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## Stories from the Border: The COVID-19 pandemic through the lives of Canada-US borderlanders

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# Stories from the Border: The COVID-19 pandemic through the lives of Canada-US borderlanders

By Dr. Andréanne Bissonnette, Postdoctoral fellow, Border Policy Research Institute

## ARCHIVING BORDER STORIES

To capture, collect and archive the stories from border residents along the Canada-US border, the Border Policy Research Institute launched an online survey allowing individuals to share stories, experiences, and anecdotes of life along the Canada-US border during the COVID-19 pandemic, while cross-border travel was restricted. The survey, which invites participants to share their story, along with their zip or postal code, launched in November 2023 and is an [ongoing form](#), with stories being added to [the map](#) as they are shared.



## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to many changes in our daily lives. Along the Canada-US border, border restrictions had specific impacts on border communities: family separation, disruption of networks of care, lack of access to essential goods, job and revenue losses and others. In all border regions, travel declined by 90%.<sup>1</sup> While the impacts of the pandemic on border communities were covered by both national and local news outlets in Canada and the United States, the share of coverage that focused specifically – or included mentions of border communities – is limited in relation to the general coverage of travel measures and their impacts in either country.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, coverage of border regions was unequal, with some areas receiving heightened attention, leading to some stories being told, while others remained less known or were simply not heard.

## BACKGROUND

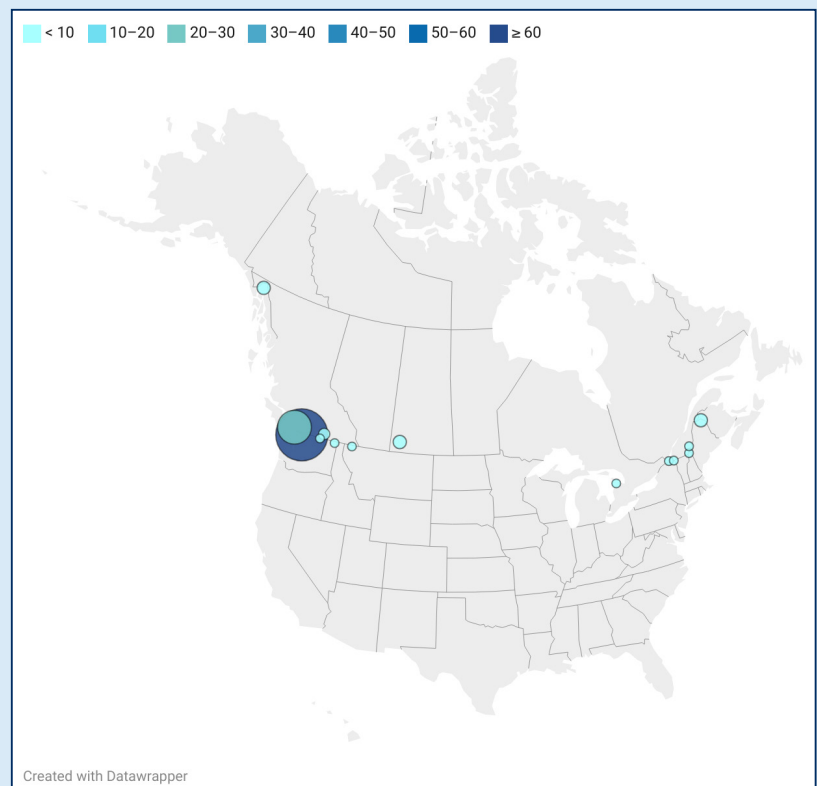
During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Canadian and US governments enacted various measures to curb travel at the Canada-US border. On March 20, 2020, the two neighbors issued a joint statement announcing the closure of the international land border to all non-essential travel starting at midnight.<sup>3</sup> What was initially a 30-day order was later extended, by an increment of 30 to 90 days, for the next 18 months. While exemptions were made for essential travel, the definition of “essential” remained limited and excluded many aspects of life in the borderlands that would be defined as essential by residents, such as those having family members on both sides, or relying on healthcare providers across the line. Some border communities felt the brunt of the impacts, because their connection to the rest of their state or province required crossing through the other country. As such, on October 30, 2020, the Canadian government announced that residents of four isolated border communities (Campobello Island, NB; Stewart, BC; Northwest Angle, MN; and Hyder, AK) would be exempted from the quarantine requirements when crossing the border to access “necessities of life” from the nearest Canadian or US community.<sup>4</sup> However, because of the definition of “necessities of life” another isolated community – Point Roberts, WA – was not included in the exemption. A little under a year later, following the roll out of vaccines, the Canada-US border slowly reopened to “non-essential” travel, first in August 2021 with the Canadian government allowing fully-vaccinated Americans with proof of a negative COVID test to cross the land border,<sup>5</sup> and then in November of that year with the US government reciprocated, but without a requirement of a negative test.<sup>6</sup> In January 2022, both governments implemented a vaccine requirement for essential travel,<sup>7,8</sup> before Canada dropped the testing requirement in April. In October 2022, Canada lifted its last travel measure, while the US waited until May 2023 to remove all requirements for Canadian travelers.

