



COVID-19 Impact Survey on Canadian Choirs

Summary of Responses (as of April 14, 2020)

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on choirs across the country. The 3.5 million choral singers in Canada who sing in 28,000 choirs in over 300 communities¹ experienced an abrupt end to their weekly choir rehearsals and upcoming concerts when social distancing rules took effect in March. Because choirs are inherently social gatherings of groups of people, the entire choral sector has had to pause and/or change operations because of the pandemic. To maintain a connection with members and patrons, choirs have had to adapt to a new normal, existing almost entirely online, somewhere in between, or not at all.

In April 2020, the choral arts service organizations in Canada, which include the national organization Choral Canada and the nine provincial choral organizations, collected data on the impact of COVID-19 on Canadian choirs. In total, **611 choral organizations representing 1,232 choirs, choruses, and singing groups** across Canada were surveyed.

The majority of choirs surveyed were amateur/non-professional (84%). Semi-professional and professional choral organizations accounted for 13% and 4% of responses respectively, while 14 choral organizations were from educational institutions.

Below is a breakdown of choirs surveyed by province or territory:

British Columbia	204
Alberta	257
Saskatchewan	65
Manitoba	211
Ontario	247
Quebec	184
New Brunswick	19
Nova Scotia	33
Newfoundland & Labrador	1
Prince Edward Island	10
Northwest Territories	1
TOTAL	1,232

ECONOMIC IMPACT

Survey data shows that **2,257 concerts or other events have been cancelled** between January and August, while **2,730 have been postponed**. This is an **average of 2 cancelled events and about 2.2 postponed events per choir** in the first eight months of 2020.

¹ According to the 2017 Choral Canada census: <https://www.choralcanada.org/national-choral-census.html>

A full **82% of choirs** surveyed **reported financial losses** due to these cancellations or postponements. Many choirs rely on these events to generate revenue used to pay staff salaries, rent, and other important expenses. The total financial losses, including lost revenues and incurred costs from these cancellations and postponements, along with other factors due to COVID-19, is **over \$5.2 million**, an average of **\$5,000 per choir**. The majority of lost revenue is due to cancellations (\$2.9 million).

Choirs reported that, in addition to lost revenue from cancellations and postponements, several other factors have negatively affected their finances. These include a loss of income from planned fundraising activities, unrecoverable expenses from upcoming tours, the refunding of membership and sponsorship fees, reductions in donations, and a loss of funding through grants.

For these reasons, many choirs are in a precarious financial position. Some have even had to decide between paying rent at their rehearsal venues and laying off artistic and administrative staff. Some choirs are no longer in a position to support other community organizations (through benefit concerts for food banks, for example), students, and local businesses. Many choirs are also concerned about the long-term effects that social distancing restrictions will have on their fiscal sustainability. Since many choirs rely on donations and grants to survive, the impact on donors and funding agencies has left some choirs concerned that they may not have adequate funding for next season.

It should be noted that **only 4% of Canadian choirs were surveyed** and that the overall economic impact on choirs is therefore **estimated to be much higher than the \$5.2 million reported**.

IMPACT ON CHORAL ACTIVITIES

Among the choirs surveyed, nearly all reported a disruption to regular activities due to the pandemic. About half of the choirs have been affected by the cancellation of board meetings, Annual General Meetings, and gatherings or events that they depend on.

In addition to the cancellation of rehearsals, concerts, and meetings, choirs reported other important activities have been put on hold or cancelled. These include competitions, workshops, auditions, educational programs, school music classes, worship services, community outreach, trips and tours, festivals, recordings, graduations, recruitment initiatives, composition premieres, retreats, social events, and benefit concerts. Some of these activities have been moved online, but there are limitations to this (see “How Choirs are Adapting” below).

IMPACT ON HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Many choirs reported that in addition to the impact on finance and operations, the pandemic has had a major impact on the mental and physical well-being of choir members. Singing is known to have a variety of physical health benefits such as improved endurance, breath control, lung health, and posture. It also stimulates healthy brain activity and causes the secretion of endorphins and oxytocin which, in turn, reduce pain, anxiety, and stress, and produce feelings of elation and pleasure. When choir members cannot gather together in-person to sing, they lose out on many of the associated health benefits. One director stated, “One of my greatest concerns is the mental health of my choristers, some of whom are already at risk in this area, and for whom I know that the choir is a stabilizing factor in their lives that provides... a place for mental, emotional, spiritual and even physical sustenance, as well as healing.”

