

## Postpartum Depression Reporting Within Canadian News Sources (2010-2019)

Manmeet Benepal<sup>1</sup>, Jasleen Gill<sup>1</sup>, Subiksha Nagaratnam<sup>1</sup>, Krishna Patel<sup>1</sup>, Noah Stancati<sup>1</sup>, Shipra Taneja<sup>1</sup>

1. McMaster University, Honours Life Sciences, Class of 2021

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### SUMMARY

Postpartum depression (PPD) is a serious mental health disorder that may occur soon after childbirth in mothers and/or fathers. Despite its high prevalence in Canada, PPD is often stigmatized and not discussed. The representation of PPD in Canadian media has not been evaluated in literature to date. It is important to understand the societal perception of PPD given its debilitating nature in the lives of new parents. In this study, we investigated the prevalence and common themes (i.e., use of personal anecdotes and scientific information) of PPD related articles published in three popular Canadian news outlets (*The Globe and Mail*, *National Post* and *Toronto Star*) in 2010, 2015 and 2019. A total of 27 articles that had at least two mentions of PPD were published, however, of these only eight articles from 2010 and 2019 had PPD as their main focus. Overall, 62.5% of articles included accounts of mothers' personal experiences with PPD, while only 25% included a description of fathers' experiences. In 2010, 85.71% of articles presented various forms of scientific information. Our findings suggest that more diverse reporting and awareness of PPD among the general population is needed, however further research is required.

### ABSTRACT

Postpartum depression (PPD) is often stigmatized and there appears to be a significant lack of representation of PPD in Canadian media outlets. This showcases the necessity for diverse reporting in the media and an increase in awareness of PPD among the general population. The extent to which PPD is underrepresented in Canadian news sources over the past decade has not been evaluated to date. In this study, we investigated the prevalence of articles about PPD published in three popular Canadian newspapers (*The Globe and Mail*, *National Post* and *Toronto Star*) in 2010, 2015 and 2019 using Factiva. We scored the publications based on relevancy, approach to communicating PPD and discussion of resources. In 2010, 58.3% ( $n=7$ ) of articles retrieved covered PPD, compared to 0% ( $n=0$ ) and 16.7% ( $n=1$ ) of articles in 2015 and 2019, respectively. Only articles that discussed PPD as their main focus were included in further analysis. Anecdotes of mothers' personal experiences with PPD were present in 62.5% of articles ( $n=5$ ), while only 25% ( $n=2$ ) included descriptions of fathers' experiences with PPD. Scientific information about PPD was mentioned in 85.71% of the articles ( $n=6$ ). There was no discussion surrounding providing support or resources for mothers or fathers experiencing PPD in any of the analyzed articles. Evidently, the number of articles mentioning or discussing PPD has decreased in the last decade. In 2010, there was greater discussion of PPD in media sources, emphasizing relevant science and personal experiences of parents. Articles published in 2010 also included a greater representation of males' perspectives on PPD. Overall, the analysis suggests a plausible trend in the reporting of PPD and PPD stigmatization, however more research needs to be conducted in order to understand whether or not PPD has become more stigmatized in the last decade.

**Keywords:** Postpartum depression, maternal health, Canadian news media, science communication

### INTRODUCTION

Postpartum depression (PPD) is a mental health disorder that typically occurs within the first month of childbirth.<sup>1</sup> PPD is similar to clinical depression with respect to the diagnosis, symptoms and treatments. The main difference, however, is that PPD affects new mothers and/or fathers primarily after childbirth. In

Canada alone, greater than 20% of new mothers report emotions associated with PPD.<sup>2</sup>

One difficulty associated with the diagnosis of PPD is that the signs of mental illness are also consistent with natural changes that occur within mothers after childbirth and are difficult to differentiate. For instance, symptoms of PPD include weight changes, fluctuations in appetite, disruptions in sleep patterns, anhedonia

(i.e., inability to feel pleasure), feelings of worthlessness, depression, poor concentration and similar cognitive deficits/declines.<sup>1</sup> There are many factors that increase the risk of PPD prevalence, such as an individual and family history of depression, issues with prior pregnancies, and hormonal and emotional factors.<sup>1</sup>

