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# How to search public health grey literature in the Canadian context

Flash Review

AUTHORS:

Anousheh Marouzi

Amal Khan



The UPHN is a national organization established in 2004 which today includes the Medical Officers of Health in 24 of Canada's large urban centres. Working collaboratively and with a collective voice, the network addresses public health issues that are common to urban populations. Research operations of the UPHN are conducted in partnership with the University of Saskatchewan.

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# **How to search public health grey literature in the Canadian Context: A Flash Review<sup>123</sup>**

**Anousheh Marouzi**

Master's Student, Community Health and Epidemiology, University of Saskatchewan

**Amal Khan**

Ph.D. Student, Community Health and Epidemiology, University of Saskatchewan

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence: Dr. Cory Neudorf, Urban Public Health Network Research Group, 107 Wiggins Road University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, E-mail: [cory.neudorf@usask.ca](mailto:cory.neudorf@usask.ca)

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# How to search public health grey literature in the Canadian Context: A Flash Review

## Keywords

Public health, public health administration, review literature as topic

## Question

Due to the less standardised nature of grey literature and its exclusion from large databases, doing a search for grey literature is usually a less straightforward task than it is for more traditional forms. There is a clear need to establish guidelines for systematically informing how to carry it out. Setting up a guide for conducting a grey literature search is of more value when it is focused on a specific field of study or in a particular context. We created this flash review to provide specific steps useful in carrying out a grey literature search in public health in the Canadian context.

Grey literature is any research or analysis not published in traditional academic peer-reviewed periodicals. It includes reports, newsletters, government documents, speeches, white papers, dissertations, etc. When conducting any literature review (e.g. systematic review, scoping review, etc.), exploring grey literature can be an important step. Failing to adequately consider grey literature can potentially leave out important pieces of information and bias a review. This is especially true in public health, where much of the research is carried out and disseminated outside of the academy.

## Review/Search Strategy

This flash review was primarily informed by the University of Saskatchewan library website (Duncan, 2011); however, other university libraries' websites, i.e. the University of Toronto (Lui, 2010), Simon Fraser University (McKenzie, 2020), and Queen's University (McKeown, 2012), were useful as well. The flash review was also informed by the authors' personal experiences conducting their own flash reviews on separate projects.

## Findings

To conduct a **grey literature review**, you need to identify a limited list of keywords that reflect the broad and key themes of your research question. For example, in a scoping review carried out by the first author of this flash review on the association between avoidable mortality and socioeconomic status, the author used the following keywords to perform the grey literature search: "avoidable mortality," "preventable mortality," and "amenable mortality."

After determining the keywords to use in conducting a grey literature search, it is recommended to perform a grey literature search in the field of public health in **two steps**:

### *General Search*

The general search is carried out using Google Scholar, Google, and [Grey Matters](#) (a practical tool for searching health-related grey literature). One may consider the following points when doing the general search:

- A. Only the chosen key terms - that reflected broad and key themes of the topic of interest - should be used to carry out searches on Google and Google Scholar, and Grey Matters.
- B. Restrict your search to a certain number of pages. Different search websites display varied numbers of results on each page, and this could be restricted to the 5 or 10 first pages again depending on the number of search results displayed.

### *Specific Search*

The specific search involves searching websites pertinent to public health in the Canadian context. Search under the specific search category is not limited to the number of pages as the general search case. Therefore, one should look for documents of interest among all the results the search engine produces. We found the following website helpful in carrying out the specific search:

- **Ontario Public Health Libraries Association (OPHLA):** OPHLA is a valuable resource for doing a grey literature search. It provides a comprehensive directory of locations to search for grey literature in public health. Four custom search engines are available on OPHLA, each with an ability to search on a long list of websites with one click. Out of these four custom search engines, we recommend the [custom search engine for Canadian Public Health information](#), which enables a search on the websites of federal and provincial health departments of Canada, the public health agencies, and collaborating centres. The name of sites which are searched with this custom search engine is provided on the webpage, among which the federal websites are as follows:
  - Health Canada | [canada.ca/en/health-canada](http://canada.ca/en/health-canada)
  - Public Health Agency of Canada | [canada.ca/en/public-health](http://canada.ca/en/public-health)
  - Canadian Best Practices Portal | [cbpp-pcpe.phac-aspc.gc.ca](http://cbpp-pcpe.phac-aspc.gc.ca)

The search could be performed through the search bar of the custom search engine, using the chosen keywords. Following searching, the results could be limited to only federals, NCCs, or a province, based on the research question. After restricting the results to any of the mentioned categories, if the number of results produced by the search engine are too many, reviewing the results could be limited to the first 5 pages.

Based on the research question, other custom search engines could be useful as well. For example, the [custom search engine for Ontario Public Health Unit Websites](#) enables one to search all the Ontario local public health units' websites at once. In case the OPHLA search is restricted to "federal," and based on the research question, there is a need to look into the UPHN webpages.

