

Strathcona County

# Community Trends



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# Introduction

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Strathcona County is a unique community. It is unique in that it includes both the urban centre of Sherwood Park and a significant rural territory including the hamlets, Antler Lake, Ardrossan, Collingwood Cove, Half Moon Lake, Hastings Lake, Josephburg, North Cooking Lake and South Cooking Lake.

The community’s uniqueness extends beyond its geographical profile. Its uniqueness is also reflected in the community’s ability to work collaboratively and collectively across County systems to meet the needs of residents. This ability is closely tied to the Social Framework, which was created in response to public feedback in the 2016 Community Talk engagement. Community leaders concluded that it was time for an intentional shift in how organizations worked together on what mattered most to residents. Since the Framework’s release, community partners have worked together to support the Framework outcomes and behavioural shifts. Collaborative strategies and responsive projects have built community capacity for collective action.

The importance of the work that has been done to implement the Social Framework has become very evident during 2020/21 as the community has risen to the challenge of supporting residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this unprecedented time, much work has also taken place to actively engage with County residents to understand their needs. This included engaging subgroups such as youth and seniors, so that the community could be aware of and respond to needs as they emerged.

In alignment with the Social Framework, one of the County’s overarching goals is to foster an environment where all residents feel physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally safe. Community leaders, the RCMP and County staff are in the early stages of working together to create a Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) Plan. The collaboration aims to increase crime prevention efforts, enhance well-being and support COVID-19 recovery.

This report profiles some data that supports our understanding of safety and well-being in our community. It is meant to inspire conversation and reflection as we begin our CSWB journey.



“To limit the impact of COVID-19, we should be physically, spatially, or geographically distancing. Socially we need to be closer than ever.”

(Hart, 2020)

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Community partners will continue to gather additional data to further refine our understanding of community safety and well-being in Strathcona County. This data will help inform a coordinated response to local community safety and well-being needs and priorities as we move forward together in the journey of recovery from the pandemic. Additional data will provide information for regular updates to this report in the coming years as our community continues to evolve and as CSWB planning and implementation moves forward.

The purpose of this report, *Strathcona County Community Trends*, is to:

1. Paint a picture of Strathcona County. This picture is grounded in currently available demographic data, data about attitudes and beliefs, and other data, such as engagement data, and tells us about the County during this unique time;
2. Provide a data-driven profile of some County subpopulations and their experiences and needs, including information about experiences and needs during the COVID-19 pandemic; and
3. Outline and interpret available data to support assessment of community safety and well-being in Strathcona County and to understand the strengths, protective factors and challenges of the County in our work to build a safe, healthy community. The assessment of community safety and well-being in this report includes current data about particular social needs, including mental health, housing, and food instability, and about the strong community response to these needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The story that is contained in this report is one of a unique community that has effectively come together to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and empower individuals, families, and communities during a challenging period in our history.



“Make sure that people are living connected and have some type of relationship with others. If they can be with others who can speak truth into their lives and let them know that they’re not alone and we’re on the journey with them, that will make a big difference.”

(Social Framework Leadership Table Member, 2020, during engagement session about the impacts of COVID-19 on Strathcona County residents)

# Methodology

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To prepare this report, a scan for relevant Strathcona County internal data was completed along with a comprehensive scan of relevant secondary data sources, including Government of Alberta and Statistics Canada data. Inclusion in the report was determined by the relevance of data to understanding current demographic, social, and economic conditions in Strathcona County and trends related to community safety and well-being. In addition, Strathcona County Departments and community organizations provided important data that contributed to the profile of the community contained in this report.

Since this scan took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, a particular focus was placed on scanning for data and academic research about the impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian communities and globally, as it was recognized that this body of work could contribute important elements to our understanding of Strathcona County.

The scan for relevant data focused on the following:

- Strathcona County internal data sources, including SCOOP surveys, Strathcona County engagement data and Strathcona County administrative data
- Alberta Provincial Government open data
- 2018 Alberta Municipal Census data
- Statistics Canada data sources, including 2016 Federal Census of Population data
- Published, peer-reviewed research articles about impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian communities

There is a range in the recency of the data referenced in this report. The most recent Federal Census data currently available was collected in 2016 and the most recent Municipal Census data currently available was collected in 2018. Other data referenced in this report was collected as recently as Spring, 2021. Updates to this report will be made as additional data, including data from the 2021 Federal Census, becomes available.

# Strathcona County Demographic Overview



# 1. Strathcona County Overview: Who are we?

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The population of Strathcona County is steadily increasing. This is characterized by a rising proportion of older residents and more growth in the County's urban population than in its rural population. The number of farms in the County decreased notably between 2011 and 2016.

The County has a lower visible minority population than the provincial average although there have been five year increases in both the numbers of residents identifying as visible minorities and as Indigenous. Lower rates of immigration have occurred in Strathcona County than in comparable communities in the province. Data about municipal rates of disability are limited and provincial rates of disability demonstrate that approximately one in five Albertans have a disability.

The average family size in Strathcona County is 3.0 individuals, close to the Canadian average of 2.9. The majority of residents 15 years of age or older (65.7%) are married or in a common-law relationship. The population of Strathcona County is relatively highly educated: Many County residents hold a post-secondary degree or other qualification compared to other municipalities in the province.

## **In 2018, the population of Strathcona County totalled 98,381 people, an increase of 15% since 2008.**

In 2008 the population of Strathcona County was 85,521 people. In 2018, the population of Strathcona County was 98,381 people. This equated to a 15% increase in the population of the County over the ten year period between 2008 and 2018.

— (Source: Strathcona County 2008 Municipal Census; Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)

## **Strathcona County is the sixth largest municipality in Alberta, after the Cities of Calgary, Edmonton, and Red Deer, the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, and the City of Lethbridge.**

In 2018, the population of Alberta's two largest municipalities, the Cities of Calgary and Edmonton were 1,267,344 and 932,546, respectively. The City of Red Deer had a population of 100,418 and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo<sup>1</sup>, a population of 111,687, followed by the City of Lethbridge with a population of 99,769. Strathcona County was the municipality with the sixth highest population in the province, at 98,381 people.

— (Source: Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2018 Municipal Affairs Population List)

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<sup>1</sup> The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo included the municipality's shadow population in their population numbers for the 2018 Municipal census.

## 2. Community Characteristics - Age

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### **The birth rate in Sherwood Park and Strathcona County is lower than the provincial birth rate.**

The birth rate from 2015/2016 to 2017/2018 was 19.6 per 1,000 women in Sherwood Park and 18.0 per 1,000 women in the surrounding county. This is lower than the Alberta provincial birth rate of 26.0 per 1,000 women during this time period.

— (Source: Alberta Health Community Profiles, 2019, for Sherwood Park and for Strathcona County, excluding Sherwood Park)

### **The County has an increasing proportion of older residents.**

The seniors' population (65 and older) increased 35% between 2011 to 2016, the highest growth of any age group. The population of children, aged 0 to 15 years, grew 4%, and the working age population, 15 to 64 years, increased 2% during the same time period.

— (Source: Statistics Canada 2011 Census of Population; Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

### **In 2016, the average age of County residents was 39 years old.**

The average age of the population in Strathcona County in 2016 was 39.2 years as compared to an average of 37.8 years for Alberta and 41 years for Canada.

— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)



### 3. Community Characteristics - Urban and Rural Populations and Farm and Cropland

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#### **The County's urban population is growing more quickly than the rural population.**

In 2018, 71,332 residents lived in urban Sherwood Park, while 27,049 resided in rural areas – roughly a seven to three split.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)

The urban population of Strathcona County grew by 29.5% from 55,063 people in 2005 to 71,332 people in 2018. The rural population grew by 7.5% from 25,169 in 2005 to 27,049 in 2018. Overall, Strathcona County population grew by 22.6% from 80,232 in 2005 to 98,381 in 2018.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2005 Municipal Census; Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)

#### **In 2016, there were 156,036 acres of cropland in Strathcona County, an increase of 3.93% since 2011. The number of farms decreased 12.0% during this time period, from 658 in 2011 to 579 in 2016.**

Strathcona County had 150,138 acres of cropland in 2011. In 2016, the County had 156,036 acres of cropland, an increase of 3.93% since 2011, with the largest increase in the non-durum wheat segment.

During the same time period, there was a notable decline in the number of farms in the County. There were 658 farms in Strathcona County in 2011 and by 2016 this number had dropped to 579, a 12.0% decrease.

—— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

## 4. Community Characteristics - Diversity

### The County has a relatively low visible minority population compared with Edmonton and the province.

In 2016, 7.29% of County residents identified as visible minorities, considerably lower than the proportion of individuals identifying as visible minorities in Edmonton (36.4%) and across Alberta (22.9%).

— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

### Diversity in the County is increasing and there has been a 32% change in the proportion of visible minority residents between 2011 - 2016.

In 2011, 5.53% of County residents identified as visible minorities with this number increasing to 7.29% in 2016. This is a five-year change of 32.0%.

— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

### 4% of County residents (3,880) are of Indigenous identity compared to 6.5% for Alberta. Over the last five years, there has been a 11.5% increase in the size of the County's Indigenous population.

In 2011 the Indigenous<sup>2</sup> population of Strathcona County was 3,480 and in 2016 it was 3,880, a five-year increase of 11.5%. Approximately 4% of County residents identified as Indigenous in 2016, the 8th highest proportion of residents identifying as Indigenous of all Alberta municipalities. 1.50% of the Province's Indigenous population resided in Strathcona County in 2016.

— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

### Overall, 21.7% of Albertans report having a disability with females experiencing a higher rate of disability (24.6%) than males (18.8%).

In Alberta, the disability rate for individuals 15 years or older is 21.7%, which is slightly lower than the Canadian disability rate of 22.3%. More females (24.6%) than males (18.8%) in Alberta have a disability. This is also true at a national level: 24.3% of females and 20.2% of males in Canada have a disability.

— (Source: Statistics Canada Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017: Data Visualization Tool)

<sup>2</sup> The Regional Dashboard from which these figures were drawn uses the terminology, "of Aboriginal identity".

## 5. Community Characteristics - Immigration and Mobility

### The County has lower rates of immigration than comparable communities in the Province.

Strathcona County had approximately three times fewer immigrants between 2011 and 2016 (1,795) than Red Deer (5,235), a city with a similar population to Strathcona County (~100,000 residents).

— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

Both Edmonton (17.8%) and Red Deer (6.8%) have significantly greater proportions of individuals who speak non-official languages at home relative to Strathcona County (2.8%).

— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

### Six out of every ten Strathcona County residents have lived in the County for 10 or more years.

According to the 2018 Municipal Census, on average 6 out of every 10 (61.0%) Strathcona County residents have lived in the County for 10 or more years, while 16.6% have lived in the County 5 to less than 10 years, 13.2% between 2 and 5 years and 9.3% less than 2 years.

— (Source: Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)

### Strathcona County had the ninth highest number of new permanent residents in 2018 compared to other Alberta municipalities. There was a 31.4% decrease in the number of new permanent residents in Strathcona County between 2011-2018.

In 2018, when compared to other Alberta municipalities, Strathcona County had the ninth highest number of new permanent residents at 175. Between 2011-2018, there has been a 31.4% decrease in the number of new permanent residents in the County.

— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

## 6. Community Characteristics - Families and Households

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**The average family size in Strathcona County is 3.0 individuals, close to the Canadian average of 2.9.**

The average family size in Strathcona County in 2016 was 3.0 and is near the Canadian average of 2.9. In 2016, 46% of the total couple families in Strathcona County were without children.

— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

**There is a slightly lower proportion of single parent led households in Strathcona County relative to the rest of the province.**

In Strathcona County in 2016, 7.3% of households were single parent households, up from 7.2% in 2011. In Alberta, 7.6% of households are single parent led households.

— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

**The majority of County residents aged 15 and older (65.7%), and a higher proportion of rural (70.1%) than urban residents (64.1%), are married or living with a common law partner.**

65.7% (52,225) of residents aged 15 years and older are married or living with a common law partner.

— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

A greater proportion of rural residents (70.1%) reported being married/living with common law partner as compared to Sherwood Park residents (64.1%).

— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

In comparison, both Edmonton and Alberta have lower rates of people who report being married/living with common law partner at a rate of 55.4% and 59.9% respectively.

— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

## Relative to Edmonton and the provincial average, Strathcona County has a lower proportion of residents who have never married.

In 2016, 23.1% of Strathcona County residents reported that they had never been married, the second most frequent relationship status after being married or in a common-law relationship. 7.1% of residents were separated/divorced and 4.0% were widowed.

— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

Edmonton and Alberta both have higher rates of people who report having never been married at a rate of 31.3% and 27.5% respectively. There were no significant differences between Strathcona County, Edmonton, and Alberta in percentage of people who reported being separated/divorced and widowed.

— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

## 7. Community Characteristics - Education

### Most Strathcona County residents have a high school diploma or certificate.

In Strathcona County in 2016, 91.6% of people aged 25 to 64 had a high school diploma or equivalency certificate, compared with 86.6% in Alberta and 86.3% in Canada.

— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

### Many Strathcona County residents hold a post-secondary degree or other qualification compared to other municipalities in the province.

In 2016, Strathcona County had 46,230 residents holding a post-secondary degree or other qualification, more than communities with comparable population sizes such as Lethbridge (39,005), Red Deer (40,640) or Wood Buffalo (34,170). 65.8% of Strathcona County residents held a post-secondary credential, relative to the provincial average of 60.8%. The number of residents holding a post-secondary credential in Strathcona County increased by 15% from 40,060 in 2011.

— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard and Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

# Strathcona County Population Profiles: Seniors and Youth

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## 1. Profile: Seniors

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The seniors' population in Strathcona County is increasing faster than the provincial average and seniors will continue to be a large population in the County for the next few decades. Roughly a quarter of seniors live in rural areas of the County and a sizeable proportion of seniors live independently, in alignment with a trend across Canada of seniors desiring to age in their own homes and in their communities. The number of seniors seeking social service supports in Strathcona County is increasing as indicated by the numbers of seniors seeking support from Family and Community Services Solutions Navigation Services. Finances and basic needs have been the needs for which seniors have most frequently sought support from Strathcona County Family and Community Services Solutions Navigation Services in 2021, followed by emotional health and relationship breakdown.

Engagement data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic about needs in the community related to COVID-19 demonstrates that community leaders were concerned about the potential for increased social isolation of seniors. They were particularly concerned about those seniors living in rural areas and living alone. This concern regarding an increased risk of social isolation for seniors during the pandemic due to physical distancing measures is supported by Canadian research (Hartt, 2020) and by research in other countries that demonstrates that seniors are at risk for social isolation and associated mental health concerns during the pandemic (Cohen & Taveres, 2021). Across the County, actions were taken to address this concern including the championing by the County's three COVID-19 Task Forces of a Community Broadband Project that would help ensure access to the internet for seniors living in rural areas of the County, helping to reduce their risk of social isolation during the pandemic. Important work focused on ensuring accessibility of technology, including technology training sessions offered by the Strathcona County Library, continued in 2020 and other measures were taken to support seniors' social connections and well-being during the pandemic, including development of new options for safely recreating and accessing social supports.

The risks that seniors have faced during the pandemic, including the risk of social isolation, have been critical to understand and address. Municipal, provincial, and federal research during the pandemic suggests that even in the context of significant pandemic-related risks seniors have also continued to make important contributions to their communities through volunteering. The limited data currently available about volunteerism during the pandemic suggests that through volunteer work, seniors are an important source of support in their communities at a time when many of their community members may be in most need of assistance due to impacts of COVID-19.

## Seniors currently are a large population in the County and this will continue to be so for the next few decades.

In 2018, there were 14,660 seniors (aged 65 and older) in Strathcona County representing 16% of the County population.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)

Demographic projections are that over the next 20 years, the seniors' population in Canada will grow by 68%. In Alberta, the population of older seniors (those who are 75 years or older) is expected to grow 2.8 times between 2017-2037.

—— (Source: Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2017)

## Strathcona County's seniors' population is increasing faster than the provincial average.

The seniors' population (65+ years old) in Strathcona County increased by 35% between 2011 and 2016. In comparison, between 2011 to 2016, the provincial seniors' population increased by 23%.

—— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

## Roughly a quarter of County seniors live in rural areas.

In 2018, 27% (3,914) of County seniors lived in rural areas and 73% (10,746) lived in urban areas.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)

## Seniors represent roughly the same proportion of Strathcona County's rural and urban populations.

15% (3,914) of the County's rural population are seniors, and 16% (10,746) of the urban population are seniors.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)

## Fewer rural seniors are 75 or older compared to urban seniors in the County.

30% (1,163) of rural seniors are 75 or older whereas 39.5% (4,240) of urban seniors are 75 or older.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)



## **There is a sizeable proportion of seniors in Strathcona County that live independently in their own homes. This aligns with a trend across Canada of seniors desiring to age in place in their own home and in their community.**

In 2018, there were a total of 1,262 seniors aged 65 or older who lived in single family dwellings in Strathcona County, 888 in Sherwood Park and 374 in rural Strathcona County. Seniors occupy 37.4% of all single occupied single family dwellings in Sherwood Park and 34.1% in rural Strathcona.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)

The 2020, Seniors Housing Survey, found that most adults aged 55 or above (89.7%) live independently in their own homes and the majority (78.6%) expect to stay in their current home for the next 1-3 years. Over a longer horizon of the next 4-10 years, the number who intend to stay in their current home drops notably to 44.4%. Still, fewer than 1 in 10 seniors intend to enter an independent or assisted seniors' residence in the next 4-10 years.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2020 Seniors Housing Survey)

These statistics align with a trend across Canada of seniors desiring to age in place. The Federal/Provincial/Territorial (Fpt) Forum of Ministers Responsible for Seniors (2016), defines aging in place as, "... having the health and social supports and services you need to live safely and independently in your home or your community for as long as you wish and are able." (p.2). Experiences of aging in place, including access to services and supports, and opportunities to maintain social connections vary and are influenced by geography. Research suggests that relative to their urban counterparts, rural seniors may experience disadvantages when aging in place in part because robust service infrastructures are less likely to exist in relatively sparsely populated rural locations (UNECE, March, 2017).

## **The number of seniors seeking social service supports in Strathcona County is increasing, as indicated by the numbers of seniors seeking support from Family and Community Services Solutions Navigation Services.**

In 2019, 389 seniors sought support from Strathcona County Family and Community Services Solutions Navigation Services. In 2020, the number of seniors accessing Solutions Navigation Services increased to 708, an 82% increase.