People diagnosed with PPD are usually prescribed various treatment options that meet specific individual needs. The most common treatment options for PPD are support groups/counseling, psychotherapy, hormonal therapies, and massage therapies.<sup>1</sup> Most of these treatments take place in conjunction with the administration of antidepressants.<sup>1</sup>

PPD has often been stigmatized and the extent of how often it is discussed in the media is not well-known. To this day, there is still a high degree of stigma attached to the diagnosis of PPD, which plays a key role in the experiences of those affected.<sup>3</sup> This stigma leads to the belief that motherhood should be a time of joy and puts pressure on pregnant persons to meet these societal expectations.<sup>3</sup> Such a societal norm is problematic because pregnant persons and their families may fail to recognize symptoms of PPD and be unaware of how to get the help they need.<sup>3</sup> Those affected by PPD may also be afraid to discuss their feelings openly out of fear that others may undermine their experiences.

Within the healthcare sector, PPD is considered a public health issue that demands an increase in awareness among the public in efforts to destigmatize the disorder.<sup>4</sup> Increasing awareness and reducing the stigma associated with PPD are both necessary for pregnant persons and their support groups.<sup>4</sup> Doing so helps to reduce the prevalence of PPD, and provides appropriate resources and social support to those affected.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, we are in a time where society is more open to having conversations about mental illnesses and the importance of mental health. This is being reflected through celebrities opening up about their experiences with PPD, the formation of support groups and discussions around fathers' experiences with PPD being more prevalent.<sup>5-7</sup> A societal shift in the way we view mental illnesses should be encouraged. We should also bring more awareness to mental illnesses, such as PPD, that are less prevalent among entire populations. Analyzing how PPD is communicated in our media can help destigmatize the experiences of postpartum persons and increase awareness of PPD in scientific and non-scientific communities.

Current research regarding the representation of PPD in North American media outlets emphasizes some common themes. Dubriwny highlights that American televised news medicalizes PPD, and raises problem-

atic questions of what good motherhood should look like and whether or not PPD is a natural phenomenon to motherhood.<sup>8</sup> Cummings and Konkle demonstrated that Canadian newspapers promote awareness of depression and use research findings as evidence for their statements.<sup>9</sup> However, Canadian news sources rarely incorporate personal stories from those affected by a mental illness.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Schanie and colleagues found that popular American press magazine articles often publish inaccurate and incomplete information about PPD.<sup>10</sup>

Evidently, it appears that a qualitative analysis of how PPD is represented in Canadian news sources, specifically, over the past decade (i.e., 2010 to 2020) has not been completed. This research topic is of interest because it allows for the identification of trends in the way PPD is communicated in Canada. It can also highlight and emphasize the need for diverse reporting and awareness of PPD and other mental health disorders as suggested in the existing literature.

This research investigation particularly focused on examining how Canadian media outlets have portrayed PPD and whether there was a shift in reporting within the past decade. The researchers identified and compiled relevant Canadian news reports published during the years 2010, 2015 and 2019. Articles were evaluated on their mentions of scientific studies or quotes from scientists, people's experiences with PPD, and support resources for individuals affected by PPD. After careful analysis, the selected news reports were scored and categorized based on their content.

We hypothesize that there has been a shift in PPD reporting within Canadian media over a 10-year span. More specifically, we believe that the discussion of PPD in the media has shifted from a scientific to an experiential lens, where there is an increase in accessibility and availability of resources to those affected. The identification of a potential shift of PPD in Canadian media outlets may reflect a change in public opinion and can demonstrate the significance of the media's roles and responsibilities regarding the translation of knowledge to society.

