



## Masking alone wouldn't have eased Ontario's respiratory virus surge in the fall: PHO document

Inspiring a mask mandate when respiratory viruses surged in the fall may not have eased the crush on pediatric hospitals, a Public Health Ontario science brief obtained by The Canadian Press concludes.

The brief -- which was not prospectively made public, unlike the reports done by a now-defunct science table predecessor -- provides a glimpse of the evidence on which Chief Medical Officer of Health Dr. Kieran Moore made his decision to go no further than a "strong" recommendation of masking in mid-November.

The effects of masking on the transmission of COVID-19 are strong, the brief from late November notes. Mandates may not have produced more of a benefit than recommendations, its research suggests.

But with influenza and respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV, circulating at the time as well as COVID-19, the benefits of mask mandates became

less clear for the group of experts.

"Current evidence suggests that adherence to masking, in addition to other layered measures such as self-screening, staying home when ill, and vaccination, are likely to prevent transmission of influenza, RSV and COVID-19 in children and youth, especially in indoor community settings where transmission is high," the PHO document concludes.

"Given the number of respiratory viruses currently in circulation, there is less certainty about the potential magnitude of the effect on transmission."

"It is also uncertain whether potential decreases in transmission are sufficient to reduce pediatric emergency department visits, hospitalizations, and ICU admissions to preserve capacity within the health-care system."

The brief settled the debate for the province's top doctor.

"The body of evidence for actively implementing a mask mandate wasn't

there," Dr. Moore told The Canadian Press in a recent interview.

"In no jurisdiction has there been a mandatory masking recommendation, nor has our expert panel recommended that we do."

Ten days later, Public Health Ontario responded with a 14-page brief. There was little evidence in scientific literature on the sole effects of masking on the transmission of influenza and RSV, it notes.

"We were unable to identify data on the effectiveness of community-level masking in preventing transmission of influenza and RSV," the document says.

"However, widespread mask use in general or targeted populations may be expected to reduce the rate of transmission of viral respiratory pathogens in the community."

The effects of masking on the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 -- the virus that causes COVID-19 -- is much stronger, the document notes, including evidence by the province's now-defunct science table.

He said he was discussing and reviewing the possibility of mandating masks in schools again.

That same day, Moore's office requested help from Public Health Ontario.

"The Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health requested a summary of evidence on the effectiveness of mask-wearing, particularly among children and youth, in the context of circulating influenza, RSV and COVID-19," the brief said.

"Information about public acceptability of mask mandates was also requested."

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## Ontario home builders urge faster approvals, harmonized green building standards

Ontario should speed up new housing approvals, increase skilled trade immigration, and "test in" municipalities introducing varying green building standards, a residential builders' group is telling the government.

The province is sifting through a mountain of requests for funding and policy changes as it prepares the budget, and its Premier Doug Ford's development-ops government looks far ways to boost housing supply, proposals from groups like the Residential Construction Council of Ontario could point some in that direction.

Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Steve Clark has made numerous moves in recent years to speed up home construction, including controversial ones to give the mayors of Toronto and Ottawa "strong mayor" powers and allowing development on 15 parcels of protected Greenbelt lands.

He has said the laws and regulatory changes are all in service of the government's goal of building 1.5 million homes in 10 years.

But it's a target that current programs suggest may be difficult to reach. In 2022, the first full year of the 10-year period, just over 96,000 new homes were built.

That's higher than the 86,600 the government projected in the fall economic statement, but still far short of the average 150,000 needed per year to hit 1.5 million.

A spokesperson for Clark said that the 96,000 new homes is 30 per cent higher than the annual average for the past 20 years.

"Despite major global and national economic challenges, including rising inflation, interest rates and labour costs, in 2022 Ontario saw the second highest number of housing starts since 1988," Victoria Podbielniak wrote in a statement.

"These new starts are proof that our government's policies are delivering results; it is also a clear sign that more action is needed."

The residential builders' association is suggesting a number of ways the government could take more action, including harmonizing construction requirements.

Some municipalities are "mandating their own unique technical building requirements as they see fit" and not conforming with



Ontario and national building codes, RESCON wrote in its budget submission.

