

'Vaccination deserts' identified in northern, rural and French-speaking Ontario

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New research out of the University of Waterloo has identified "vaccination deserts" in parts of northern and rural Ontario and in locations where French is predominantly spoken. These areas have little to no access to pharmacist-administered vaccination sites for COVID

vaccines or the flu shot.

Researchers used provincial and Statistics Canada data to determine where pharmacists are working in relation to where Ontarians live. They found that most [community pharmacists](#) authorized to administer injections work in the urban regions of southern Ontario, confirming a large geographic discrepancy.

"Our biggest realization is that there are many communities that do not have local access to a [pharmacy](#) at all," said Dr. Sherilyn Houle, a professor at Waterloo's School of Pharmacy and co-author of the study. "While medication can be delivered remotely and virtual care can be used for offsite counseling, access to vaccinations will need a more innovative approach."

As community pharmacies are becoming the preferred locations for administering vaccinations, the ability for people in northern communities and [rural areas](#) to access pharmacies continues to be difficult.

"Reaching these communities of individuals will require innovative ideas, including mobile vaccination clinics and additional training for pharmacists located in these areas," Houle said.

These findings have immediate and long-term applications for [public health](#) as the ongoing pandemic and influenza season mean vaccinations are more important than ever.

"We have to recognize where the gaps remain and plan accordingly to bring seasonal services to provide for hard-to-reach communities and hopefully encourage practicing pharmacists in those areas to become trained in vaccination, if they haven't already," Houle said.

There is an additional limitation for primarily French-speaking populations in Ontario. In areas where at least 25 percent of the population speaks French, there are not enough French-speaking pharmacists to service those areas.

Most French-speaking pharmacists practice in areas where the smallest French-speaking population resides, with many of the larger French-speaking populations located in "vaccination deserts".

"The landscape has changed drastically in these past few years, and a shift has occurred where pharmacies are becoming more relied upon as vaccination providers. However, pharmacists alone can't meet these needs for all communities. Without a pharmacy, many services cannot be provided," Houle said.

Policymakers and [health professionals](#) need to be creative when addressing these issues since solutions that have been effective in urban centers do not necessarily work for all Ontarians, especially in rural and remote regions.

The study, "Identifying vaccination deserts: The availability and distribution of pharmacists with authorization to administer injections in Ontario," co-authored by Houle, Patrick Timony, Nancy M. Waite and Alain Gauthier, was a collaboration between the University of Waterloo and Laurentian University. The study was recently published in the *Canadian Pharmacists Journal*.

More information: Sherilyn K.D. Houle et al, Identifying vaccination deserts: The availability and distribution of pharmacists with authorization to administer injections in Ontario, *Canadian Pharmacists Journal / Revue des Pharmaciens du Canada* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/17151635221115183](https://doi.org/10.1177/17151635221115183)

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