## METHODS

### *Data Collection*

Data was collected using Factiva, which is a search database that contains current and archived content from major global media publications. Through this database, we searched the most popular Canadian newspapers for their coverage of PPD in 2010, 2015 and 2019. We opted to search for news articles in 2019 rather than in 2020, since the extensive media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led to a decrease in reporting of PPD in the news. *The Globe and*

*Mail*, *The National Post* and *The Toronto Star* were selected as they are the three most circulated English Canadian newspapers.<sup>11</sup>

### Search Criteria

We conducted three searches on Factiva using the exact phrase “at least 2 postpartum depression.” We completed the search in three newspapers: “The Globe and Mail - All sources” OR “National Post (Canada)” OR “The Toronto Star.” The searches retrieved articles from January 1st to December 31st in the years 2010, 2015 and 2019. We included articles only published in English and excluded duplicate articles from the search.

### Scoring System

First, a preliminary analysis was completed by reading through all the retrieved news articles to determine if the main theme of the article was PPD and, thus, relevant to the study. If the news articles solely just mentioned PPD, they were considered to be irrelevant and were excluded from further analysis. Relevant articles were then further analyzed and scored using the following criteria by two reviewers.

### Approach

The language and content of each article was assessed in this category. Articles that discussed a scientific study or used a quote from a scientist received a ‘y’ for yes. The number of experts, scientific studies, and statistics used in the article were captured as numerical values. Articles that did not report a scientific study, statistic, or quote from a scientist received an ‘n’ for no.

This section further assessed whether personal experiences of PPD in mothers or fathers were mentioned in the article. This was separated into two subsections: mothers and fathers. Both subsections were evaluated on the same criteria. Articles that discussed a person's experience with PPD in a few sentences or throughout the article received a ‘y.’ The number of personal experiences mentioned in the article was captured as a numerical value. Articles that did not report a person's experience with PPD received an ‘n’.

### Discussion of Resources

This section assessed whether support or resources for postpartum persons were mentioned in the article. This was separated into two subsections: mothers and fathers. Both subsections were evaluated on the same criteria. Articles that discussed resources received a ‘y.’ The number of resources mentioned was also reported as a numerical value. Articles that did not re-

port any sources of support or resources for postpartum persons received an ‘n.’

## FIGURES

The findings from the scoring system were used to compare how the articles within and between years scored in each aforementioned category. Graphs of key results were created using *Microsoft Excel for Mac 2021 (version 16.46)*.

## RESULTS

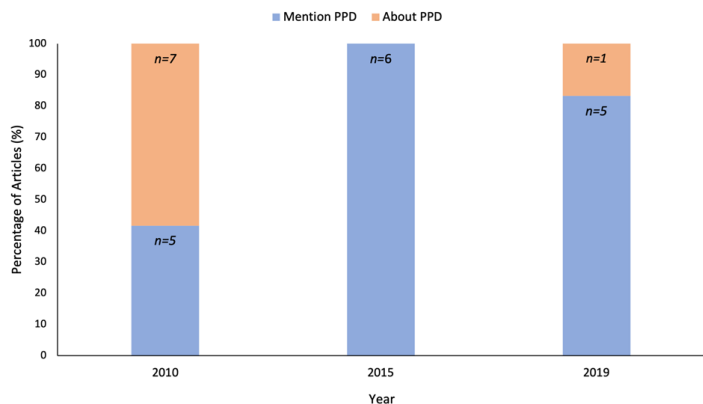
A total of 27 news articles were found across 2010, 2015 and 2019 upon the initial search criteria. The search retrieved a total of 13 articles in 2010, 3 of which were from *The Globe and Mail*, 6 from *The National Post* and 4 from *The Toronto Star*. The 2015 search retrieved a total of 8 headlines. 2 articles were from *The Globe and Mail*, 2 from *The National Post* and 4 from *The Toronto Star*. A total of 6 articles were retrieved from 2019. 1 article was published by *The Globe and Mail*, 3 by *The National Post* and 2 by *The Toronto Star* (Tables 1-3, Appendix A).

Preliminary analysis was completed on all 13 articles in 2010, 8 articles in 2015 and 6 articles in 2019 to determine whether they were relevant to the nature of this study. Through this, one headline from 2010 was excluded from the analysis as it was a letter rather than a news article. From the 2015 articles, two were excluded as one was an advice column and the other was a duplicate article.

