

# Chapter 6: COVID-19 and Deviance

As the pandemic progressed, it became clear that the demographic most susceptible to the ravages of COVID-19 were the elderly. In Canada, the danger the disease posed to this group was illustrated in horrifying fashion in long-term care homes. In the first four months of the pandemic, unsafe and unclean conditions, a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), and understaffing contributed to thousands of resident deaths. As of June, [80% of Canada's coronavirus deaths](#) had occurred in long-term care homes. The situation was so dire the government sent the army to help in Ontario and Quebec.



*Illustration by Russell Tate on Unsplash*

When the pandemic was declared by the WHO, many still believed that while young people might get sick and transmit the virus to others, they themselves would not die from the disease. This was mistaken. But the toxic stew of fear and dire economic predictions led to some astounding discourses, including an [American politician](#) suggesting grandparents should happily sacrifice themselves for the sake of the economy and the livelihoods of their children and grandchildren. In this context, to be old was to be deviant—and expendable. As Canadians, we certainly had nothing to feel superior about: we appeared to already be treating the elderly as expendable in our private care homes.

The pandemic was also responsible for a massive change in behavioural norms. One way to identify these new norms was through the incidence of moral panic that occurred when they were not followed. Activities that were innocuous pre-COVID—like having a picnic with friends or going to the beach—were quickly and aggressively recast as deviant behaviour. Photos of crowded Florida beaches and videos of a packed Toronto park sparked outrage in the media and online. People were [publicly shamed](#) for what was now deemed deviant behaviour. Ironically, based on evidence

from existing “super spreader” incidents, few things could be more deviant than [going to church](#) on Sunday and singing with your congregation. While people imposed negative sanctions through social media comments, some municipalities went a step further, imposing [fines](#) for deviant behaviour.

## As you read the chapter, consider the following questions:

- How has Canada's elderly population been sacrificed in the fight against COVID-19? Consider how government and societal approaches might have differed if children were most susceptible to the disease (and accounted for 80% of the deaths).
- Peer pressure can be a powerful form of social control, as can shaming people who do not follow societal norms. Do you think peer pressure or public shaming are justified to control the spread of COVID-19? What are the possible upsides and downsides of these approaches?
- Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, the practice of mask wearing was primarily restricted to Asian cultures. Face-mask culture originated in Japan, due to the 1918 Spanish flu, and eventually became fashionable among young people throughout Asia. However, in Western countries like Canada and the US, it was considered deviant behaviour—until now. What does this example illustrate about how deviance is defined? What other social factors contribute to a society labelling a person or behaviour deviant?



## Additional online resources

Why do you think Canada failed its care-home residents?

- [Canada ranks worst in elderly care home coronavirus deaths: study](#). (2020, June 25). Medical Press.

Should you have a right to access healthcare if you're not wearing a mask? What can and should be done to enforce rules like this?

- Carter, A. (2020, July 6). [Toronto hospital says masks are mandatory after woman's refusal video garners millions of views](#). CBC News.

This article explores if negative sanctions are effective in changing behaviours.

- Couto, M. (2020, March 25). [Is online shaming of COVID-19 rebels effective? Maybe, but not for everyone](#). City News.

Ageism is a form of prejudice against older people. How has this affected how they've been treated during the pandemic?

- Nash, P., & Schnarrs, P. W. (2020, June 15). [Coronavirus shows how ageism is harmful to health of older adults](#). The Conversation.

This author responds to ageist commentary. How might his social location influence his point of view?

- Pittis, D. (2020, March 26). [Politicians who consider sacrificing the old for the sake of the economy face a backlash: Don Pittis](#). CBC News.