

# Study shows dramatic impact of COVID-19 on active Canadians

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A significant reduction in outdoor activity due to COVID-19 may be having a harmful effect on mental health, according to the early results of a new Brock University study.

A team of Brock researchers, led by Professor of Recreation and Leisure Studies Tim O'Connell, set out to discover how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted [outdoor recreation](#) before, during and after physical distancing strategies were implemented in Canada.

The most important aspect of these results are respondents reporting significantly worse mental health due to the lack of opportunity to take part in outdoor [recreation](#) activities, said O'Connell.

"The magnitude of the impact was surprising," he said. "We think it is a reflection of Canadians relying on outdoor recreation for healthy living and as a way to connect socially with others. We found that participants reported a significant change in mental health due to the lack of ability to get outdoors."

O'Connell and co-investigators, Recreation and Leisure Studies Associate Professor Garrett Hutson and Adjunct Professor Ryan Howard, collaborated with ALIVE Outdoors, an outdoor and experiential education company, to collect data from 1,550 participants across an eight-day span beginning in early May.

The study reveals outdoor enthusiasts reduced their activities by six hours per week on average, but didn't completely give up on being outdoors despite park closures.

Instead, they pivoted from venturous activities such as camping, mountaineering or playing [outdoor sports](#) in favor of gardening, walking and nature photography.

"Many of these more complex outdoor recreation experiences like canoeing, hiking and sea kayaking are pre-planned many months in advance," said Howard. "What may have happened during COVID-19 is that many people had to go down their list of other outdoor recreation activities that they enjoy. We saw increases toward walking in the neighborhood and bird watching."

There are some key motivations that come through in the data and many of the participants relate a core set of activities to their identity, added Howard.

"We see these impacts coming to light over a very short period of time and that regular access to outdoor spaces with others is incredibly important to many Canadians for more than just exercise," Howard said. "Individuals probably already enjoyed these activities, but they were likely secondary to their initial activities that formed a larger part of their identity."

Participants planned to change their behavior and travel to different places with different people and modify their activities.

They also vowed to return to their regular activities once the pandemic ends, will continue to honor the closure of recreational areas, and indicated that advocating for the protection of outdoor recreation resources was important to them in the future.

"Finding creative ways to maintain access while adhering to physical distancing requirements needs more attention from policymakers and a higher priority on public health agendas," said Howard. "Rather than restrict, we should support these individuals to maintain their physical and [mental health](#) in times when this is incredibly important."

The three researchers plan to delve deeper into the results of the survey and will be publishing their full findings in the coming months. The preliminary results will be shared with land management agencies, politicians and recreationists across Canada.

They are also developing a follow-up to the first phase of this study.

"We're working on a second survey that continues to explore Canadians' outdoor recreation experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic," O'Connell said. "This is especially important as many outdoor recreation areas across Canada have reopened or are slated to reopen soon. We hope to launch the Phase 2 survey in the next few weeks and plan for a third phase, as well."

Provided by Brock University

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