"While we presume well-intentioned, municipal governments that seek ... the implementation of municipal green standards by acting independently

of higher-tier governments can in fact elicit unintended consequences, such as increasing the cost, complexity and time it takes to deliver much needed new housing," the association wrote.

"The Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing should bolster their commitment to code harmonization and rein in the fragmented municipal requirements," Richard Lyall, RESCON president, said in their memo to be clear and transparent rules.

"Yes, let's make things greener," he said in an interview. "Yes, let's make the code on energy efficiency and all that stuff. And we'll continue to do that. But, let's do it in an organized way, and not having these sort of provincial fits and starts here and there with different municipalities going off in different directions."

Colin Best, the president of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, said municipal governments have to balance development with a broad range of public interests to make communities "environmentally responsible, livable and prosperous."

"The development industry is calling for changes that benefit the development industry," Best wrote in a statement.

"The upcoming 2023-24 provincial budget will indicate if the Ontario government is going to put relatively narrow private interests ahead of the many broad public interests that governments are responsible for managing."

In the fall, many groups including the Canada Green Building Council expressed concern that one of Clark's

housing bills would negatively affect green building standards, overriding municipal ones in Toronto, Ottawa, Mississauga and other cities.

"They risk causing disorder in the development process as municipalities with green development standards would have to redesign existing processes, creating uncertainty for both development departments and developers across Ontario," the group wrote in the memo.

"Ultimately, including energy, sustainability and climate from consideration in the planning process will have new housing exposed to spalling energy costs and carbon prices."

RESCON is also urging the province to expand a Simcoe County pilot project, which is using an electronic development approval and building permit platform to speed up the process. As well, the government should make it easier for immigrants with experience in the skilled trades to come to the province through allocations under the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program.

Almost one quarter of the current construction labour force in the Greater Toronto Area is set to retire by 2030, RESCON said.

The group is not alone in its push for the government to introduce new ways to boost the housing supply. The Ontario Chamber of Commerce also raises it in their budget submission, highlighting it as an economic issue.

"For businesses, the lack of affordable housing options has become a top competitiveness concern, impacting their ability to attract and retain a diverse, talented workforce," the chamber writes.

Its recommendations include to "optimize existing settlement areas and minimize disruption to natural assets and agricultural lands to help safeguard sustainable growth over the short- and long-term."

## Uber brings back ride share for some Canadian cities - but under a new name

Uber has brought back its ride-sharing option in select Canadian cities -- but under a new name. Officially launched this week, the company is calling UberX Share, its "most affordable option" for commuters who want to make "greener" and more "sustainable" choices.

Available across Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, the UberX Share will allow passengers to travel together and split their fares.

Previously known as UberPOOL, the service was paused in Toronto in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, Uber said it's been "working tirelessly to revamp the experience."

"We know affordability plays a role when people are making decisions on how to get from point A to B," said Michael van Hemmen, general manager of Uber Canada mobility, in a statement Sunday.

"This new shared rides option will provide a more affordable and sustainable experience for riders and the cities we serve."

How is UberX different from UberPOOL?

In the past, UberPOOL was known to sometimes deviate from a direct route and take more time than public transit, but the company now argues the new feature will only add an average of six minutes to a trip when matched.

Riders will also receive an upfront discount of up to 20 per cent if they choose UberX Share.

"UberX Share provides a new way to get from A to B, by moving more people with fewer cars to help you city avoid extra emissions and our love by sharing your ride," Uber said.

When it comes to the drivers, the company says UberX Share will give them more choices while earning the same recommended rates with UberX Share as they would with UberX but with more riders on trip.

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## Ottawa to propose 10-year health-care funding plan to provinces, territories

The federal government will propose a decade-long plan to fund and reform the health-care system when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau meets with the premiers in Ottawa on Tuesday, according to sources with knowledge of the plan.

The federal proposal will see new money flow as soon as the next budget. It will include a top-up to the planned across-the-board increase to the Canada Health Transfer (CHT) and substantial funding for bilateral agreements with provinces and territories to deal with their specific needs.

Sources say the proposed CHT increase, and the bilateral health deals, will each run for a period of 10 years.