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Service Statistics)

## **Finances and basic needs are the needs for which seniors are most frequently seeking support in 2021, followed by emotional health and relationship breakdown.**

Since January, 2021, the five most frequently mentioned needs of seniors seeking support from Family and Community Services Solutions Navigation Services in order of frequency are: finances/basic needs; emotional health; relationship breakdown and abuse; transportation; and housing.

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Service Statistics)

## **During the COVID-19 pandemic, community leaders have been concerned about increased risk of social isolation and mental health challenges in the seniors' population.**

Community engagement data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that community leaders have been concerned about the potential for increased social isolation and associated mental health challenges during the pandemic in the seniors' population and in particular, for seniors who live in rural areas and those that live alone (Social Framework Leadership Table and COVID-19 Citizen and Community Support Task Force Engagement Session, September, 2020). This concern has been supported by research in Canada and worldwide about impacts of the pandemic on the health and well-being of seniors (Hartt, 2020; Cohen & Taveres, 2021).

## **Equal access to technology and to the internet were recognized by Strathcona County community members as important components of a solution to social isolation of seniors during the pandemic.**

Community leaders recognized that because seniors were a population at high physiological risk for developing COVID-19 they had been uniquely and significantly affected by social distancing measures during the pandemic, creating a risk of social isolation in the County's seniors' population (Social Framework Leadership Table and COVID-19 Citizen and Community Support Task Force Engagement Session, September, 2020). Technology has become an important tool during the pandemic to facilitate increased connection to others and reduce social isolation. In Canada, early research provides evidence that supporting seniors' access to technology can help address the issue of seniors' isolation during the pandemic. Limited research is yet available but early findings have demonstrated that seniors in Canada have begun to use new technologies during the pandemic and have started to use technology in new ways in order to connect with others (Haase et al., 2021).

In Strathcona County, a Community Broadband Project was championed by the three COVID-19 Task Forces established to guide pandemic recovery and resilience efforts. The project will help ensure equitable access to broadband and wireless services for seniors living in rural areas of the County so that they are able to access web-based socialization opportunities and supports.

Canadian research also demonstrates that some seniors may experience barriers to use of technology that include limited knowledge about technologies and preferences for other modes of communication, such as telephones (Haase et al., 2021). In Strathcona County, the Strathcona County Library's Community Needs Assessment, 2020/21, also found that seniors may not have the skills to navigate the internet, preventing them from using technology effectively.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Library 2021/21 Community Needs Assessment)

Much work has occurred to ensure accessibility of technology in the County. For example, in 2020 the Strathcona County Library provided:

- 35 formal technology classes for 252 residents;
- 1:1 technology training sessions for 164 residents;
- 13,791 public computer sessions; and
- 15,820 WiFi connections.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Library Service Statistics)

## **Even in the context of significant pandemic-related risks, seniors make important contributions to their communities through volunteering.**

Seniors have high rates of volunteerism that benefit their communities and available evidence suggests that this has continued throughout the pandemic. In Canada, seniors have historically contributed the highest number of hours in volunteer work of any age group (Hahman, du Plessis, & Fournier-Savard, 2020). Although they have been a group highly impacted by COVID-19 they have been found to continue to engage in high rates of volunteerism in Canada (Sin, Klaiber, Wen, DeLongis, 2021). In the 2020 Seniors Community Involvement Survey in Strathcona County, 30.3% of respondents, adults aged 55+, indicated that they volunteer. While there has been much concern about the real risks seniors have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ayalon et al., 2020), the limited data currently available about volunteerism during the pandemic suggests that seniors are important sources of support in their communities at a time when many community members may be in most need of support due to impacts of the pandemic on their lives.

## 2. Profile: Youth

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Youth and young adults make up almost one quarter of the current population in Strathcona County. They value the access to a variety of indoor and outdoor programs and services in Strathcona County that support their recreation needs. They also report feeling less connected than other age groups and that they experience stigma in a variety of settings and contexts.

The County's youth and young adults indicate that their own mental health and that of their loved ones are top issues of concern in their lives. In Strathcona County, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, a priority has been placed on engaging with youth and young adults to understand and respond to their needs. Engagement with youth and young adults has confirmed that particular mental health needs, including increased social anxiety, have emerged for this age group in response to the pandemic. They identify peers as an important source of support in their lives and report that social distancing measures associated with COVID-19 have made it more difficult to connect with friends for support. Globally, youth and young adults have experienced higher rates of stress, anxiety and depression in response to the COVID-19 pandemic than have other age groups (Jones, Mitra, & Bhuiyan, 2021). During recent engagement, youth and young adults in the County have expressed a strong desire to increase their mental health literacy as a tool to support their own and their peers' mental health.

The County's youth and young adults appreciate and acknowledge that community supports and services exist but also share that they don't always know where to learn about them or how to navigate them. They have indicated a need for increased communication about programs, services, and supports available to them. They also expressed a need for communication of information through the platforms they are already using with an emphasis on use of social media platforms such as Instagram. More opportunities to connect with youth and young adults through social media have recently been initiated in Strathcona County.

County youth and young adults identify transportation and cost as the barriers they most often experience to accessing supports and services. Youth and young adults also experience barriers to employment, reflected in a higher unemployment rate amongst youth, ages 14-24, relative to the rest of the population.

## Youth and young people make up approximately one-quarter of the County population.

In 2018, 23% (22,248 out of 98,381) of Strathcona County's population was aged 10-29 years. Youth aged 10-19 were 13% (12,823) of the population and young adults aged 20-29 were 10% (9,425) of the population.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)

## The programs and services youth and young adults in Strathcona County access most are indoor sports and recreation, followed by outdoor parks, trails and green spaces.

In the 2019 Youth Needs and Assets Assessment survey, the top three services and programming options accessed by youth in the past year included, indoor sports and recreation (78% of youth had accessed), outdoor parks, trails, and green spaces (73% of youth had accessed), and outdoor sports and recreation (61% of youth had accessed).

—— (Source: Strathcona County Youth Needs and Assets Assessment Final Report, October 4, 2019)

## Youth in Strathcona County feel less belonging and connection with others than adults.

In the 2016 Community Talk survey, 61% of youth, between the ages of 11 and 17 agreed with the statement that "people in Strathcona County feel like they belong and are connected to others". In comparison, three-quarters (75%) of adults over the age of 18 agreed with the statement.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Community Talk What We Heard Report, 2016)

## County youth and young adults experience stigma in a variety of settings and contexts.

County youth and young adults experience stigma when using public gathering spaces and also feel stigma regarding accessing mental health services and supports. In contrast, they want to experience spaces, services and supports that are free from stigma. When youth and young adults are accessing these spaces, services and supports, they want to feel free of judgment and labelling and included and safe.

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Next Gen Action Sessions What We Heard Report, 2021)

## Youth and young adults rank mental health as the top issue of importance in their lives.

In the 2019 Youth Needs and Assets Assessment survey, the top three most important issues selected by youth and young adults that were influencing their lives, included a loved one's mental health (80%), their own mental health (73%) and their own physical health (71%).

—— (Source: Strathcona County Youth Needs and Assets Assessment Final Report, October 4, 2019)

Research has demonstrated that relative to other age groups, youth and young adults have experienced higher rates of stress, anxiety and depression than other age groups as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Jones, Mitra, & Bhuiyan, 2021).

In 2021, a youth engagement session in Strathcona County about mental health resulted in an understanding that mental health continues to be a salient concern for youth in the County and that particular mental health needs have resulted from the pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, youth have experienced isolation from peers, stress of online schooling, stress with family, etc. This has had impacts on their mental health and their self-esteem and contributed to increased social anxiety and stress. Recognizing the impacts of the pandemic on youth mental health, Strathcona County's Youth Advisory Committee that works to promote initiatives that support the well-being of youth in Strathcona County, has identified mental health as a priority area of focus in 2021.

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Next Gen Action Sessions What We Heard Report, 2021)

## The COVID-19 pandemic has created new barriers to accessing mental health supports and services.

In 2021, a youth engagement session in Strathcona County about mental health resulted in an understanding that barriers to accessing mental health services and supports have emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing measures. Youth and young adults identified lack of private, safe spaces for accessing online mental health resources, such as counselling, and also lack of reliable access to the internet as barriers to their use of these services.

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Next Gen Action Sessions What We Heard Report, 2021)

## Youth and young adults in Strathcona County list friends more often than family as the people they rely on for help and advice.

In the 2019 Youth Needs and Assets Assessment survey, 76% of youth and young adults indicated that they would most often rely on friends for help and advice and 54% indicated that they would most often rely on family.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Youth Needs and Assets Assessment Final Report, October 4, 2019)

## **Social distancing measures during the pandemic have made it more difficult for youth and young adults to connect with their friends for help and advice.**

During a 2021 youth and young adult engagement session in Strathcona County about mental health, youth and young adults described being cut off from friends, an important source of support and advice, because of social distancing measures.

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Next Gen Action Sessions What We Heard Report, 2021)

## **Youth and young adults place high value on building mental health literacy as a tool to support their own and others' mental health.**

During the 2021 youth and young adult engagement session about mental health, youth and young adults also expressed a need and desire for building mental health literacy. They believe that a universal understanding of mental health is crucial for better supporting youth and young adults. Additionally, creating mental health literacy is a way to destigmatize the topic of mental health, which benefits all age groups.

