

# Report highlights cost of misinformation to health care services during COVID-19 pandemic

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A new report has highlighted the consequences of misinformation, including loss of trust in public institutions, delayed action on pressing

issues such as climate change, and the financial toll on health care services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ["Fault Lines" report](#) involved a panel of international experts, including leading cognitive scientist Professor Stephan Lewandowsky, from the University of Bristol.

As science and health [misinformation](#) become a growing part of people's lives, the findings show how these issues are having a greater influence on ideology and identity. The report, led by the Council of Canadian Academies (CCA), also indicates how these threats are contributing to social division and inequality as well as exerting financial pressure on health care systems.

The report set out mounting evidence revealing how misinformation has led to illness and death from unsafe interventions and products, [vaccine preventable diseases](#), and flouting of [public health measures](#), with the most vulnerable populations suffering more. For instance, it estimates that science and health misinformation cost the Canadian health care system at least \$300 million during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the first time that the cost of misinformation has been estimated directly.

Professor Stephan Lewandowsky, Chair in Cognitive Psychology, said, "This report demonstrates and quantifies the pervasive potential of misinformation to adversely affect society and put unnecessary extra pressure on health care services already under considerable strain.

"Misinformation associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, fueling vaccine hesitancy, is a case in point which has resulted in measurable loss of life, not to mention the considerable financial toll. Although combatting this scourge is a constant battle, various measures outlined in this report can be deployed to minimize and dispel misinformation, which is an increasingly prevalent threat in people's daily lives."

While tackling misinformation is a complex and long-term challenge, the report details several measures that have shown promise. Ensuring that accurate health and [science information](#) is widely accessible and is communicated honestly, understandably, and by trusted messengers can help protect people from misinformation.

Identifying, labeling, and debunking misinformation can also be effective, as are interventions that better equip individuals to sort through the increasingly complex information environment, particularly the promotion of critical thinking and media and science literacy in school education.

"Misinformation has become a global problem and a defining issue of our time," said Professor Alex Himelfarb, Chair of the Expert Panel and Chair of the Steering Committee of the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives.

"The unchecked spread of science and health misinformation leaves individuals and society vulnerable to exploitation and threatens our ability to work together to address shared challenges."

"Fault Lines" explores what makes people susceptible to misinformation messaging and how these insights might be used to improve societal resilience. The report includes original modeling work to estimate the [health impacts](#) and hospitalization costs associated with COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in Canada, and the role misinformation played in contributing to this hesitancy.

"The impacts of misinformation are complex and not always easy to quantify directly, but they have the potential to undermine the advances made to date in science and health," said Professor Eric Meslin, President and CEO of the CCA.

"This report explores some of the leading practices for assessing and responding to misinformation that could help to inform approaches to address it."

Provided by University of Bristol

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