to help other countries *and* received vaccines through COVAX to give to Canadians. This move has been criticized

since COVAX is intended to help countries that otherwise couldn't afford vaccines.* Canada is the only G7 country that has used vaccines from COVAX for its population.*

Canada has fulfilled its promise to offer 100 million doses to less wealthy countries, and that's a meaningful number, but we shouldn't stop there. The WHO has estimated that 11 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines are "needed to vaccinate at least 70 per cent of the world's population and truly end the pandemic."* Since Canada has the highest percentage of partially and fully vaccinated people in the world, and since Canada has used COVAX for itself, it is reasonable to suggest that Canada has a moral obligation to do more to reduce vaccine inequality.

In late June, there was a summit on vaccine internationalism. At that summit, national and regional governments, political leaders, public health experts, and vaccine manufacturers from over 20 countries made commitments to reduce vaccine inequality by sharing vaccine technology and production.*

The Canadian government didn't participate, but its absence was felt, as participants discussed Trudeau not allowing a Canadian vaccine manufacturer to produce vaccines for Bolivia.* Click [here](#) to read more about that summit and the commitments that came from it.

What we can do: Write to your Member of Parliament

Writing to your Member of Parliament, or MP, is the most direct way to express your opinions to the federal government. If you don't know who your MP is, click [here](#) to find out by entering your postal code (e.g. M2N 5K3) or the name of your constituency (e.g. Willowdale). Even if your MP represents a different political party than the one you support, don't hesitate to share your opinion with them. Once you know the name of your MP, you can send them a letter without postage. Just write their name and [this address](#) on the front of the envelope.

If you would rather communicate electronically, Google their name and it should take you to their website where you should be able to contact them via email. Both formats are handled in the same way*, so use whichever method you prefer.

What you write is up to you, but here are some ideas:

1. You can inform your MP that you support the Canadian government continuing to donate vaccines to middle-income and low-income countries, perhaps to a specific country where you have family, or to a country that you have been reading about in the news. You can ask them to do everything they can to address the issue of vaccine inequality.
2. You can inform them that you support the Canadian government's participation in future summits on vaccine internationalism.

3. You can include your own personal experiences and views, including why you are interested in the issue and why you support these actions.*
4. You can ask them to clarify their position* on the issue of vaccine inequality.
5. You can thank them for any positive action they have taken in the past on this issue or other issues that you care about.*

It's also recommended that you ask your MP to respond to your letter (otherwise they may not!), include the date, and include your address and postal code so that they know that you are a part of their constituency.* The organization [Citizens for Public Justice](#) has more tips on writing a letter to your MP as well as a sample letter in both Microsoft Word and PDF formats. Click [here](#) to check it out!

What we can do: Donate to COVAX

If you can afford it, making a donation to COVAX would make a big difference. A donation of \$50 gives 59 children life-saving vaccines.* Click [here](#) to learn more about COVAX, and click [here](#) to make a donation.

COVAX is a collaborative project between the [Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations](#) (CEPI), the [Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation](#) (Gavi), the [World Health Organization](#), and the [United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund](#) (UNICEF).* UNICEF is leading this project on behalf of these organizations due to its expertise as the largest single vaccine buyer in the world to help protect children from a variety of diseases.*

Through COVAX, UNICEF is “leading procurement and delivery for 92 low- and lower middle-income countries while also supporting procurement for more than 97 upper middle-income and high-income nations.”*

COVAX is the organization that's doing the work to get vaccines to people in developing countries as soon as possible, including purchasing and delivering vaccines and supplies that are required to administer vaccines, such as syringes, safety boxes for their disposal, and special vaccine refrigerators so that the vaccines don't expire.*

Final Thoughts

Going back to the comparison of the toilet paper fiasco of 2020 and the current international competition for vaccines, while there are clear similarities between the two events, there's a limit to that metaphor. That's because there's a difference between government entities and scared individuals.

It's widely considered unethical for wealthy countries to hoard vaccines, but individuals should not be labelled as unethical or uncaring people for hoarding. Hoarding is a manifestation of our anxiety while we are in survival mode, and it's a way to feel a sense of security (even though it's only temporary).

In fairness to the people who stockpiled essentials in the early days of the pandemic, many of them eventually realized that it's both unnecessary and unfair to others. Another thing that happened during that time was the creation of Facebook groups where people who needed supplies asked for donations, and people who had those supplies responded and delivered it to them.

Hopefully, wealthy countries that have been hoarding vaccines, including Canada, will similarly use their positions of relative wealth to donate vaccines to countries that need them. This would save lives and also end the pandemic sooner for everyone. In the meantime, we can do our part by writing to our MPs, donating to COVAX, and talking to others in our social circles about this issue of vaccine inequality.

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If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at www.ontario.ca/coronavirus. Follow all directions from your medical provider or your local health unit at the following phone numbers:

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000

Toronto Public Health: 416-338-7600

Peel Public Health: 905-799-7700

Durham Region Health Department: 905-668-7711

York Region Public Health: 1-877-464-9675