### Articles that Mention PPD or are About PPD

Further analysis was conducted on all remaining articles (i.e., reading the article in-depth and determining whether the main focus was PPD). In 2010, 58.3% ( $n=7$ ) were about PPD, while 41.7% ( $n=5$ ) articles only made mention of PPD. In 2015, 100% ( $n=6$ ) of articles only made mention of PPD. In 2019, 16.7% ( $n=1$ ) of articles were about PPD and 83.3% ( $n=5$ ) just made mention of PPD (Figure 1). This yielded a total of 8 relevant articles from 2010 and 2019, which were scored further on their approach to discussing PPD and inclusion of support resources.

Globe and Mail, Toronto Star and National Post Articles that Mention PPD and are About PPD in 2010, 2015 and 2019

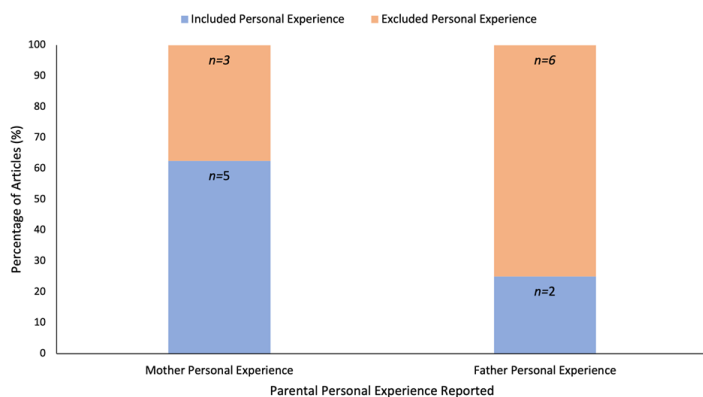


**Figure 1.** Percentage of articles that only made mention of PPD (blue) versus articles that focused on PPD (orange) in 2010 (n=12), 2015 (n=6) and 2019 (n=6). One headline from 2010 was excluded from the analysis due to it being a letter rather than a news article. Two articles were excluded from 2015 as one was an advice column, and the other was a duplicate article. All articles were included from 2019.

### Discussion of PPD Personal Experiences of Mothers and Fathers

A recurring theme in the content of some of the articles was mentioning personal experiences of PPD, particularly those of mothers. In 2010 (n=4) and 2019 (n=1), 62.5% of articles included accounts of mothers' personal experiences with PPD (Figure 2). In contrast, only 25% of all articles included a description of fathers' experiences with PPD. Data from only 2010 and 2019 was included in this figure due to there being no data pertaining to the use of mothers' and fathers' personal experiences with PPD for 2015.

Globe and Mail, Toronto Star and National Post Articles Use of Mothers' and Fathers' Personal Experiences with PPD in 2010 and 2019



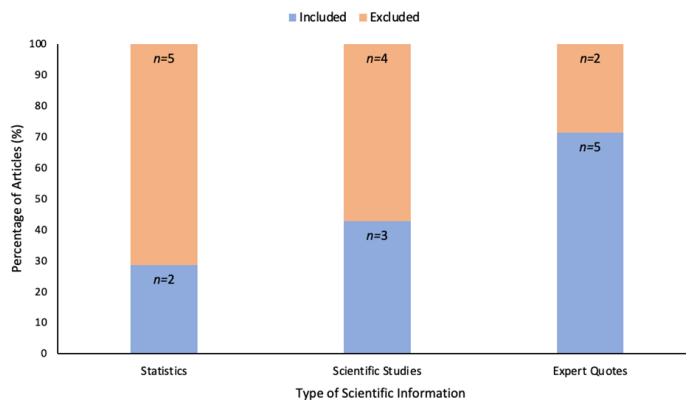
**Figure 2.** Percentage of articles that included (blue) and excluded (orange) mothers' and fathers' personal experiences with PPD in 2010

and 2019. All articles except for 1 were published in 2010 (n=8).