Health-care funding has always been a contentious topic between the provinces and the federal government. The pandemic's effects on an already strained system have made the need for a new funding agreement more urgent.



On Tuesday, Canada's premiers will meet in Ottawa with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to discuss the federal government's proposal to increase the CHT's share of total public health spending from 22 per cent to 35 per cent. The federal government has said it will offer more money but rejects the claim that it only pays 22 per cent of health-care funding in Canada.

## Ottawa extends, expands work permit program for Hong Kong residents

Ottawa has extended and expanded a work permit program for Hong Kong residents seeking jobs in Canada as advocates warned thousands could be shut out with impunity.

Immigration Minister Sean Fraser announced Monday that the federal government was extending the application deadline for the temporary three-year open work permit to Feb. 7, 2025. It was set to expire Tuesday.

Fraser also said Ottawa was expanding eligibility to Hong Kong residents who have graduated within the past 10 years from a post-secondary learning institution in Canada or abroad. Previously, applicants had to have graduated within the past five years.

The announcement comes after Global News reported last month that advocates urged the federal government to extend the program and address the challenges posed by the criteria for applicants who have graduated within five years.

"Extending the open work permit public policy also means that

spouses, common law partners and dependent children of Hong Kong residents can also apply for a study or work permit in Canada, resulting in even more workers for employers to hire and more people coming to our communities," Fraser said.

"To make sure that business owners in Canada can hire the workers that they need to sustain our economy, we need to continue to bring in more newcomers."

Ottawa's Hong Kong work permit policy was rolled out in February 2021, two years after China further tightened its grip over the former British territory.

In the summer of 2019, protests erupted in Hong Kong over a new anti-fraud bill that extended suspects to China, which undermined Hong Kong's judicial independence. What followed was the introduction of what Beijing calls a national security law in June 2020 that led to the arrest of political dissidents, lawyers and journalists.

The national security law in Hong Kong, which is still in effect, has very broad definitions that criminalize

## China admits 2nd surveillance balloon flying over Latin America is theirs

The cost of health care, Ottawa has argued that the tax points transferred to provinces in 1977 bring the federal share to 38 per cent.

The second major sticking point has been about placing conditions on any increased funding. The federal government says it wants additional funding to be targeted at specific areas.

The province has pushed back by insisting the provision of health care is a provincial responsibility. But Quebec and Ontario recently have shown some willingness to meet the federal government's bid.

Earlier Monday, NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh called on Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to make any health-care funding agreement with the provinces conditional on the provinces agreeing not to direct additional resources toward for-profit private health care providers.

"The prime minister was very strong on this. He said there are going to be conditions. I absolutely agree there should be conditions," Singh said Monday. "But those conditions should be public money should solve the problem."

"Public money shouldn't go toward a for-profit clinic being able to have more profit. Our public money should go toward solving the actual problem that we're up against, which is a shortage of health care workers."

In a Monday press briefing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning confirmed for the first time that a large white balloon transiting Latin American airspace is a Chinese vessel.

The Colombian air force has been tracking the balloon since Friday, though news of its presence was largely obscured by different Chinese surveillance balloons that made headlines last week as it passed over the continental U.S. Sources told Global News the vessel - a suspected spy balloon - also spent time in Canadian airspace.

"The balloon was shot down off the coast of the United States," Cohen said, speaking in an interview with The West Block host Mercedes Stephenson, aired Sunday. "It has happened previously."

In fact, soaring surveillance balloons from both China and Russia are a regular occurrence, the ambassador explained.

"Affected by weather and due to its limited self-control ability, the airship severely deviated from its set route and entered the space of Latin America and the Caribbean by accident," Mao said.

"China is a responsible country. We have always strictly abided by international law. We have informed all relevant parties and appropriately handled the situation, which did not pose any threats to any country."

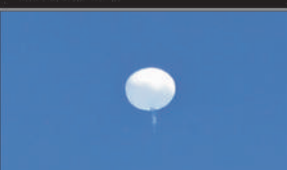
Over the weekend, Colombia's air force announced they had spotted a large balloon flying over the northern part of the country, and tracked it until it left their airspace. The air force did not identify the balloon as Chinese at the time, but noted it didn't represent any threat.

