

Chapter 10

Are Climate Change Adaptation Policies a Game Changer? A Case Study of Perspectives from Public Health Officials in Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

The health impacts of climate change have received significant attention in the international scholarly literature. Despite this, there is an absence of research evaluating existing policies aimed at promoting and protecting population health. This chapter provides an implementation analysis of the Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS), 2008/2014--the provincial policy statement that governs mandatory public health activities in the province which includes taking action on climate change. This chapter responds to two specific questions: First, how are Ontario's 36 regional health units interpreting and implementing this policy statement; and second, how are those interpretations translated into practice. Using a web-scan and in-depth interviews with practitioners from twenty Ontario health units, this paper presents four interpretations of the OPHS, a typology of best practices related to regional adaptation, and policy recommendations to bolster domestic and international adaptive capacity to emerging infectious diseases associated with climate change, and a variety of other health-related climate impacts.

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change is rapidly affecting human health around the globe and posing new challenges for public health infrastructure and systems (McMichael, 2013). This paper analyzes the degree to which existing public health policies are successful in bolstering adaptation to climate change in the public health sector, and whether the implementations of those policies create activities capable of responding to the emergence of new infectious diseases and a host of other climate-related health impacts. Specifically, this paper uses Ontario, Canada as a case study for examining how public health policies (i.e. the *Ontario Public Health Standards, 2008/2014*) are interpreted and made actionable by front-line practitioners. The paper begins with an overview of climate change and its health impacts across Ontario before describing the methods and presenting a typology of policy interpretations that speak to the strengths and weaknesses of a relatively broad policy mandate. More specifically, the paper seeks to understand how practitioners made climate change actionable in their work before and after the enactment of the *Ontario Public Health Standards*, and to what degree policy elicits adaptive programming and interventions. In doing so, the paper provides guidance for government officials and public health practitioners in other nations attempting to understand whether their policy infrastructure is robust enough to respond to climate-related health impacts.

BACKGROUND: CLIMATE CHANGE IN ONTARIO, CANADA

Canada's climate is rapidly changing, and as a result, so too are the health risks posed to Canadians (Séguin, 2008). While global average temperatures are projected to increase by between two and four degrees Celsius by the end of the twenty-first century, Canada will experience more rapid temperature increases (IPCC, 2013). Between 1948 and 2006, southern Ontario has already experienced a 1.3 degrees Celsius increase, and projections for the province indicate that it will experience a two to four degree Celsius increase by 2050 (Feltmate & Thistlewaite, 2012).

Climate change has been called the greatest public health threat of the twenty-first century (Costello et al., 2009). Accordingly, the Canadian experience of climate change will mirror that occurring in other democratic countries with a well-established public health sector. Primary risks include the direct biological consequences of extreme weather events (i.e., heat, cold, violent weather), temperature-enhanced air pollutants in urban areas, and increased exposure to UV radiation; secondary risks include risks mediated by biophysical or ecological processes including food security/foodborne disease, water scarcity/waterborne disease, and changes in disease vectors as previously inhospitable climates become warmer. For Ontario, Canada,

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