

Long-term care homes were hit hardest by 2023 disease outbreaks in Toronto healthcare facilities*

Benny Rochweg

January 23, 2024

In this report, 2023 Toronto Public Health data on outbreaks in healthcare facilities was analyzed. Long-term care homes comprised a majority of the outbreaks, approximately 95% of the outbreaks were respiratory, and almost two-thirds of the outbreaks had COVID-19 as their first known cause. This highlights the need for enhanced public health measures in healthcare facilities, particularly in long-term care homes. Future research should assess disease outbreaks in additional settings, such as workplaces and schools, to gain further insight into the extent of this issue.

Table of contents

1	Introduction	2
2	Data	2
2.1	Overview	2
2.2	Results	3
3	Discussion	6
A	Appendix	8
A.1	Dataset and Graph Sketches	8
A.2	Data Cleaning	8
A.3	Attribution Statement	8
	References	9

*A GitHub Repository containing all data, R code, and other files used in this investigation is located here: <https://github.com/bennyrochweg/healthcare-outbreaks-toronto>

1 Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organization proclaimed that the spread of COVID-19 constituted a pandemic (World Health Organization, n.d.). Shortly thereafter, in May 2020, the COVID-19 mortality rate in Canadian long-term care homes, where individuals live and receive healthcare on a continuous basis for reasons such as “advancing age, disability or declining health” (Home and Community Care Support Services, n.d.), reached approximately 35% and represented 81% of Canadian COVID-19 deaths (Canadian Institute for Health Information 2020). In general, the risk of disease circulation is greater in healthcare settings due to an increased presence of ill individuals and nearer physical contact between patients and staff (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2022).

Consequently, with the recent advent of large volumes of respiratory diseases such as influenza and COVID-19 in Toronto (Freeman 2024), assessing the prevalence of disease outbreaks in healthcare facilities in Toronto is of paramount importance. According to Toronto Public Health (2024), an outbreak is “a localized increase (e.g. in an institution, or a specific ward or floor within an institution) in the rate of infection or illness, above that which is expected”. Thus, this investigation examines the number of outbreaks by location type (long-term care homes, retirement homes, hospitals, and transitional care facilities), outbreak type (respiratory and enteric/gastroenteric, the latter referring to intestinal and/or stomach illness (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, n.d.; Collins English Dictionary, n.d.)), and first known cause (e.g., COVID-19, influenza A, etc.) to fill this knowledge gap.

To do this, 2023 Toronto Public Health data on outbreaks in healthcare facilities was first obtained as described in Section 2.1. Based on this dataset, it was discovered that long-term care homes comprised a majority of the outbreaks, that approximately 95% of the outbreaks were respiratory, and that almost two-thirds of the outbreaks had COVID-19 as their first known cause (Section 2.2). As discussed in Section 3, the high prevalence of outbreaks in long-term care homes has likely been exacerbated by the removal of a universal masking requirement, suggesting that the Government of Ontario should consider reinstating this policy to protect these vulnerable individuals. With respect to the structure of this paper, Section 2 includes an overview of the data and the results; Section 3 includes a discussion of the results; and Section A includes supplementary information.

2 Data

2.1 Overview

The dataset used in this analysis is the 2023 installment of “Outbreaks in Toronto Healthcare Institutions” from Toronto Public Health (Toronto Public Health 2024). In Ontario, the law mandates that respiratory and gastroenteric infections in healthcare facilities are followed and that any outbreaks, regardless of verification, are reported to public health entities such as

Toronto Public Health (Toronto Public Health 2024). Based on this information (or these measurements), Toronto Public Health updates this dataset on a weekly basis (Toronto Public Health 2024). Moreover, this dataset is considered to be “open data” (Toronto Public Health 2024) and can be utilized for a variety of purposes as long as an attribution statement is attached (Section A.3) and the link to the City of Toronto’s Open Data License is added (City of Toronto, n.d.b).

