



The End of COVID-19 Restrictions?

Most Canadian provinces and territories have removed all COVID-19 restrictions with only three jurisdictions retaining some public health measures. Among them, Quebec is the only one still requiring mask in indoor public space. As of May 10, the Centre of Excellence on the Canadian Federation's stringency index shows that public health measures are the least stringent they have been since the start of the pandemic, across all provinces and territories.

The Centre of Excellence on the Canadian Federation has been tracking daily changes to public health restrictions since March 2020. The Centre's Stringency Index tracks 14 public health measures in the 13 provinces and territories and combines them in a single indicator, updated weekly.



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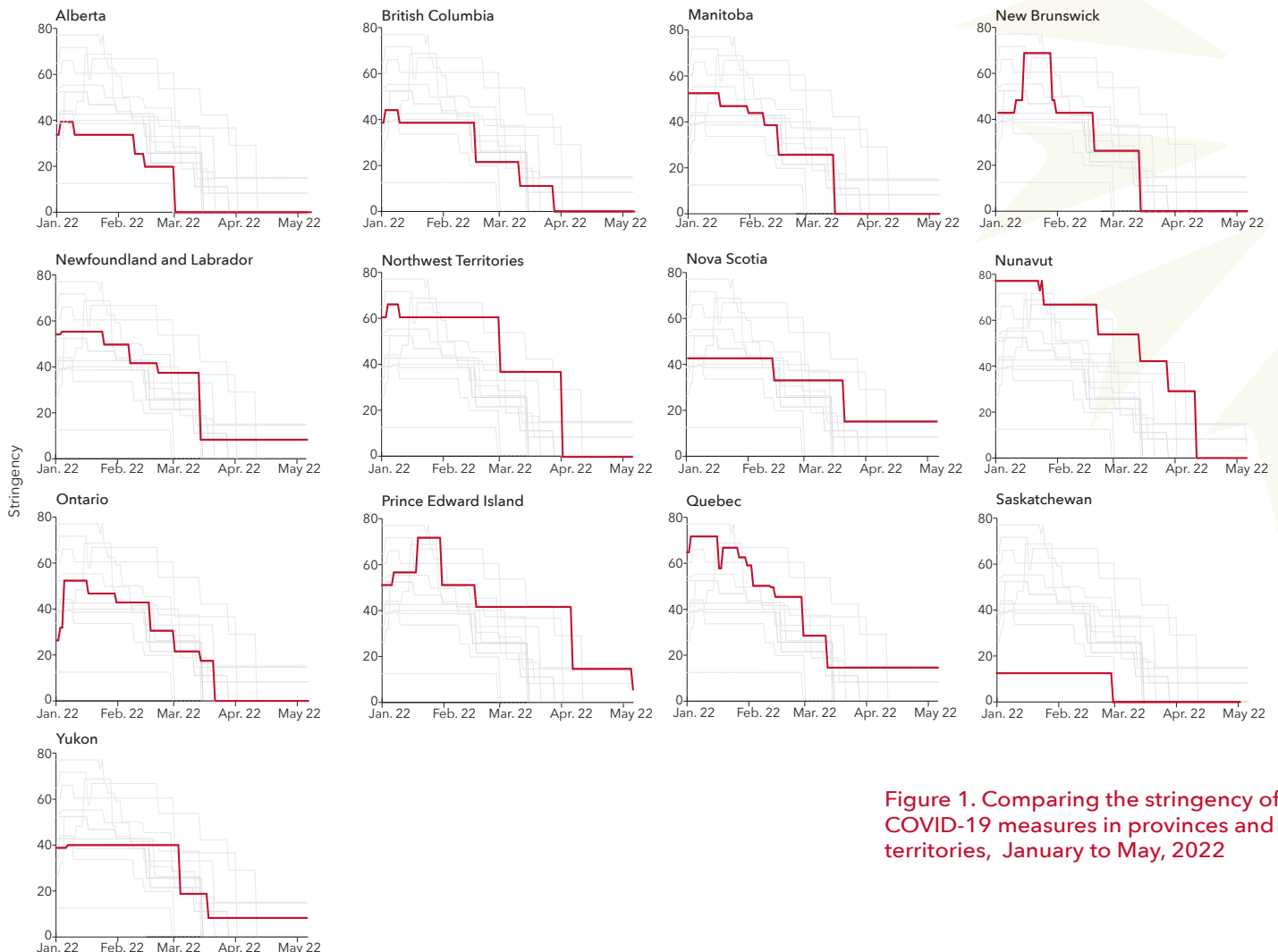