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Next Gen Action Sessions What We Heard Report, 2021)

## **Youth and young adults appreciate and acknowledge that community supports and services exist but they don't always know where to learn about them or how to navigate them.**

Youth and young adults acknowledge that supports exist in the community, but communication about these supports need to reach youth and young adults where they are at (i.e., public school, home school, outreach school, post-secondary, etc.) and using the modes of communication that they are already using (i.e. social media, texting etc.).

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Next Gen Action Sessions What We Heard Report, 2021)

## The most effective communication methods for youth and young adults involve use of social media.

In the 2019 Youth Needs and Assets Assessment survey, nearly three-quarters (74%) of youth and young adults indicated that they would prefer to be informed about programs and services via Instagram; 50% indicated that Snapchat was the best way to share information with them; and 44% felt that SMS was the most effective way to share information with them.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Youth Needs and Assets Assessment Final Report, October 4, 2019)

Three youth and young adult engagement sessions were held in 2021 focused on the topics of gathering spaces, mental health, and transportation. A need for increased communication targeted to youth and young adults using multiple modes of communication including social media, was a theme across all engagement sessions.

To respond to this need, an Instagram page, *strathconextgen* was created to share youth and young adult-related content and a website was created for the youth strategy.

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Next Gen Action Sessions What We Heard Report, 2021)

## Youth and young adults identify transportation and cost as the top barriers to accessing services and programs. Rural youth list transportation as the top barrier. Urban youth list cost as the top barrier.

In the 2019 Youth Needs and Assets Assessment survey, the top two reasons preventing youth and young adults from accessing services and programming included transportation (34%) and cost of services and programs (20%). There was a notable difference between the responses given by urban versus rural respondents:

- Urban respondents were more likely to cite cost as a barrier (25% versus 7% of rural respondents);
- Rural respondents were more likely to cite transportation as a barrier (58% versus 25% of urban respondents).

—— (Source: Strathcona County Youth Needs and Assets Assessment Final Report, October 4, 2019)

## There is a higher unemployment rate amongst youth and young adults relative to the rest of the population.

In April 2021, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for individuals age 15+ in Alberta was 9.0%, while the unemployment rate for youth, ages 15-24 was 16.1%.

—— (Source: Government of Alberta Economic Dashboard)



# Strathcona County Safety and Well-Being Overview

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# Strathcona County Overview: Safety and Well-Being

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The Strathcona County Social Framework described in the introduction to this report, supported a journey in the County of moving toward creating collaborative solutions to community challenges and building system alignments. The Social Framework is a mutual agreement on how community partners work together in relationship to create a supported, safe and connected community.

Around the world, such a shift toward collaborative and preventative solution-making and system alignment has been shown to be a powerful way to build responsive and practical solutions to social challenges (Nilson, 2018). This fosters an effective continuum of care ranging from health, social and economic development to prevention, early intervention, risk mitigation, crisis response and post incident recovery. When communities work together to develop pragmatic and evidence-informed solutions and to achieve shared outcomes, community safety and well-being is supported.

Community safety and well-being is a, “combined outcome from the greatest absence of crime, addiction, mental suffering, violence, poverty, homelessness, sickness, injury and/or other social harms that a community can achieve.” (Nilson, 2018, p.98). In Strathcona County, community safety and well-being planning has begun as the next step in the Social Framework journey. In this section of the report, current data about multiple domains of community well-being and safety is presented. These domains are:

- Community Vitality, Belonging, and Safety
- Economic Well-Being and Living Standards
- Leisure and Culture
- Health and Wellness

This section of the report is intended as the beginning of a discussion about Community Safety and Well-being (CSWB) in Strathcona County. Over the next year, as CSWB planning continues, community partners will collect and compile additional data about safety and well-being and work towards setting priorities based on a comprehensive understanding of safety and well-being perceptions and realities in Strathcona County. The CSWB Plan will identify ways to proactively respond to emergent vulnerabilities, reduce dependence on crises driven responses and align supports and services to meet increasingly complex needs. Data collected through CSWB planning will provide information to allow regular updates to this report.

# 1. Community Vitality, Belonging, and Safety

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The vitality of communities and the quality of life within them are indicated by factors such as the level of engagement of community members in community activities, including in volunteer activities, and also by the sense of belonging (Canadian Municipal Network on Crime Prevention, August, 2020) and safety that people feel within their communities. Community safety is captured by objective measures of safety such as crime rates and by perceptions of safety. Across Canada, perceptions and experiences of safety vary by race, ethnicity, age, and gender with members of visible minority groups, younger Canadians and in particular, young women, more likely to feel unsafe than the rest of the population.

## Volunteering

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Volunteering is engagement in service and support work without financial compensation (Hahmann, April 23, 2021). Volunteers are an important source of social capital and make significant contributions to the lives of individuals and to the vitality of their communities. The contributions of volunteers are in many domains of society, including the arts, sports, healthcare, fire and rescue and education (Hahmann, April 23, 2021). In 2018, approximately 1 in 5 Strathcona County residents reported engaging in volunteer work. Across Alberta, residents participate in more informal than formal volunteer work and 17% of Albertans report not participating in any volunteer work.

### **In 2018, 21.9% of Strathcona County residents reported engaging in volunteer work.**

According to the 2018 Municipal Census, 21.9% of Strathcona County residents do some sort of volunteering. Further breakdown reveals that:

- 21.2% of urban residents reported doing some volunteering; and
- 23.6% of rural residents reported doing some volunteering.

— (Source: Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)

## **Albertans participate in more informal volunteer work than in formal volunteer work. 17% of Albertans reported not participating in any volunteer work in 2018.**

When volunteering occurs through a group or organization it is classified as formal volunteering and when it is provided as direct help without the mediation of a group or organization, it is considered informal volunteering (Hahmann, du Plessis, & Fournier-Savard, June 26, 2020). In 2018, 41% of Albertans participated in a combination of formal and informal volunteer work, 4% participated in formal volunteering only and 37% participated in informal volunteering only. 17% of Albertans did not participate in any volunteer work in 2018.

—— (Source: Hahmann, April 23, 2021)

# **Belonging, Connectedness, and Safety**

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Nurturing and maintaining a sense of belonging and acceptance is critical to the long-term health of our community and our citizens. Social relationships, a sense of belonging, and feeling included, are strong predictors of health outcomes (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). People who have strong social relationships have a 50% lower risk of death than people who are socially isolated (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Social isolation poses as great a risk to physical health as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day and loneliness substantially increases the risk of developing dementia (Holwerda et al., 2014).

Community safety is also fundamental to individual and community well-being. Community safety exists when all citizens feel physically, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally safe (Strathcona County Social Framework). Residents of Strathcona County place a high priority on feeling safe in their community and on fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance in the County. Almost 90% of Strathcona County residents feel safe in their community and this number is trending upwards. Seven out of ten County residents feel that there is currently a strong sense of belonging and connection in the community and approximately one-third of residents feel that they can rely on their neighbours for support.

Across Canada, perceptions and experiences of safety vary by race, ethnicity, age, and gender with members of visible minority groups, younger Canadians and in particular, young women, more likely to feel unsafe than the rest of the population. Members of visible minority groups in Canada are more likely to report an increased perception of harassment on the basis of race, ethnicity or skin colour during the pandemic than are other populations.

To support building of community connections, belonging, inclusion, and safety, Strathcona County began funding Community Connection grants and Community Change grants. The number of grants available to the community has been increased since the grants were first introduced in 2016 and grant recipients have described growth of social connections and feelings of safety as a result of funded projects.

## **Creating a sense of belonging and connection and feelings of safety and inclusion for all community members are important priorities for Strathcona County residents.**

In 2016, of approximately 8,000 people responding to a survey about goals for the Strathcona County community, 88.4% agreed that it is important to achieve a goal that people in the County feel safe and free from physical and emotional harm and 87.5% agreed that it is important that people in the County feel like they belong and are connected to others.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Community Talk What We Heard Report, 2016)

## **Strathcona County is a safe community with a crime rate that is notably lower than the Alberta provincial crime rate.**

In 2019, the total crime rates per 100,000 population for rural (3,899) and urban (6,096) Strathcona County were notably lower than the Alberta provincial crime rate of 9,962 and the Canadian crime rate of 6,487.

—— (Source: Statistics Canada Table: 35-10-0183-01, Incident-based crime statistics, by detailed violations, police services in Alberta; Statistics Canada Table: 35-10-0177-01, Incident-based crime statistics, by detailed violations, Canada, provinces, territories and Census Metropolitan Areas)

## **89.8% of residents think that Strathcona County is a safe place to live or visit and perceptions of community safety are trending upwards.**

In 2020, 89.8% of residents responding to the Strathcona County 2020 Public Satisfaction Survey indicated that safety in the community is good or very good, an increase of 1.7% since 2019.

—— (Sources: Strathcona County 2020 Public Satisfaction Survey)

## **Strathcona County, like other communities in the Province, has seen a five-year increase in crimes committed.**

The County has seen a 15.7% increase in crimes from 3,704 crimes committed in 2013 to 4,489 in 2017. Edmonton has experienced a 53.3% increase in crime over the same time period from 69,190 in 2013 to 99,318 in 2017.

—— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

## **Seven out of ten residents of Strathcona County feel that there is currently a strong sense of belonging and connection in the community.**

Approximately seven out of ten County residents indicated that in Strathcona County people feel like they belong and are connected to others.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Community Talk What We Heard Report, 2016)

## **Over one-third of both urban and rural residents in Strathcona County feel that they can often or always count on their neighbours for help.**

In 2019, 37.1% of urban residents and 36% of rural residents felt they could count on their neighbours for help.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2019 Public Satisfaction Survey)

## **Perceptions and experiences of safety in Canadian communities vary by race, ethnicity, age, and gender:**

### **More than 25% of members of visible minority groups in Canada report being sometimes or often harassed on the basis of race, ethnicity or skin colour compared to 10% of those who are not a member of a visible minority group. Members of visible minority groups are 3 times more likely to report a perceived increase in this type of harassment during the pandemic.**

26% of Black and Korean participants, 25% of Chinese participants, and 22% of Filipino participants in a Statistics Canada study about perceptions of safety, reported sometimes or often experiencing harassment or attack based on race, ethnicity, or skin colour compared to 10% of participants who are not members of a visible minority group. Members of visible minority groups are 3X more likely to have perceived an increase in harassment based on race, ethnicity or skin colour during the pandemic than is the rest of the population (18% relative to 6%).

—— (Source: Statistics Canada, October 20, 2020)

## **Younger Canadians, and in particular young women, are more likely to feel unsafe than the rest of the population.**

Statistics Canada reports that those in younger age groups, and in particular young women, more often have perceived an increase in crime in their neighbourhood and an increase in harassment and attacks based on race and ethnicity during the pandemic than the rest of the population. Young women are also less likely to feel safe in their neighbourhoods at night when alone.

— (Source: Statistics Canada, October 20, 2020)

## **To support building of community connections, belonging, inclusion and safety, Strathcona County began funding Community Connection and Community Change grants. Grant recipients have described increases in social connections and feelings of safety as a result of funded projects.**

Every year, Strathcona County provides funding for community members to strengthen connection and build neighbourhood relationships. The Community Connection grant provides funding for community-based events, and the Community Change grant provides funding for community-based projects. In 2020, Strathcona County adapted these grants to reflect the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting restrictions around social gathering. Grants were provided for residents to connect safely and to support kind gestures to help residents that were impacted by the pandemic.

In 2020, 100 Community Connection grants were distributed, and 17 Community Change grants were distributed. The number of grants available to the community has steadily increased from 25 grants in 2016 to 125 grants in 2019.

In 2020, grant recipients noted that the projects funded by the grants have lead to an increased feeling of safety in their neighbourhoods during the pandemic and more knowledge of the needs of their neighbours, including knowledge of those who do not have family nearby and are in need of support and knowledge of seniors who need help with tasks such as snow shovelling or purchasing groceries.

— (Source: Family and Community Services Service Statistics)

# Domestic Violence

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The pandemic has increased the risk of intimate partner violence in Canada and worldwide. The UN has called violence against women during the pandemic, “A shadow pandemic.” (UN Women, 2021). One in ten Canadian women reported feeling concerned or very concerned about the risk of violence in the home in Spring, 2020.

Physical distancing measures may make it more difficult for those experiencing domestic violence to access supports and some organizations, including Strathcona County Family and Community Services Solutions Navigation Services, have seen a decrease in the number of individuals accessing support for domestic violence. At the same time, worldwide, calls to national call lines providing support for domestic abuse victims have increased in number and specialized help lines in Alberta have seen a 30-50% increase in numbers of calls during the pandemic.

## **One in ten Canadian women reported feeling concerned or very concerned about the risk of violence in the home in Spring, 2020.**

The pandemic has increased the risk of intimate partner violence in Canada and worldwide. Increased job insecurity, financial pressures, and increased social isolation associated with the pandemic and social distancing measures all increase the risk of intimate partner violence (Viero et al., 2021). The United Nations has called violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic, a “shadow pandemic” (UN Women, 2021).

In Canada, in a Spring 2020 survey, Statistics Canada found that one in ten (10%) female respondents reported feeling very concerned or extremely concerned about the risk of violence in the home.

—— (Source: Statistics Canada, April 8, 2020)



**Public Health measures put in place to limit the spread of COVID-19 may make it more difficult for women to access support when experiencing domestic violence. Some organizations providing supports for those experiencing domestic violence, including Strathcona County Family and Community Services Solutions Navigation Services, have seen a decrease in numbers of individuals seeking support during the pandemic.**

Measures put in place to limit the spread of COVID-19 may also limit women's access to supports when experiencing domestic violence. Many organizations that provide supports for those experiencing domestic violence have experienced a sharp decrease in the numbers of individuals requesting support, suggesting that some barriers to support seeking have increased during the pandemic (Viero et al., 2021). The number of individuals seeking support from Family and Community Services Solutions Navigation Services related to family violence has decreased 13% from 2019 to 2020.

— (Source: Family and Community Services Service Statistics)

**At the same time, other support services, and in particular domestic violence helplines in Canada and worldwide have experienced significant increases in request for support (Viero et al., 2021). In Alberta, specialized crisis lines providing support for those experiencing domestic violence have seen a 30-50% increase in number of calls (Bradley et al., 2020).**

At the same time as some support services have seen decreases in requests for support, others have experienced significant increases in numbers of individuals reaching out for help (Viero et al., 2021). In Alberta, for example, specialized crisis lines providing support for intimate partner violence have experienced a 30-50% increase in number of calls (Bradley et al., 2020).

**Recognizing that individuals in the community affected by domestic violence may be experiencing barriers to accessing supports during the pandemic, Strathcona County community partners developed an innovative Family Violence Toolkit to help ensure continued access to support.**

In the early days of the pandemic, Strathcona County Family and Community Services and partners, A Safe Place, Saffron Centre, Strathcona County RCMP, and Government of Alberta Children's Services, came together to address a concern that individuals in Strathcona County affected by domestic violence may be experiencing barriers to accessing supports. An innovative Family Violence Toolkit and distribution plan were developed. The Toolkit contained information about family violence and about supports in the community. Even in the midst of physical distancing measures in place during the pandemic, individuals were still accessing their community pharmacies. Recognizing the opportunity that this created to reach those affected by family violence, the Family Violence Toolkit was distributed to 28 pharmacies in Strathcona County and pharmacists used the toolkit to provide information to community members in need of support.

## 2. Economic Well-Being and Living Standards

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Economic well-being and living standards are crucial components of overall well-being for individuals and communities. Employment is an important key indicator of economic well-being. Employment confers obvious economic benefits at both individual and community levels and is a key mechanism by which societies deter poverty and social exclusion (Voukelatou et al., 2021). At an individual level, the economic and social resources resulting from employment also support health and wellness.

Other key indicators of economic well-being and living standards, include income, housing conditions (Voukelatou et al., 2021), and food stability. Affordability and accessibility are additional crucial factors impacting economic health as they influence whether individuals can access and/or acquire goods, such as adequate and stable housing and food; and services, such as transportation and recreational opportunities, that contribute to living conditions.

## Employment

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The labour force participation rate of Strathcona County is close to the provincial average and the County's unemployment rate is relatively low compared to the rest of the Province. The labour force participation rate in the County is declining and the decline varies by gender: the five-year decline has been lowest for the female segment of the County population. There has also been a sharper five-year increase in the unemployment rate for the male than for the female population of the County. Strathcona County Library provides important services to residents that support employment seeking and employment success.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an appreciable impact on economic well-being: The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in Alberta in May, 2019, was 6.7% and this rose to 15.5%, in May, 2020, an 8.8% increase. In April, 2021, approximately one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment rate in the province was 9.0%, one of the highest unemployment rates of any province and higher than the Canadian unemployment rate of 8.1%. The number of Albertans receiving Employment Insurance has increased precipitously during the pandemic.

## The labour force participation rate in Strathcona County is close to the provincial average.

In 2016, the labour force participation rate in Strathcona County was 72.1%, close to the provincial average participation rate of 71.7%.

—— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

## The labour force participation rate in the County is declining, and the five-year decline has been lowest for the female segment of the County population.

In 2016, the labour force participation rate in Strathcona County was 72.1%, close to the provincial average of 71.7% and a decline from 74.4% in 2011. The female segment of the County population experienced a lower decline in labour force participation rate than did the male segment: Between 2011 and 2016 the labour force participation rate for females decreased from 69.4% to 67.3%, a 3.03% decline. During the same 5-year period, the male labor force participation rate declined from 79.4% to 76.9%, a 3.15% decline.

—— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

## The unemployment rate in Strathcona County increased between 2011 and 2016 and was lower than the provincial average.

In 2016, there was an unemployment rate of 6.5% in Strathcona County, an increase from 4.20% in 2011, equating to a 54.8% five-year increase. The provincial unemployment rate in 2016 was 9.06%.

—— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

## There was a sharper increase in the unemployment rate for the male than for the female population of the County.

While the unemployment rate for males increased from 4.30% in 2011 to 7.40% in 2016, a 72.1% increase, the unemployment rate in the female population showed only a 34.1% increase from 4.10% in 2011 to 5.50% in 2016.

—— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

## **43.1% of County residents were employed full-time and 7.9% were employed part-time in 2018.**

Approximately half of the residents in Strathcona County are employed (51%) either full-time (43.1%) or part-time (7.9%). The remaining 49% of residents are either students (22.4%), caring for a child not yet in school (4.4%), not in the workforce (9.1%) [limited to residents in working age range of 18-64], or retired (13.2%).