The variables or measurements included in this analysis are “Type of Location” (named “Outbreak Setting” in the original dataset), which refers to the nature of the healthcare offered at each facility; “Type of Outbreak”, which indicates whether each outbreak is respiratory, enteric, or other in nature; and “Outbreak First Known Cause” (named “Causative Agent-1” in the original dataset), which denotes the first discovered pathogen based on at least one of the outbreak’s cases (Toronto Public Health 2024).

Only two other datasets involving outbreaks, titled “COVID-19 Cases in Toronto” and “Daily Shelter & Overnight Service Occupancy & Capacity”, could be identified following a search of the City of Toronto’s Open Data Catalogue (City of Toronto, n.d.a). However, none of these datasets pertain specifically to healthcare settings in Toronto and were thus not used in this analysis.

Using the R programming language (R Core Team 2022), the `janitor` (Firke 2023) and `tidyverse` (Wickham et al. 2019) packages were used to simulate the dataset and generate tests for it. The `opendatatoronto` (Gelfand 2022) and `tidyverse` (Wickham et al. 2019) packages were then applied in order to download the raw Toronto Public Health dataset. Next, the `tidyverse` package (Wickham et al. 2019) was used to clean the raw dataset and test the cleaned dataset.

2.2 Results

After loading the dataset using the R programming language (R Core Team 2022) and the `here` package (Müller 2020), the `tidyverse` (Wickham et al. 2019) package was used to generate graphs. In doing so, R code was adapted from Alexander (2023).

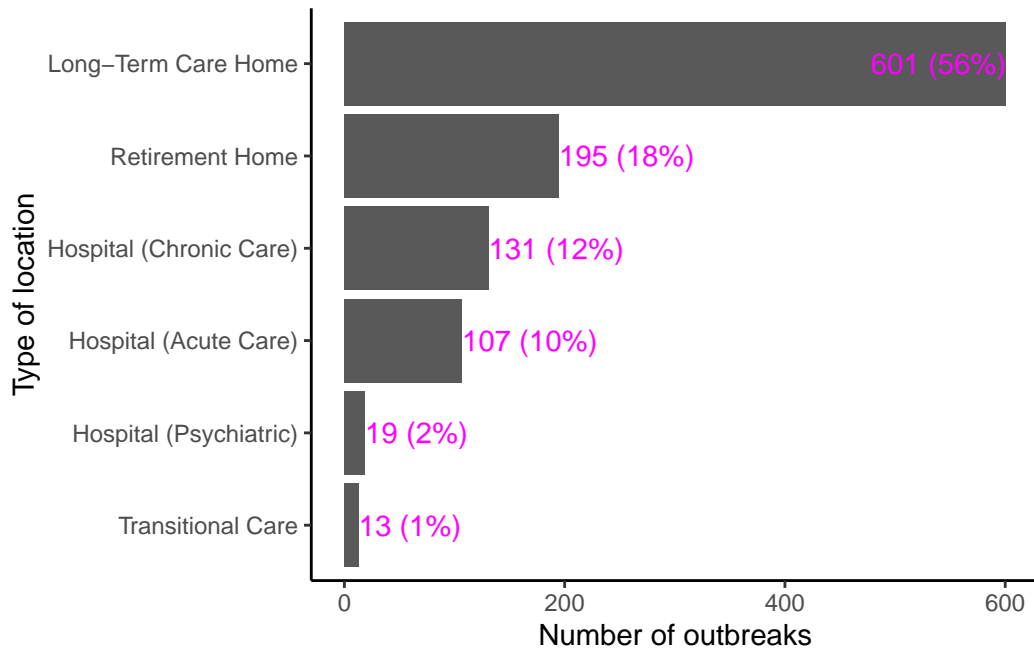


Figure 1: Number of outbreaks by type of healthcare location in Toronto in 2023

Figure 1 illustrates that long-term care homes comprised a majority (approximately 56%) of the total number of 2023 healthcare outbreaks in Toronto. This was followed by retirement homes (approximately 18%), chronic care settings in hospitals (approximately 12%), acute care settings in hospitals (approximately 10%), psychiatric care settings in hospitals (approximately 2%), and transitional care locations (approximately 1%). Note that these percentages do not add up to 100% as they were rounded to the nearest integer.