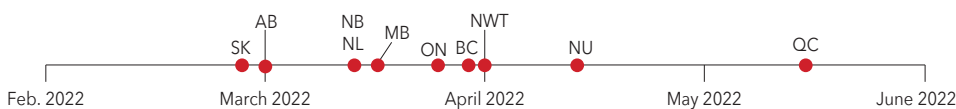
Figure 1. Comparing the stringency of COVID-19 measures in provinces and territories, January to May, 2022

As provinces and territories were removing restrictions, some premiers have stated that they would not return. Figure 1 shows that although provinces and territories diverged on the specific measures used to fight COVID-19, the level of stringency in most jurisdictions dropped in mid-March and has remained relatively similar since then.

But some jurisdictions dropped their restrictions quicker than others. Of course, where a province started from also mattered: Saskatchewan was the quickest to drop their COVID restrictions, but they started 2022 with relatively little restrictions. The province went from an index of 12.5 to 0 in less than a week. Yukon and Nova Scotia follow Saskatchewan at 2 and 5 weeks respectively. In contrast, Quebec took approximately 17 weeks to go from their highest stringency (71.7) in 2022 to its lowest (0), which they are projected to hit on May 14. Prince Edward Island, and the Northwest Territories follow Quebec as the slowest to remove their COVID-19 restrictions at 13 and 12 weeks respectively. Taking longer to remove restrictions allowed premiers to determine whether hospitalization rates were decreasing before moving onto the next phase.

In terms of timing, Saskatchewan was the first province to announce a lifting of all public health measures on February 28. Alberta followed shortly after, dropping all measures except for mask mandates in high-risk places, which are expected to remain in place indefinitely.¹ Only Nova Scotia, Quebec and Yukon have retained public health measures other than masking in high-risk settings. Nova Scotia and Yukon kept their mask mandate in schools, while dropping it in public spaces. Quebec announced that its mask mandate in public spaces will be dropped on May 14.

Figure 3 shows when the provinces that are at zero removed all public health measures included in the Centre’s Stringency Index.



REMAINING RESTRICTIONS

One measure that has been retained, even in jurisdictions that have removed all other restrictions, is a mask requirement in high-risk settings like long-term care homes and hospitals, as shown in Figure 4.² The Northwest Territories, Manitoba and Saskatchewan are the only jurisdictions that have not extended this requirement in hospitals. Ontario stands out for retaining masking requirements on public transit even while dropping masking requirements outside of high-risk settings. It is the only province to do so.

Four jurisdictions have retained masking beyond just vulnerable sectors. In Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia and Yukon, teachers and students are still required to keep masks on during classes and in common areas such as hallways. After Prince Edward Island’s masking mandate was lifted on May 6, Quebec was left as the last province with public masking requirements in place. The province is set to remove it on May 14.