"It was determined that this element did not represent a threat to national security and defense, as well as to aviation safety," Colombia's air force said in the release.

Costa Rica's Civil Aviation Authority also spotted the balloon over its airspace, CNN reported.

The issue of these surveillance balloons, and whether they were used for meteorological research - or to spy on military sites in the U.S. and Canada - has driven yet another wedge between China and the West.

But according to David Cohen, the U.S. ambassador to Canada, this is



It is the first time that this type of device has been spotted over the United States, Cohen said, speaking in an interview with The West Block host Mercedes Stephenson, aired Sunday. "It has happened previously."

## Former child actor identified as victim of Toronto hit-and-run homicide

A man killed in a weekend hit-and-run in Toronto was a child actor who starred in a movie shown at the Toronto International Film Festival more than a decade ago.

Gabriel del Castillo Mullyally, 25, was struck by a vehicle near Danforth and Woodbine Avenues at around 4 a.m. on Sunday in an incident that police are now investigating as a homicide.

In an email statement sent to CTV News Toronto on Monday, Elmukher's Yousaf Lewis and Colin Thomas confirmed that Mullyally starred in their 2011 movie 'Amy George' which premiered at TIFF.

According to his IMDb profile, Mullyally also acted in the 2013 film 'Tale'.

"We're shocked and devastated by Gabriel's tragic death. Out of respect for the family, we'd prefer to not say anything at this time," Lewis and Thomas said.

Toronto police have previously said that Mullyally was at a bar in the area prior to the hit-and-run.

He was walking along a sidewalk when he was struck by a vehicle driven by the suspect.

Mullyally was taken to St. Michael's Hospital at about 4:30 a.m. with life-threatening injuries. He was pronounced dead there a short time later.

Witness Natasha Bilak told CP24 that she heard yelling outside of her nearby residence just before a pedestrian was struck.

She said, at that time, there was an altercation between a group of young adults and a man who she believes is in his late 20s or early 30s.

"There was a dispute which ended up with the man getting into his car and deliberately driving [his vehicle] into the crowd of young adults. They were able to get out of the way," Bilak said, adding the driver then made a U-turn on Danforth Avenue and drove towards the group a second time.

"He had seen a gap and basically hopped up on the curb [his vehicle] and hit the one man. I've never witnessed something like that before."

Advocates who spoke to Global News last month pleaded with Ottawa to extend and modify the work permit program.

Katherine Leung, Canadian policy adviser for U.K.-based NGO Hong Kong Watch, told Global News that the five-year graduation limit was "a very technical bug in the policy."

"Let's say someone graduated between 2016 to 2017, they get the open work permit, come to Canada, work for a year, and if we add in the amount of time it takes to get settled to find work and complete paperwork, it's going to exceed the five-year limit for Stream B," Leung said.

Tom Kmiec, Conservative MP and immigration critic, said in a statement on Facebook that Ottawa shouldn't have waited until they beat the program expired to announce changes.

"The amount of stress and uncertainty these individuals have gone through due to this government's lack of action is big," he said.

"We are glad the government listened to us to extend and expand the program. Their small pace change is giving Canada a terrible reputation on the international stage."

Fraser said the policy changes were result of community feedback.

They have low-altitude satellites that are constantly taking pictures of all of the United States and of all of Canada, for that matter," Cohen said.

Outlookers would also be "wowed" to think the balloon represents any kind of significant escalation from China, Cohen went on to say, adding that they "just haven't heard about it before."

Rather, the incident should be treated as a reminder to be "vigilant" when it comes to China.

"China is not a country to be trifled with," Cohen said. "China is a potential threat and needs to be watched carefully."

In response to the U.S. downing the suspected spy balloon, Vice-Foreign Minister Xiao Fong said he lodged a formal complaint with the U.S. Embassy on Sunday - characterizing the incident as a "U.S. attack on a Chinese civilian unmanned-airship by military forces."

"However, the United States turned a deaf ear and insisted on indiscriminate use of force against the civilian airship that was about to leave the United States airspace, obviously overreacted and seriously violated the spirit of international law and international practice," Xiao said.

The presence of the balloons in the skies above the U.S. dealt a severe blow to already strained U.S.-China

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