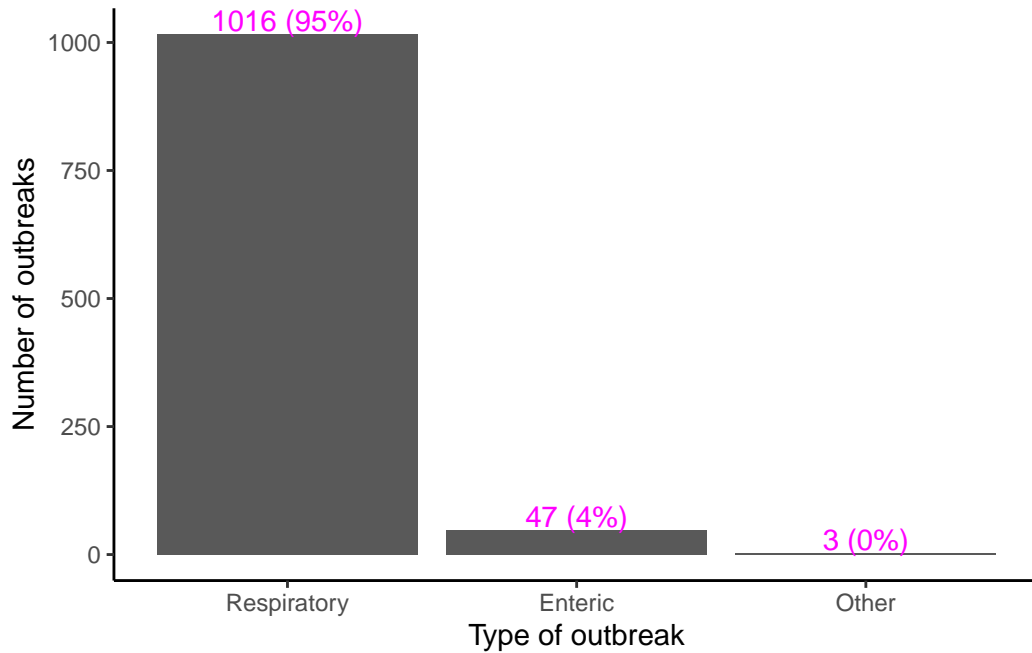


Figure 2: Number of outbreaks by type of outbreak for Toronto healthcare locations in 2023

Figure 2 shows that the vast majority of 2023 healthcare outbreaks in Toronto were respiratory in nature (approximately 95%). This was followed by enteric outbreaks (approximately 4%) and other types of outbreaks (less than 1%). Note that these percentages do not add up to 100% as they were rounded to the nearest integer.