### Discussion of Scientific Information Regarding PPD

From the articles that met the inclusion criteria, scientific information was mentioned in 85.71% of the articles in 2010, which was all articles except for one (n=6). Scientific information was presented in the form of statistics, reference to scientific studies and quotes from experts in the field. Expert quotes were included the most with 71.43% articles incorporating at least one comment from a scientist (Figure 3). Findings from scientific studies were described in 42.86% of articles, while statistics about PPD were included in just 28.57% of articles. Only data from 2010 was included in this figure due to there being no data pertaining to the use of scientific information in PPD for 2015 and 2019.

Globe and Mail, Toronto Star and National Post Articles Use of Scientific Information in PPD related articles in 2010



**Figure 3.** Percentage of articles that included (blue) and excluded (orange) statistics, scientific studies, and quotes from experts about PPD in 2010 (n=7).

### Discussion of Resources

None of the articles that were analyzed included any sort of discussion about support or resources for mothers or fathers experiencing PPD.

### Themes

Various themes emerged in the articles (n=27), some of which included infanticide in relation to crime and law, the majority of which were found in 2010. Another theme was biographies or personal accounts. Mothers' experiences were recounted most frequently, although discussion of fathers' experiences was also a recurring theme (Figure 2).

## DISCUSSION

Our research study explored how PPD has been represented in Canadian news outlets in the years 2010, 2015, and 2019. We focused on assessing how news articles have discussed PPD through the use of scientific information, personal experiences, and resources available for individuals affected by PPD. We embarked on this study in order to examine whether discussions regarding PPD in the media have shifted to reduce stigmatization and increase the accessibility and availability of resources.

Our findings suggest that in the last decade, there has been a decrease in the number of articles that are about or mention PPD. Specifically, there has been a reduction in the number of articles about PPD from 2010 onwards. Articles retrieved from 2010 focused primarily on scientific studies and the personal experiences of new parents affected by PPD. These articles discussed the incidence of PPD by including statistics on prevalence, symptoms, and experiences from both the maternal and paternal perspectives. Articles published in 2015 and 2019 had simple mentions of PPD in relation to other topics, such as crime, but there was no increase in the reporting of scientific findings or personal experiences of PPD during these years. These findings may suggest that news outlets are now discussing PPD more in terms of how it may impact one's actions (e.g., lead to crime), instead of focusing on the prevalence of PPD. Additionally, there was a decrease in reporting personal stories and scientific studies about PPD throughout the years. The articles that were published in 2010 had greater mentions of scientific studies, expert opinions, and personal experiences from both the mothers' and fathers' perspective. It is plausible to suggest that news outlets are shifting their reporting style, however the sample size in this study is too low to generalize.

Previous studies have suggested that stigma is linked with familiarity and stereotypes.<sup>12</sup> According to Thorsteinsson and colleagues, familiarity is the degree of awareness and knowledge about a subject matter and can be acquired in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to, media.<sup>12</sup> Higher familiarity has been shown to reduce stigma and stereotypes.<sup>12</sup> Stereotypes, on the other hand, are built upon knowledge structures that are shared by the public. Stereotypes can lead to the misconception that people with a particular mental illness, or in this case PPD, can be dangerous. This type of thinking can lead to the formation of prejudice followed by the act of discrimination.<sup>12</sup> In our study, familiarity of PPD in the articles was assessed by looking at the level of knowledge, experiences and resources shared in each article, along with the context of the articles. Two of the 13 articles published in 2010 shared a stereotype that those suffering from PPD may be dangerous and commit crime. The remaining articles published in 2010 discussed statistics, science,

and expert opinions about PPD, which contributed to the increased level of familiarity. Whereas articles published in 2015 and 2019 had less information regarding PPD. This may suggest a possible trend in how PPD is reported in the media, but more research is needed to confirm this trend.

## LIMITATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

There are some important limitations to this study that are worth mentioning. First, the relevant articles were not scored by the same reviewer. Articles from 2010, 2015 and 2019 were split between four reviewers. This introduces the possibility for bias, which would then reflect differences in the outcomes of scores. In the future, the same reviewer(s) should be responsible for scoring all relevant articles utilized within the study.