That is to say that for over 3 years, traveling across the Canada-US land border was restricted in some capacity. While true for all Canadians and Americans, the prolonged use of travel measures along the Canada-US border created impacts specific to border communities.

*These fall in two categories: (1) economic impacts, encompassing both individual and collective impacts such as loss of revenue and lack of tourism; and (2) personal and social impacts, including lack of access to services and goods such as grocery and health care and separation from family members and/or friends.*

**Economic impacts.** When implementing the border restrictions, both countries, recognizing the depth of their economic connection, decided to exempt certain travelers, deemed essential notably for economic reasons, from the restrictions. As such, while some economic impacts were avoided, for many businesses relying not only on the border but mostly on border traffic, the closure of the border to non-essential travel and the length of time during which the restrictions were in effect were highly detrimental, and businesses have yet to return to pre-pandemic revenues in many parts of the border as customers' habits have changed. Indeed, according to Statistic Canada's records of same-day travel by Canadians, cross-border trips were down 25.8% in 2023 compared with 2019.<sup>9</sup>

One direct impact was on businesses relying on or tailored for tourism, such as those that can be found in many communities in Alaska, Yukon and northern BC, which were impacted by the combination of a halt of international travel and the closure of the Canada-US border to non-essential travel. In other areas, some local businesses directly respond to needs of border-crossers. For example, for many border towns close to the Cascadia Region border crossings (Point Roberts, Blaine, Sumas and Lynden) cross-border day-trippers and shoppers are an essential part of their business, with parcel pick-up locations having become an integral part of local economies, reliant on business from Canadians. The border restrictions have had a profound and durable impact in the region, with traffic remaining down by 25% compared to 2019,<sup>10</sup> and recovery being slower than the national average. The same goes for the Quebec-New York-Vermont border region, where cross-border shopping, long weekend trips or even just short trips for dinner were a frequent occurrence in both directions. With border restrictions in place, many businesses suffered from a lack of cross-border shoppers, day-travelers, and seasonal tourists, in places like Jay Peak, Burlington, Plattsburgh and Montreal. In the Plains-Mountains West border region, while most of the trade between the two neighbors goes through pipelines, trains and trucks, borderlanders shared their struggles



The current Stories from the Border map includes over 100 answers from across border regions. Regardless of the current geographical representation, we welcome answers from all regions of the Canada-US border

as small businesses owners for whom border crossings, from other borderlanders and travelers en-route to larger cities, represent a source of revenues.

One area of the border where restrictions had deep economic impacts is the Great Lakes region, home to the Windsor-Detroit and the Niagara-Buffalo corridors, as many other dynamics exacerbated economic impacts. In Niagara Falls, a region that attracts international and cross-border tourists alike, many rely on the industry for their livelihood. Secondly, in both corridors, border cities are home to many cross-border commuters, whose jobs and houses are on different sides of the border. For example, in each area, many Canadian nurses reside in Windsor or Niagara, ON, but work in, respectively, Detroit, MI and Niagara Falls or Buffalo, NY. While they were covered by the exemptions for essential travel, it still added a layer of complication to daily life in the borderlands. Lastly, with the neighboring city being so close, daily commuters for shopping, services and goods are an integral part of life in both areas, leading to economic consequences not only for businesses but also for individuals who used the border to lower their cost of living and access goods and services at the lowest price.

Additionally, on either side of the border, the COVID-19 pandemic border restrictions were used as a justification for shortening hours in some more rural border crossings. Once the last restriction was lifted, however, the border crossings did not return to pre-pandemic hours of operation, contributing to both ongoing economic impacts for businesses close to or relying on the border, and personal impacts, as visiting with cross-border friends or family members now remains difficult and require additional planning when compared to pre-pandemic travel.