The pandemic is causing worry and anxiety for other reasons. Choirs are growing concerned about long-term impacts and how COVID-19 will affect next season, and some are wondering if they will be in a position to resume in the fall, even if it is safe to do so. Some stated that it is difficult to plan for next season “without knowing how long the crisis will last” and they are anticipating a negative effect on momentum and morale.

IMPACT ON COMMUNITY

Choirs across the country are devastated that COVID-19 ended the choral season so abruptly, and some reported grieving the lost opportunity to sing pieces they had been rehearsing for some time. Most respondents noted that even more important than the financial loss is the profound sense of loss of their choir community. For many, choirs are like family, a home away from home. One respondent described this by saying, “Choir is a way to connect with others through our shared love of music.” Another lamented, “We are unable to enjoy the emotional support, weekly group and personal connection which helps us thrive; the fun, camaraderie, musical development, brain challenge, physical benefits of singing well, and moving toward our exciting performance goals.”

HOW CHOIRS ARE ADAPTING

Despite the stress and anxiety choirs are facing, some have adapted their in-person activities to virtual platforms with the goal of staying connected to each other and relevant to their communities. Many choirs have moved regular “rehearsals” and meetings online through platforms like Zoom, Skype and Google. Choirs are also posting regularly on their websites and social media accounts to keep singers and supporters engaged. Artistic staff are sharing videos, music links, and e-newsletters with choristers to encourage them to work on vocal health and technique. In the spirit of working together, many choirs are sharing resources with each other like never before. Some choirs reported doing online workshops with composers and conductors, virtual music sharing events, and more. Virtual choirs have become a trend to create new performance goals for singers, and to share music and messages of hope and community with each other. One choir reported that next season they plan to organize “Facebook Live performances from individual choir soloists, virtual-choir recordings, and maybe even a community sing-along”.

All the while, choral leaders are trying to keep up morale. One director stated, “Everyone is really missing the singing and the camaraderie. I'm making it my job to send out things that will make them laugh, things that will inspire them, ask them how they are doing and share info with the group about others... a couple of times a week, with emphasis on the laughter.” In short, choral leaders are developing creative solutions using the online tools and resources available to them.

While virtual activities can play a role in maintaining important social connections and interaction, they simply cannot replace the in-person experience of singing in a choir. This is partly because the technology to allow simultaneous singing without a time lag does not currently exist. Furthermore, it may be a challenge for some choristers—particularly older adults and those without regular access to computers or strong internet connectivity—to use virtual platforms. One respondent shared their perspective on this: “Across the world, as people are isolated and/or quarantined, we see them reaching out through the arts to connect. Virtual choirs abound, from every style and type of group of singers. These, while inspirational and enjoyable to watch as a viewer, do not recreate the activity of a group of people joining together in one space to create a single song with one collective voice. The sense of ‘community’ cannot be done remotely, through whatever platform is chosen.”

One director shared a creative way to rethink the concept of virtual choir for now and the future: “I’m coining the term *choral canned goods* and am trying to ask myself and others: What is the canned-goods and toilet paper version of choral art that we can start gathering into a silo for the future? How can we make choir continue to happen when people might be too financially stretched to pay for a membership in any activity? What comes out of the creative potential inherent in the current situation and where are the opportunities to do something new and wonderful rather than try to replicate, digitally, a ‘normal’ choral experience?” These questions will be important considerations as choral organizations, choirs, and singing groups move forward together.

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

The choral arts service organizations (ASOs) in Canada are thankful to everyone who participated in the COVID-19 Impact Survey. The data collected through this survey is extremely valuable and will enable the choral ASOs to better meet the needs and advocate on the behalf of choirs to the local, provincial and federal governments, as well as to funders and industry leaders. We hope that this summary will be shared within our communities as a means of raising awareness of the impact COVID-19 is having on choirs. We are hopeful that once restrictions are lifted, the 3.5 million Canadians who sing in choirs will be able to return to their choirs and choral communities.

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