Initially, the reviewers intended to examine articles over a 10-year period. However, there was a significant lack of PPD related publications in the year 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The years 2010, 2015, and 2019 were analyzed to reflect this 10-year period. Future studies should present findings that are based over a longer time frame. Due to a lack of data found in 2010, 2015 and 2019, additional years would increase the accuracy regarding potential shifts in media coverage.

A final limitation is that only three media outlets were analyzed, resulting in a low sample size that may not be representative of all sources of information in Canada. Going forward, research should investigate news articles from more media outlets in order to better assess the trends that can be generalized across Canada. Furthermore, studies should be conducted utilizing social media, blogs, and additional platforms of social communication, enabling a more in-depth understanding of how PPD is communicated on a national scale. These study limitations can also be considered as future steps.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our findings reveal that there has been a decrease in the number of articles regarding PPD in Canada's top three news media sources since the year 2010. Specifically, the reporting of relevant scientific findings, personal experiences of mothers and fathers, and resources for those affected by PPD has decreased over the last decade. This may suggest a shift in reporting and, thus, reduced familiarity associated with PPD, which may mean that stigmatization of PPD has not decreased over the past decade. However, further research with a greater sample of news articles is needed in order to determine whether PPD reporting has led to a change in the illness' stigmatization and social understanding.

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## ARTICLE INFORMATION

**Senior Editor**  
Lavanya Sinha

**Reviewers and Section Editors**  
Samini Hewa, Danial Aminaei

**Formatting and Illustrations**  
Zani Zartashah

## APPENDIX A

**Table 1. Titles and sources of articles retrieved in Factiva from 2010.**

2010					
Source	Article	Source	Article	Source	Article
Globe and Mail	Did you hear the one about the Mormon comedian? In her new memoir, <i>I Love Your Laugh</i> , Jessica Holmes chronicles her journey from Latter-day Saints to stand-up and TV through postpartum depression	National Post	I would never have hurt my baby	Toronto Star	Mom with breast cancer denied EI; Women who become ill on maternity leave are losing out on sickness benefits, critics say
	Baby killing: infanticide or murder?; Depression Defence; A 'middle ground' punishment for mothers who kill		Hearing tests postpartum depression defence; Appeals court to decide on murder vs. infanticide		10% of new dads suffer postpartum depression; According to a new study, postpartum depression is common in fathers. And a big barrier to treatment is that it is still widely seen as a woman's illness
	Saving women and children from postpartum psychosis		Health; A Toronto doctor hopes his findings will help prevent postpartum depression		Postpartum depression: Her hidden secret Early Problems; Signs and symptoms can often be dismissed as the baby blues or trials of motherhood
			Winnipeg mom charged with stabbing her children		Mysterious fall of a rising star; What prompted a Toronto-raised, NYU professor to leap to his death?
			Postpartum depression risk for dads, too		
			Even Dad gets the blues: Postpartum depression can also affect fathers, who often suffer in silence, Dakshana Bascaramurty reports		

**Table 2. Titles and sources of articles retrieved in Factiva from 2015.**

2015					
Source	Article	Source	Article	Source	Article
Globe and Mail	Mother charged in toddler's death; Police trying to determine if she had postpartum depression	National Post	I'm pregnant and I have an eating disorder; Shame often prevents people from seeking help, but even when they take that brave step, the right services can be hard to access	Toronto Star	Listen for clues about how friend is doing: Ellie
	Scotiabank pulls more cultural funding		Be a good listener for friend in crisis		How bias hurts women, from the lab to the medicine cabinet
					I do not believe she was suffering from mental illness
					Lisa Raitt's latest comeback: Adroit transport minister returns after health scare and picks up right where she started - 'full steam ahead'

**Table 3. Titles and sources of articles retrieved in Factiva from 2019.**

2019					
Source	Article	Source	Article	Source	Article
Globe and Mail	Ontario program treats perinatal anxiety	National Post	Singer Battles Anxiety Following Birth of Third Child	Toronto Star	A Blow in the Face takes audiences through the 'cave' of postpartum depression
			Five Canadian things to know about		A graphic (novel) look at postpartum depression; Author Talks
			How do you solve a problem like DeMar?; A Qualified tribute to past raptors teams		