**The Case of Point Roberts.** Within the Cascadia region lies the specific case of Point Roberts, a US exclave surrounded by water and adjacent to Canada. Due to the exclave's geography, its residents must live a cross-border life: to connect with the rest of Washington, they must cross through Canada. Additionally, residents rely on services and goods from neighboring Tsawwassen, BC. Conversely, the peninsula is also home to many cabins and homes owned by Canadians, whose links with the community were developed over many generations. As such, the border restrictions – and the lack of exemptions for Point Roberts residents – was very impactful to residents and Canadian property owners. To this day, the community still feels the impact of the prolonged border restrictions, as the many stories from Point Roberts residents and people connected to the peninsula showcase.

**Personal and social impacts.** In many parts of the border, communities on either or both sides are in remote or isolated areas leading to higher levels of reliance on each other than in other areas of either country. Along the Alaska-BC border, residents have come to rely on crossing the border for goods, services and social ties. For example, the communities of Hyder, Haines and Skagway, Alaska, have to drive through parts of Canada to connect with the rest of the state. And while the last two are self-sufficient, Hyder relies on its connection to Stewart, BC, for power, food and many other commodities, and social events. For border communities in the Plains-Mountains West region, because most border counties are lightly populated and major population centers are further from the border, it is not uncommon for borderlanders to rely on a cross-border network for their needs, including healthcare, education and cultural activities. This led, for example, to Manitoba negotiating an agreement with Minnesota<sup>11</sup> allowing its residents to access healthcare south of the border. The stories shared as part of the Stories from the Border project illustrate those cross-border ties that were disrupted during the pandemic.

The second dynamic, quite visible for example in the Great Lakes region, is the level of interconnectedness of personal lives. Not only do people have family members across the border, but many also have their partner and/or children residing “across the river”. Crossing the border is so easy for most that it seems to disappear. The border restrictions thus led to many cross-border couples being separated for extended periods of time, parents and grandparents losing time with their (grand)children and social ties being forever changed.

These two dynamics – access to goods and services including healthcare and social ties – collide along the border between Maine, Quebec and New Brunswick, where the international border meets with an interprovincial

one. While normally only the first is visible – albeit easily navigated – the pandemic brought a double set of border restrictions to the region with the implementation of interprovincial border controls in addition to the international restrictions, further impacting daily life for borderlanders.

For some people, these impacts lasted for over 18 months, pushing them to change their habits or even uproot their life and move to limit the crossborder dimensions of their lives. These impacts can be measured through their personal stories of life in the borderlands during the pandemic.

**The positive lens.** Although most stories recount negative impacts from the border restrictions, some borderlanders have also shared how the COVID-19 border restrictions positively impacted their life along the border. For some, the border restrictions' direct impact on tourism in turn had a positive impact on their life, limiting the number of visitors and minimizing what are perceived to be negative impacts of tourism-focused activities on their community. Others have also mentioned that lower border crossings coupled with slower paces in rural communities have contributed to wildlife “retaking control”.

## CONCLUSION

The last COVID-19 border restrictions ended on May 11, 2023 when the US lifted its last travel requirements. Over a year later, the impacts remain visible and quantifiable for communities along the Canada-US border. In most of Cascadia, cross-border traffic remains down by an average of 25% compared to 2019, with Point Roberts being most impacted. In Niagara-Buffalo, weekly shopping trips across the border are, for many, a thing of the past. From coast to coast, cross-border ferries, buses and trains have yet to resume service, and rural border crossings still operate at reduced hours. From changed habits to time that can never be recouped, restrictions to cross-border travel along the Canada-US border have had long-lasting effects.

The multi-layered impacts of COVID-19 related border policies highlight the need for future policies to be more mindful of the specificities of different communities across Canada and the United States, and the uniqueness of cross-border lives. The economic importance of the Canada-US border has been time and again recognized by both countries', but more recognition of its importance at the local and individual level is needed to ensure that border-related policies do not add more obstacles or complications to Canadians and Americans residing along the border.

The [Stories from the border during COVID-19](#) was created to provide borderlanders a space to share their story and ensure that lived experiences from the pandemic were not only recorded and archived, but are widely accessible, offering readers a glimpse into the lives that were impacted by the border restrictions.

***Do you reside in the Canada-US borderlands? Add your story to the map: [https://www.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8AeuTkUFWWbLqkK](https://www.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8AeuTkUFWWbLqkK)***

## ENDNOTES

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