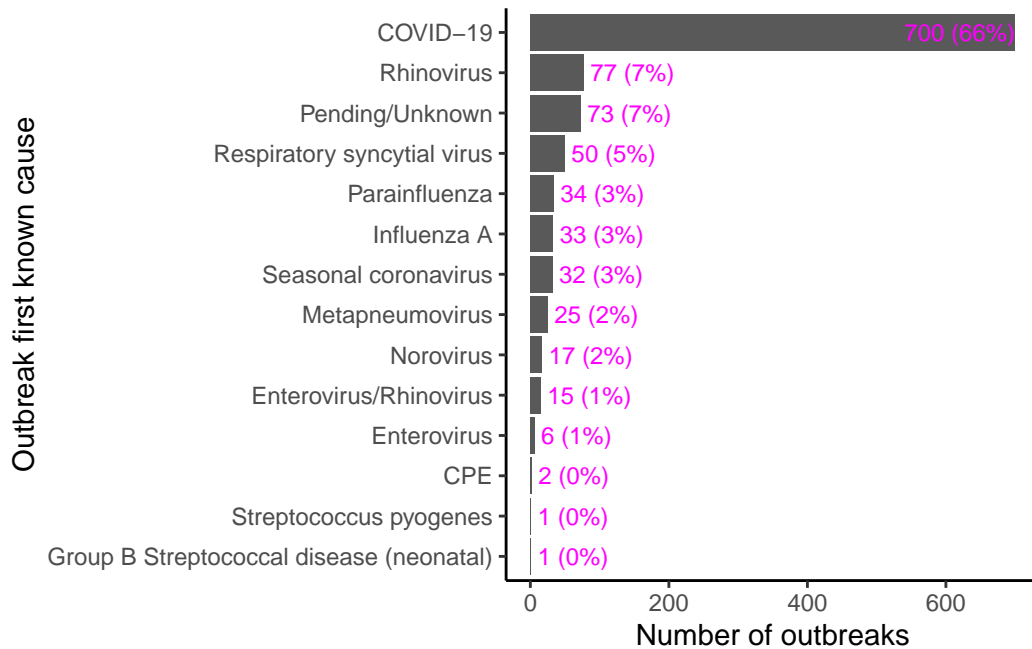


Figure 3: Number of outbreaks by first known cause for Toronto healthcare locations in 2023

Figure 3 illustrates that the majority of 2023 Toronto healthcare outbreaks had COVID-19 as their first known cause (approximately 66%). This was followed by rhinovirus (approximately 7%), respiratory syncytial virus (approximately 5%), parainfluenza (approximately 3%), influenza A (approximately 3%), seasonal coronavirus (approximately 3%), metapneumovirus (approximately 2%), norovirus (approximately 2%), enterovirus/rhinovirus (approximately 1%), enterovirus (approximately 1%), CPE (less than 1%), streptococcus pyogenes (less than 1%), and neonatal Group B streptococcal disease (less than 1%). Approximately 7% of outbreaks had a pending or unknown first known cause.

3 Discussion

In Section 2.2, it was observed that long-term care homes had the greatest proportion of the total outbreaks among healthcare facilities in Toronto in 2023 (Figure 1), that approximately 95% of the outbreaks were respiratory in nature (Figure 2), and that COVID-19 was the first known cause of a majority of the outbreaks (Figure 3).

All three of these results share common origins. For instance, in October 2022, the Government of Ontario removed a masking requirement for caregivers and visitors in long-term care homes (The Canadian Press 2022), whose residents are primarily at or above 65 years of age with an average age of 83 years as reported in 2018 (Ontario Centres for Learning, Research and Innovation in Long-Term Care 2018). Since individuals aged 60 years or older are more likely

to experience worse health effects after contracting COVID-19, the Public Health Agency of Canada recommends that they wear a respirator or mask to limit the transmission of this pathogen (Public Health Agency of Canada 2022). As a result, it seems that the Government of Ontario did not heed this advice, possibly contributing to the large proportion of disease outbreaks (which include COVID-19) in Toronto long-term care homes in 2023. This appears to follow a long-standing trend in Ontario long-term care homes. For example, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, long-term care homes in Ontario experienced a sizable increase in COVID-19 cases (Casey 2020). This was potentially made worse by the fact that not all of these facilities enforced mask-wearing and that long-term care homes were passed over for personal protective equipment in favour of hospitals (Casey 2020). Moreover, the fact that several hospitals in Toronto curtailed their mask requirements in June and July of 2023 (Fox 2023) likely contributed to the large volume of respiratory disease outbreaks observed in Figure 2.

Although over 1,000 data points pertaining to healthcare outbreaks in Toronto in 2023 were examined in this analysis, several limitations were present. For instance, asymptomatic disease outbreaks were likely not included in the studied dataset as they may not have been noticeable enough to be reported, contributing to an underestimate of the total number of outbreaks. In addition, only the first known cause of each outbreak was examined for clarity purposes. This also likely led to an underestimate of the number of outbreaks associated with each disease.

Future research should be conducted to assess the state of disease outbreaks in long-term care homes in particular, both in Toronto and across Canada, in order to gain deeper insight into this critical issue. The prevalence of disease outbreaks in additional settings, such as schools and workplaces, should also be investigated to expand on this analysis.

A Appendix

A.1 Dataset and Graph Sketches

Sketches depicting both the desired dataset and the graphs generated in this analysis are available in the GitHub Repository.