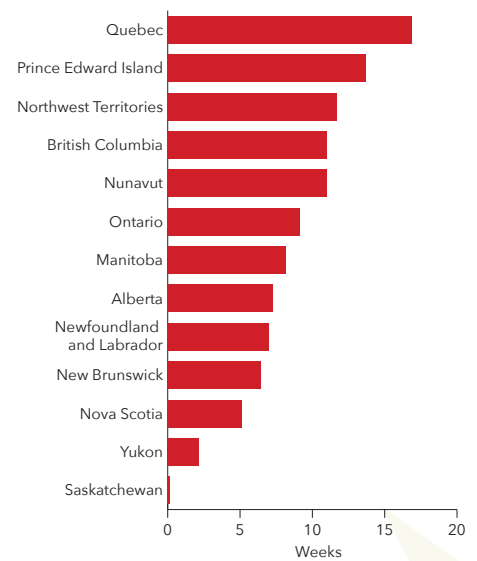


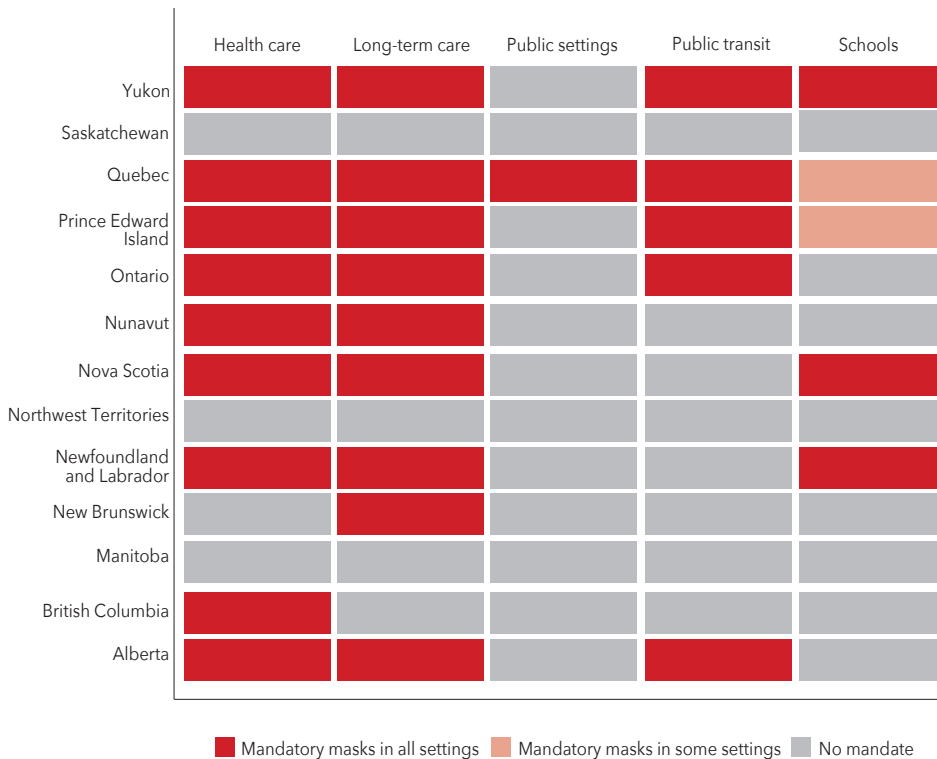
Figure 2. Lifting measures: How many weeks did it take to go from most stringent measures to least stringent in 2022

¹ The Centre index does not account for masks in high-risk places which is why Alberta is at 0 on our index. Our masks measure captures mandatory masks in public spaces like retail stores and services.

Figure 3. When did provinces remove all public health measures included in the Centre’s Stringency Index

² Even with the removal of provincial restrictions, many health care institutions have implemented their own COVID-19 policies that endure. However, the Centre’s Stringency Index only measures provincially mandated COVID-19 restrictions.

Figure 4. Mask mandates in Canadian provinces and territories, May 10, 2022



VACCINE MANDATES

Most provinces dropped their vaccination passports in February and March. The last jurisdiction to do so was British Columbia on April 7. The picture is less clear on vaccination mandates. Most provinces have explicitly dropped requirements for public servants and health care professionals to be vaccinated (though it should be noted that many hospitals still require mandatory vaccinations). Four provinces have stated that their vaccination policies will remain in place: British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia and Yukon. In Nunavut and Quebec, the status of vaccine mandates is less clear. Although Quebec did not impose a vaccine mandate on its health sector workers, it did have a “vaccine or test” program in place, which required unvaccinated workers to be tested regularly; those who refused could be removed from their jobs. This appears to still be in place.

Two years after the onset of the pandemic, the Centre of Excellence’s stringency index shows that COVID-19 restrictions have steadily declined in recent months, reaching zero in most provinces. Provinces were quick to remove public health measures that limited freedom of movement and access, like vaccine passports, but many have retained mask mandate especially in high-risk settings – perhaps the least restrictive measure – as the last remaining public health restriction against the spread of COVID-19.



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The Centre of Excellence on the Canadian Federation is a permanent research body within the Institute for Research on Public Policy. Its mission is to build a deeper understanding of Canada as a federal community. The Centre provides insights into key public policy challenges facing the Canadian federation, from post-pandemic provincial policies to fiscal relations, Indigenous governance to public opinion on federalism.