— (Source: Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)

## **Strathcona County Library provides important services to residents to support employment seeking and employment success.**

In 2019, the Strathcona County Library provided the following services to support residents' employment seeking and employment success:

- 298 Resume Tutor appointments
- 13 career-related programs for 107 residents
- 15,221 resumes printed/copied

— (Source: Strathcona County Library Service Statistics)

## **The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted unemployment rates. In April, 2021, approximately one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment rate in Alberta was 9.0%, one of the highest unemployment rates of any province.**

The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in Alberta in May, 2019, was 6.7% and this rose to 15.5%, in May, 2020, an 8.8% increase. During the same time period the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in Canada rose from 5.4% to 13.7%, an 8.3% change.

In April, 2021, approximately one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a unemployment rate of 8.1% in Canada and the unemployment rate in Alberta had dropped to 9.0% from 13.4% in April, 2020. Only the province of Newfoundland and Labrador (13.9%) had a higher unemployment rate than Alberta in April, 2021.

— (Source: Government of Alberta Economic Dashboard)

## The numbers of Albertans receiving Employment Insurance have increased precipitously during the pandemic.

In April, 2019, there were 51,400 work eligible individuals in Alberta receiving regular Employment Insurance. This number increased to 68,300 by April, 2020 and to 171,580 by March, 2021 (the most recent figures available). There was a 191.3% increase in the number of Albertans receiving Employment Insurance between March, 2020 (58,900) and March, 2021 (171,580).

—— (Source: Government of Alberta Economic Dashboard )

## The numbers of Albertan households receiving Income Support have decreased during the pandemic, however, the Edmonton zone has the highest proportion of households receiving Income Support of any region of the province, at 51.9%.

Between March 2020 and 2021, the number of households receiving Income Support in the province decreased 29.1% to 43,640. The Edmonton zone has the highest proportion of Income Support recipients of any region of the province: 51.9% (22,650) of Income Support recipients reside in the Edmonton zone; 28.2% (12,307) reside in the Calgary zone; and 5.2% (2,271) reside in the South zone with relatively smaller numbers of recipients in the North Central, North East, and North West regions of the province.

—— (Source: Government of Alberta Community and Social Services Open Data - Income Support)

# Income + Debt

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Income is an important indicator of economic well-being and in market economies is a key determinant of the purchasing power of individuals and of their ability to buy goods and services required to support a good standard of living (Voukelatou et al., 2021). In Strathcona County residents have a substantially higher household income compared to the provincial median and there is a relatively small population living with low income. Purchasing capacity and the ability to acquire required goods and services is also affected by consumer debt. On average, Albertans carry more consumer debt than residents of other provinces.

## County residents have a substantially higher household income compared to the provincial median.

Median family household income in the County in 2018 was \$133,786, higher than the provincial median of \$102,493.

—— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

## Strathcona County has a relatively small population living with low income, lower than the provincial and Canadian average.

Four percent (3,895) of residents in Strathcona County are living with low income. Across Alberta, 9.3% of the population live with low income and across Canada, 14.2% of the population live with low income.

—— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

## Albertans consumer debt and mortgage delinquency rates have remained steady since 2019, but Albertans continue to carry more debt than residents of other provinces.

During Q3 of 2020, Albertans' average consumer debt (excluding mortgages) was \$28,405, down 2.66% from the same time last year. This is roughly \$5,000 more than the national average (\$23,237).

—— (Source: Equifax, November 30, 2020)

During Q4 of 2020, Alberta's mortgage delinquency rate was 0.44%, down slightly from Q4 of 2019 (0.50%). This is higher than the national average delinquency rate of 0.25% in Q4 of 2020.

—— (Source: CMHC, March 7, 2021)

# Housing

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Adequate and affordable housing is an important social determinant of health and impacts health and well-being in a variety of tangible and intangible ways. Most obvious are the physical health impacts, including disease and injury, that may result from inadequate housing. For example, mold or dampness in housing is associated with respiratory illnesses such as asthma (Jaakkola et al., 2011) and safety risks in housing such as poor lighting, inadequate safety rails on stairways etc. can lead to accidental injuries (Gibson et al., 2011; Keall, Ormandy, & Baker, 2011). Affordability is another dimension of housing that has multiple health impacts. Living in unaffordable housing, often defined as housing that costs greater than 30% of household income, is associated with poor perceived physical health, illnesses such as hypertension and arthritis (Pollack, Griffin, & Lynch, 2010), and lower overall psychological well-being (Taylor, Pevalin, & Todd, 2007).

In Strathcona County, 14% of residents are spending 30% or more of their income on housing costs. Both home prices and average rental costs are higher in Strathcona County than provincial median costs for purchasing or renting a dwelling. In 2019, financial need and housing needs were the most frequently experienced needs for those seeking support from Strathcona County Family and Community Services Solutions Navigation Services. The 2020 Strathcona County Affordable Housing Estimate found that the majority of survey respondents experiencing housing insecurity were employed, had completed a post-secondary credential, and almost one-quarter were homeowners.

## **14% of Strathcona County residents are spending 30% or more of their income on housing costs.**

Affordable housing is defined as household monthly shelter costs that are less than 30% of a household's monthly income before tax (CMHC, March 31, 2018). 4,870 out of the 35,565 (14%) households in Strathcona County (3,535 homeowners and 1,335 tenants) are spending 30% or more of their monthly income on housing costs.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Needs & Demands Assessment, 2020)

## **Roughly 2,000 households, 5.54% of all households in Strathcona County, are in core housing need.**

When a household's dwelling is unsuitable, inadequate, or unaffordable and the household's total income is insufficient to afford alternative housing in their community, the household is considered in Core Housing Need. In 2016, the rate of Core Housing Need in Strathcona County was 5.54%, equivalent to roughly 2,000 households.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Needs & Demands Assessment, 2020)



## One-person households are at highest risk of experiencing core housing need.

Estimates by the Alberta Rural Development Network completed for the Strathcona County Needs & Demands Assessment, 2020, demonstrate that in 2016, one-person households in Strathcona County were at highest risk of experiencing core housing need relative to other family and household types.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Needs & Demands Assessment, 2020)

## The cost to own a home in Strathcona County is high compared to the rest of the province.

In 2016, the median value of a dwelling in Strathcona County was \$450,119 while the median provincial value of a dwelling was \$400,104.

—— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

## Fewer households in Strathcona County are renting their dwellings compared to the provincial average rate of renting.

The number of households currently renting in Strathcona County is low at 10.9%, relative to the Alberta average rate of renting of 26.9%.

—— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

## The median monthly rent in Strathcona County is higher than the provincial median monthly rental rate and there are few purpose-built rental dwellings relative to the total number of tenant households in the County.

In 2016, the median monthly cost for rented dwellings in Sherwood Park was \$1,594, compared to the Alberta median of \$1,243.

—— (Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

The number of purpose built rental market dwellings in Strathcona County is low relative to the number of households that are renting dwellings. It is estimated that 2,642 out of the 3,865 tenant households in Strathcona County are renting a secondary dwelling from a private property owner.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Needs & Demands Assessment, 2020)

## **In 2019, financial need and housing needs were the most frequently experienced needs for those seeking support from Family and Community Services, Solutions Navigation Services.**

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Service Statistics)

## **Housing is especially unaffordable in Strathcona County for those living with low income.**

Consider a single person household earning at or below the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) threshold:

One person earning \$24,949/year (LICO for one person, 2016 from Government of Canada, April 5, 2017) = \$2,079/month

Income of \$2,079 - \$1,594 rent (median monthly rent, Strathcona County) = \$485 left over for groceries, bills, and other expenses

—— (Data Source: Statistics Canada 2016 Census of Population)

## **The 2020 Strathcona County Affordable Housing Estimate found that most respondents experiencing housing insecurity were employed, had completed a post-secondary credential, and almost one-quarter were home owners.**

Results of the 2020 Strathcona County Affordable Housing Estimate demonstrated that 54% of respondents experiencing housing insecurity were employed full-time or part-time, 56% had a post-secondary certificate, diploma, degree, or trade certificate, and 24% were home owners. These results indicate that those experiencing housing insecurity in Strathcona County are not outliers from a demographic perspective and fit within the profile of Strathcona County residents outlined in the first section of this report.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2020 Rural Housing and Service Needs Estimation Report)

# Food Security

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Access to sufficient and healthy food is fundamental to well-being. Food insecurity can affect the quality of diet consumed and lead to malnutrition and undernourishment (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2020). It can also give rise to overweight and obesity. In addition, experiences of food insecurity are associated with mental health challenges, lower life satisfaction and decreased well-being (Elgar et al., 2021). Across Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity has increased in prevalence because the fiscal shocks of COVID-19 on Canadian households has negatively impacted the economic access of many to good quality food (Deaton & Deaton, 2021).

In Strathcona County, food bank use is trending upward. A food gift card program was created in the County to support families facing food insecurity during the pandemic. By March, 2021, 89 families facing food insecurity had been supported through the program.

## Strathcona County Food Bank use is trending upward.

From 2014 to 2019, the number of individuals supported through the Strathcona County Food Bank increased from 4,897 to 9,529 respectively. In 2019, 666 requests from agencies for Food Bank support were also fulfilled.

— (Source: Strathcona County Food Bank, 2019)

## A food gift card program was created in Strathcona County during the pandemic and by March, 2021, 89 families facing food insecurity had been supported through the program.