A.2 Data Cleaning

The data cleaning process involved filtering out some of the columns from the raw dataset and renaming some of the data entries for clarity and simplicity.

A.3 Attribution Statement

“Contains information licensed under the Open Government Licence – Toronto” (City of Toronto, n.d.b).

References

- Alexander, Rohan. 2023. *Telling Stories with Data*. Boca Raton: CRC Press. <https://tellingstorieswithdata.com/>.
- Canadian Institute for Health Information. 2020. “Pandemic Experience in the Long-Term Care Sector: How Does Canada Compare with Other Countries?” June. <https://www.cihi.ca/sites/default/files/document/covid-19-rapid-response-long-term-care-snapshot-en.pdf>.
- Casey, Liam. 2020. “Long-Term Care Homes Suffered Due to Efforts to Help Hospitals, Inquiry Hears.” *CBC News*, October. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/covid-ont-ltc-commission-1.5759753>.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2022. “Recognize Infection Risks in Health Care.” *U.S. Department of Health & Human Services*, March. <https://www.cdc.gov/infectioncontrol/projectfirstline/healthcare/recognize-risks.html>.
- City of Toronto. n.d.a. “Open Data Catalogue.” <https://open.toronto.ca/catalogue/?search=outbreak&sort=score%20desc>.
- . n.d.b. “Open Data License.” <https://open.toronto.ca/open-data-license/>.
- Collins English Dictionary. n.d. “Definition of ‘Gastroenteric.’” *Collins*. <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/gastroenteric>.
- Firke, Sam. 2023. *Janitor: Simple Tools for Examining and Cleaning Dirty Data*. <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=janitor>.
- Fox, Chris. 2023. “Toronto Hospitals Relax Mask Mandates Amid Lower Levels of COVID-19 Transmission.” *CP24*, July. <https://www.cp24.com/news/toronto-hospitals-relax-mask-mandates-amid-lower-levels-of-covid-19-transmission-1.6468415?cache=osw>.
- Freeman, Joshua. 2024. “Toronto Health Officials Say Respiratory Illnesses High, but Levelling Off.” *CTV News*, January. <https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/toronto-health-officials-say-respiratory-illnesses-high-but-levelling-off-1.6726578>.
- Gelfand, Sharla. 2022. *Opendatatoronto: Access the City of Toronto Open Data Portal*. <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=opendatatoronto>.
- Home and Community Care Support Services. n.d. “Long-Term Care.” <https://healthcareathome.ca/long-term-care/>.
- Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary. n.d. “Enteric.” *Merriam-Webster*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enteric>.
- Müller, Kirill. 2020. *Here: A Simpler Way to Find Your Files*. <https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=here>.
- Ontario Centres for Learning, Research and Innovation in Long-Term Care. 2018. “A Home for All: Younger Residents Living in Long-Term Care,” November. <https://clri-ltc.ca/files/2019/01/Younger-Residents-in-LTC-Handout.pdf>.
- Public Health Agency of Canada. 2022. “People Who Are at Risk of More Severe Disease or Outcomes from COVID-19.” *Government of Canada*, April. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/people-high-risk-for-severe-illness-covid-19.html>.
- R Core Team. 2022. *R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing*. Vienna,

Austria: R Foundation for Statistical Computing. <https://www.R-project.org/>.

The Canadian Press. 2022. "Ontario Quietly Changes LTC Rules; Visitors No Longer Have to Mask in Resident Rooms." *CBC News*, October. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ont-ltc-masks-1.6622221>.

Toronto Public Health. 2024. "Outbreaks in Toronto Healthcare Institutions." City of Toronto. <https://open.toronto.ca/dataset/outbreaks-in-toronto-healthcare-institutions/>.

Wickham, Hadley, Mara Averick, Jennifer Bryan, Winston Chang, Lucy D'Agostino McGowan, Romain François, Garrett Golemund, et al. 2019. "Welcome to the tidyverse." *Journal of Open Source Software* 4 (43): 1686. <https://doi.org/10.21105/joss.01686>.

World Health Organization. n.d. "Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic." <https://www.who.int/europe/emergencies/situations/covid-19>.