Recognizing the economic shocks being experienced by many families in the County during the pandemic, a Community COVID-19 grant from the Government of Alberta and Family and Community Support Services of Alberta was utilized to create a food gift card program to support Strathcona County households facing food insecurity. By March, 2021, 89 families had been supported through the program with \$17,350 distributed through the program.

— (Source: Family and Community Services Service Statistics)

# Accessibility and Affordability

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Well-being of individuals and of communities is impacted by accessibility of supports, services, material goods, and opportunities that contribute to high quality of life and by the affordability of the goods required for a satisfactory standard of living such as high quality food and adequate housing and of services such as recreational opportunities and transportation. Transportation is closely linked to individual and community well-being (Lee & Sener, 2016). Accessible transportation is a key enabler of individual access to health care, nutrition and recreational opportunities all of which impact physical health and is also vital to the building and maintaining of social connections and to social well-being. According to Lee and Sener, (2016), “the more difficult it is to travel, the more difficult it will be to develop social connections” (p. 149). Accessibility of transportation is a priority in Strathcona County. The County ensures affordable access to Mobility Bus Services for residents with mobility difficulties and has continued to safely provide these services during the pandemic. Access to transit services have also been maintained in the County during the pandemic.

During the pandemic and as social distancing measures were enacted, the role that technology played in ensuring accessibility of services and supports, and as an enabler of social connection grew in importance. In Strathcona County, 97% of residents have access to the internet and 81% of urban residents and 60% of rural residents are satisfied with the speed of their internet service. During the pandemic, barriers to adequate technology access and utilization were identified for some residents and the three COVID-19 Task Forces that were established by Strathcona County to guide the community’s COVID-19 pandemic recovery and resilience efforts championed the Community Broadband Project to help ensure equitable internet access in rural regions of the County.

In 2020, financial issues were the top need identified by residents seeking supports from Strathcona County Family and Community Services Navigation Services, an increase of 54% from 2019. Many residents of Strathcona County are concerned about affordability and demand for affordable services is significant.

## **Strathcona County residents with mobility challenges have access to affordable Mobility Bus services.**

In July 2018, Strathcona County Transit introduced Fare Parity between its commuter, local and Mobility Bus services. Since its introduction, Mobility Bus has seen an increased demand for its services. This policy change has increased the availability of affordable transportation options in the County and actively contributed to achievement of the County’s Social Framework outcomes for residents with mobility challenges.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Transit Service Statistics)

## **Mobility Bus Services have continued to safely operate through the pandemic, although ridership has decreased from pre-pandemic levels.**

Mobility Bus provided 11,620 trips to customers in 2020. As with other transit services, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this represented a decrease from the record 26,437 trips provided in 2019.

— (Source: Strathcona County Transit Service Statistics)

## **Access to safe transit services has continued throughout the pandemic.**

Transit has maintained 82% of its service levels, while maintaining physical distancing amongst passengers. Service reductions were only implemented where a duplication of services existed, namely during 'peak' hours.

— (Source: Strathcona County Transit Service Statistics)

Residents can safely access Transit services with 100% mask usage being reported onboard Strathcona County Transit buses.

— (Source: Strathcona County Transit Service Statistics)

## **97% of Strathcona County residents have access to the internet, including 98% of urban residents and 94% of rural residents.**

Of residents who provided information in the Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census about having internet access, 97.1% have internet access. Further breakdown demonstrates that 98.2% of occupied households in the Urban Service Area and 94.2% in the Rural Service Area have internet access.

— (Source: Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)

## **81% of urban residents and 60% of rural residents are satisfied with the speed of their internet.**

80.7% of Urban Service Area residents with internet access and 60% of Rural Service Area residents with internet access are satisfied with the speed of their internet connection.

— (Source: Strathcona County 2018 Municipal Census)

## During the COVID-19 pandemic, barriers to technology access have been identified for some residents.

The Library's Community Needs Assessment identified a number of barriers to satisfactory internet access during the COVID-19 pandemic, including:

- Some rural residents are unable to get access to high-speed internet as it is not available in their communities;
- Some households are experiencing increased demands on bandwidth due to multiple family members using the internet simultaneously while working from home or attending school remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- Some families do not own the required number of electronic devices to meet their family's increased technology needs while members are working and/or attending school from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

— (Source: Strathcona County Library 2021/21 Community Needs Assessment)

## Ensuring equitable internet access has been a priority in the County as a component of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Technology has become an important measure during the pandemic to facilitate access to programs and services and connection to others. To help ensure equitable access to broadband and wireless services so that residents may utilize web-based socialization opportunities and support services, the Community Broadband Project was championed by the three COVID-19 Task Forces. The Broadband Project will help ensure reliable and fast internet access in rural regions of the County that have had less internet access than urban regions.

## Financial issues were the top need of residents seeking support from Strathcona County Family and Community Services Solutions Navigation Services in 2020. The number of residents seeking support for financial issues increased 54% from 2019.

In 2020, 'financial issues' were identified as the top need of Strathcona County Family and Community Services Solution Navigation Services clients (1749 out of 3438 sessions), increasing 54% from 2019 (1133 out of 2613 sessions).

— (Source: Family and Community Services Service Statistics)

## Many community members are concerned about affordability.

In the 2016 Community Talk engagement with Strathcona County residents, affordability was the most frequently mentioned topic. The importance of affordability to residents of the County is further supported by Community Talks Survey results: 93.4% of 8000 respondents responding to the Community Talks survey agreed that all people in Strathcona County should have their basic needs met and 41.4% of people thought that this is the goal that the community should focus on first.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Community Talk What We Heard Report, 2016)

## There is a sustained demand for recreation subsidies in Strathcona County.

In 2018 1,143 residents received subsidies for recreation and in 2019, demand for recreation subsidies remained relatively steady with 1,117 residents receiving subsidies.

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Service Statistics)

## Increasing the affordability of library services by offering free library cards resulted in a 30% increase in library card registrations and 13% increase in eBook circulation.

The Strathcona County Library made library cards free in 2016 and saw a 30% increase in registrations, 6% increase in visits, 3% increase in physical item circulation, and 13% increase in eBook circulation.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Library Service Statistics)

### 3. Leisure and Culture

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Resident participation in enjoyable leisure activities and cultural activities influences both individual well-being and community well-being. Leisure and cultural activities may include engagement with a variety of pursuits including sports and recreation, visual arts, and the performing arts. Involvement with these activities can positively influence physical (Raza et al., 2020) and emotional health (Chen et al., 2020), enhance social relationships, and build bonds in the community, promoting community well-being (Kleiber, 2020).

Strathcona County residents prefer to recreate outdoors and the County contains more park space than comparable communities. 94% of households in the County use parks and open spaces. Approximately one-third of County residents experience barriers to participation in recreation and culture activities with cost being the most frequently encountered barrier.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, residents indicated a need for safe recreation opportunities and virtual, in-person and hybrid programs (in-person class with virtual component) have been developed to address inclusion and diversity barriers as well as safety concerns. Many residents continue to use the County's outdoor and indoor amenities during the pandemic and feel that safety concerns have been well-addressed by the County.

**Strathcona County residents prefer to recreate outdoors and the County contains more park space than comparable communities. 94% of households in the County use parks and open spaces.**

83% of residents indicate that their favourite household recreation and culture activity takes place outdoors; 94% of all households use parks and open spaces in Strathcona County.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Recreation and Culture Strategy, 2019)

Strathcona County provides more park space, playgrounds, spray parks and outdoor sport spaces per resident (i.e. ball diamonds, beach volleyball, bike park, pickleball courts) compared to benchmark communities<sup>3</sup>.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Recreation and Culture Strategy: Trends and Best Practices report, 2019)

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<sup>3</sup> Comparable communities in AB and BC include Edmonton Tri-municipal region, Fort Sask, St. Albert, Leduc, Red Deer, Airdrie, Lethbridge, Wood Buffalo, Grand Prairie, Burnaby and Richmond.



## **Some residents experience barriers to participation in recreation and culture activities, with cost being the top barrier that is encountered.**

35% of residents indicate they have experienced barriers to participation in recreation and culture activities to the desired degrees.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Recreation and Culture Strategy, 2019)

The top three barriers are admission costs, program scheduling and overcrowded facilities.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Recreation and Culture Strategy, 2019 and Strathcona County Recreation and Culture Strategy: Community Profile report)

## **Many residents desire access to safe outdoor recreational opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

78% of residents who indicated they would be comfortable (or were not sure) about attending an outdoor event during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that they would feel comfortable attending a contact-free outdoor public event in 2020 (such as drive-through programming).

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2020 COVID-19 Survey, January 2021)

The top three preferred outdoor events to participate in (of those who indicated they would be comfortable or were not sure) are outdoor winter skating, drive-through display and outdoor fire pits.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2020 COVID-19 Survey, January 2021)

**Recognizing the importance of recreation and culture opportunities to the health of the community, during the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual, in-person and hybrid programs (in-person class with virtual component) have been developed to address inclusion and diversity barriers as well as safety concerns. Many residents continued to use the County's outdoor and indoor amenities during the pandemic and felt that safety concerns had been well-addressed by the County.**

In-person group fitness programs were not allowed, as mandated by the province's response to the global pandemic, from December 2020 to March 2021. Within eight days of low-intensity group fitness programs being offered in the County, 76% of in-person and hybrid programs were filled and 96% of aqua classes filled.

—— (Source: Recreation, Parks and Culture Service Statistics, March 8, 2021)

The Active Schools Challenge is an annual event that encourages students in Kindergarten to grade 6 to be active for an extra 30 minutes every day for two weeks. The challenge was held virtually in 2021, and over 1,700 students have registered and participated in either Yoga, Dance Fit or Cardio Kickboxing classes.

—— (Source: Recreation Parks and Culture Service Statistics, March 2021)

83% of surveyed residents were using outdoor amenities and 61% were using indoor amenities when these were open to use.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2020 COVID-19 Survey, January 2021)

89% of residents who use outdoor recreation amenities during the pandemic indicate that they feel somewhat or very safe when using outdoor recreation amenities and 51% of residents who use indoor recreation facilities feel somewhat or very safe.

—— (Source: Strathcona County 2020 COVID-19 Survey, January 2021)

## 4. Health and Wellness

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### Physical Health

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Physical health is an essential component of individual well-being (Voukelatou, 2021). Residents of Strathcona County have good overall health. The prevalence of smoking by County residents is decreasing and residents are increasingly active. The proportion of obese residents in the County is increasing, however, and is higher than the provincial average. Supports for physical wellness are a high priority for County residents and almost 90% of patients of emergency services in Strathcona County feel that communication and options provided during their care were appropriate.

#### Strathcona County residents have good overall health as reflected by a relatively high average life expectancy.

The average life expectancy of Sherwood Park residents is 82.5 years and of residents in the surrounding County, excluding Sherwood Park is 81.4 years. The Alberta provincial average life expectancy is 81.2 years.

— (Source: Alberta Health Community Profiles, 2019, for Sherwood Park and for Strathcona County, excluding Sherwood Park)

#### Smoking in Strathcona County is decreasing.

The percentage of residents 12 years or older that smoke daily decreased from 18.5% in 2016 to 15.1% in 2017, an 18.5% decrease.

— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

#### Strathcona County residents are increasingly active, but less so compared to the rest of the province.

There was a 20.4% increase in the percentage of Strathcona County residents who are physically active between 2013 and 2017. In 2013, 60.3% of residents reported being moderately active and active, while by 2017, that number had increased to 72.3%.

This is lower than the provincial average: 73.2% of Albertans were physically active in 2017.

— (Source: Government of Alberta Regional Dashboard)

## The percentage of obese adults in Strathcona County is increasing and is higher than the provincial average.

In 2017, the proportion of the population that reported being overweight, was 58.0%. This is a five-year increase of 10.3% since 2013 when 54.7% of the population reported being overweight. In comparison, in 2017, 56.1% of the Alberta population reported being overweight.

—— (Source: Alberta Government Regional Dashboard)

## Physical, social and emotional wellness, are the three most important health and wellness issues for Strathcona County residents.

Throughout July and August 2019, Strathcona County Family and Community Services conducted a large scale public engagement with County residents to better understand their thoughts and ideas on a community wellness hub.

Respondents were given a list of seven elements of wellness (social, physical, emotional, occupational/vocational, intellectual, environmental, and spiritual) and asked which elements represented wellness to them: The top three elements that resonated most with respondents were:

- Physical wellness (93%)
- Social wellness (91%)
- Emotional wellness (85%).

Similarly, when asked which elements of wellness would be important to themselves and their family to support in a community wellness hub, the top three most frequently selected responses were:

- Social wellness (85%)
- Physical wellness (80%)
- Emotional wellness (73%).

—— (Source: Strathcona County Community Hub Engagement What We Heard Report, 2019)

## Almost 97% of emergency medical service patients feel that information sharing and options provided during their care were appropriate.

96.8% of patients of emergency medical services feel that they were appropriately included in the information sharing process and provided options for care.

—— (Source: Emergency Medical Service Patient Care Survey, 2019)

# Mental Health

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Historically, most residents of Strathcona County have rated their mental health as good or excellent and fewer Strathcona County residents have visited an emergency department for support for mood and anxiety disorders than has occurred across the Province. During 2020/21, the COVID-19 pandemic has created or exacerbated conditions that negatively impact the mental health of some residents and there has been a high demand for mental health supports during this time period.

## Most residents of Strathcona County rate their mental health as good or excellent, with decreases in the perceived mental health of males between 2016 and 2017.

The percentage of residents in the Edmonton zone that rated their mental health as either excellent or very good decreased from 71.9% to 69.4% between 2016 and 2017. This decrease was mostly attributed to males: In 2016, 75.1% of males in the Edmonton zone rated their mental health as excellent or very good and in 2017 the percentage decreased to 69.3%. For females, the percentage of those that rated their mental health as either excellent or very good increased marginally between 2016 and 2017, from 68.8% to 69.6%.

—— (Source: Alberta Health Community Profiles, 2019, for Sherwood Park and for Strathcona County, excluding Sherwood Park)

## Historically, fewer Strathcona County residents have visited an emergency department for support for mood and anxiety disorders than has occurred provincially.

In 2017/18 the number of emergency department visits related to mood and anxiety disorders per 100,000 is 895 in Sherwood Park and 663.9 in the surrounding County. Both numbers are age standardized and lower than the provincial rate of 1,328.2.

—— (Source: Alberta Health Community Profiles, 2019, for Sherwood Park and for Strathcona County, excluding Sherwood Park)

## **The COVID-19 pandemic has created or exacerbated conditions that have negatively impacted the mental health of some residents.**

Research in Canada has demonstrated that COVID-19 and public health social distancing measures have created or exacerbated conditions such as social isolation that have resulted in increased psychological distress of Canadians (Best, Law, Roach, & Wilbiks, 2021). During engagement with community during the pandemic, community leaders shared that there has also been a steep rise in rates of stress, isolation, anxiety, and depression in the Strathcona County community. Social isolation and the mental shift to seeing other people as potentially dangerous to one's health were identified as key factors impacting mental health, along with financial/job instability. People are feeling overwhelmed and struggling to balance safety with the need for social connection. Preventing staff and caregiver burnout and supporting children/youth/young adults' mental health needs were also highlighted as important.

—— (Source: Strathcona County Library 2020/21 Community Needs Assessment; Social Framework Leadership Table and COVID-19 Citizen and Community Support Task Force Engagement Session, September, 2020)

## **The pandemic has increased the pressures on families and a significant number of Canadians are highly concerned about the impacts of social distancing measures on levels of family stress. The number of Strathcona County residents seeking support related to family relationships has increased during the pandemic.**

Families are experiencing increased pressures during the pandemic including balancing caregiving and paid work in the context of confinement measures, stress related to new and disrupted routines during the pandemic, and financial insecurity (Prime, Browne, & Wade, 2020). In 2020, one third of Canadians reported being very or extremely worried about the impacts of social distancing measures on levels of family stress (Stats Canada, The Daily, April 8, 2020). In 2020, the number of residents seeking support from Strathcona County Family and Community Services Solutions Navigation Services related to family relationships increased 49%, from 69 residents in 2019 to 103 in 2020.

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Service Statistics)

## There has been a high demand for mental health services in the County during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Emotional health is the second most frequent concern for which residents seek support from Strathcona County Family and Community Services Solutions Navigation Services and the number of residents seeking support for emotional health increased 278% from 2019 to 2020.

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Service Statistics)

In a one week snapshot of mental health referrals to the Primary Care Network, the most common reasons for referral were anxiety, depression, and stress.

—— (Sherwood Park-Strathcona County Primary Care Network Service Statistics, August 2020)

## Substance Use

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Substance use and substance addiction are influenced by multiple factors in various domains of well-being. For example, housing insecurity, food insecurity, and lack of social connections are all risk factors for substance misuse and addiction. Having strong social connections and experiencing community safety are protective factors (Green, Blue, & Natal, 2021). Strathcona County is part of the Edmonton Region and, as with many other municipalities in Canada, is impacted by growing challenges associated with opioids and substance misuse more generally. The need for addiction-related services in Strathcona County is increasing. There has been a rise in numbers of emergency department visits and mortality rates due to opioids misuse in recent years.

## The need for addiction related services is increasing.

The number of referrals to substance use support and treatment made by Strathcona County Family and Community Services Solutions Navigation Services increased from 18 in 2018 and 30 in 2019 to 94 in 2020.

—— (Source: Family and Community Services Service Statistics)

## Strathcona County has lower rates of emergency department visits related to substance misuse than the province.

The number of emergency department visits related to substance misuse per 100,000 is 782.6 in Sherwood Park and 653.2 in the surrounding County. Both numbers are age standardized and are lower than the Alberta provincial rate of 1,300.3.

—— (Source: Alberta Health Community Profiles, 2019, for Sherwood Park and for Strathcona County, excluding Sherwood Park)

## Opioids misuse is rapidly increasing, showing up in emergency departments and mortality rates.

Sherwood Park falls within the Alberta Health Services Edmonton zone, which has seen an increase in the rate of emergency department visits related to opioids use per 100,000 people from 169 in the first quarter of 2019 and 172 in the first quarter of 2020, to 241 in the first quarter of 2021.

—— (Source: Alberta substance use surveillance system, June 2021)

The Edmonton zone has also seen an increase in the rate of drug poisoning deaths involving opioids per 100,000 people from a rate of 11.8 in January 2019 and 13.3 in January 2020, to 41.7 in January 2021.

—— (Source: Alberta substance use surveillance system, June 2021)



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**CITATION**

Strathcona County Family and Community Services. Title: Strathcona County Community Trends 2021.