After searching OPHLA, based on the research question, a decision could be made on whether to stop searching for grey literature or go on and search other resources as well. In case the researcher is not satisfied with the number of literature found in these three websites, and searching for other grey literature sources is reasonable in terms of time, money, and resources, he or she can further explore websites introduced below:

- **Government of Canada Publication Search:** This website is a great source to search for the Government of Canada documents. [link](#)
- **Canadian Public Documents Collection:** contains reports from both the Canadian Public Policy Collection and the Canadian Health Research Collection. [link](#)
- **ProQuest:** This website is helpful in searching for unpublished theses and dissertations from across North America. Also, one can search for newspapers, magazines, reports, blogs, podcasts, and websites through ProQuest. Although the results are not limited to Canadian literature, using this website is recommended due

to its value in the public health field. To access this website with no restriction, one should use the university's library website.

- **Urban Public Health Network (UPHN) websites:** “The UPHN is a network of Medical Officers of Health in Canadian urban centres who came together in 2004 to address public health issues that are common to urban populations” (UPHN, 2013). Under the UPHN webpage, you can find public health organizations who are members of UPHN, listed by their health authority and the corresponding region. Each of these organizations’ webpage was searched on Google, and the chosen keywords were searched on the search bar of each website independently.<sup>4</sup>

### **Case Studies**

We discuss **two case studies** below to explain the various steps involved in exploring the grey literature in two different scenarios.

#### **Case study 1: Avoidable mortality and socioeconomic status in Canada**

- **General search:** Using a predetermined list of keywords, the first author searched Google, and Google Scholar with restrictions to the first five pages, with ten results on each page. The first author assessed each result thoroughly against the inclusion/exclusion criteria of the scoping review. Resultantly one document was included in the review.
- **Specific search:** Considering the review’s scope, worldwide, while focusing on Canadian grey literature, the first author decided to include some key international websites in the grey literature search. Using the same set of keywords used for the general search, limiting the search to the first five pages and targeting ten results per page, the following websites were examined. The results corresponding to each website are also mentioned: [The World Health Organization](#) (0 pertinent literature found), [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) (0 relevant literature found), [United Nations](#) (1 pertinent literature found but excluded), [OECD](#) (1 pertinent literature found but excluded).

Further on, the following websites were searched with no restrictions on page numbers of the search result; [Canadian Institute for Health Information \(CIHI\)](#) (2 pertinent literature found, 1 was included), [National Collaborating Center for Determinants of Health](#) (1 pertinent literature found but excluded), [OPHLA-Custom Search Engine for Canadian Public Health information](#) (6 pertinent literature found, 3 were included).

In addition, Urban Public Health Network (UPHN) member's websites (See Appendix) were searched with no restrictions on page numbers for the search results. Collectively, five pertinent pieces of literature were found from the UPHN members' websites, and one report was included in the study. Overall, the OPHLA website was the most helpful resource through the process of grey literature review.

#### **Case study 2: Barriers and facilitators around HPV vaccination uptake in Canada**

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<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of preparing this flash review and to ease future grey literature in search, a list of UPHN members with links to their websites was prepared. One can find this table in appendices. By clicking on each health authority, you will be directed to that health authority’s website where you can search the selected key terms in the search bar.

- **General search:** involved search through Google, Google Scholar, and Grey Matters with restriction to the **first** five pages (inclusive) of the search result. Within those five pages, each study was thoroughly examined against the predetermined inclusion criteria.
- **Specific search:** included search through UPHN and OPHLA with no restriction on page numbers of the search results. In that, the authors assessed all **UPHN** webpages. Search results of Quebec Urban Public Health Network units were displayed in French and only some studies that appear relevant were assessed using Google translation. **OPHLA** was assessed choosing “all” websites under the “Federal” category and “two” websites each under the “Provincial” category except for Nunavut, Prince Edward Island, and Yukon, which displayed one website by default.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Grey literature is generally used to communicate the results of a wide range of different research and analysis mainly generated outside the traditional publishing in academic settings and are not adequately presented in peer-reviewed research databases. These kinds of literature are highly informative and crucial when doing an academic literature review, such as systematic review and scoping review. While there are rigid approaches for doing different types of literature review, there are no such recommendations for grey literature search. The above guide is aimed to provide directions on how a grey literature search looks like in the public health field.

In this flash review, several websites are suggested for searching public health grey literature in the Canadian context. It recommends completing the search in two stages by completing a general search and then a specific search. However, there are no hard and fast criteria for conducting a grey literature search. Depending upon the review topic, resources that are not mentioned in this flash review might be useful. For example, if a review is done on breast cancer, Cancer Agency websites are valuable resources for the grey literature search, besides the sources suggested in this flash review. Therefore, considering the wide range of topics possible to do a literature review in the field of public health, it is recommended that the above-mentioned sources serve as a baseline.

**Appendix A.** List of UPHN members and links to their respective websites.

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Health Authority	Region
<a href="#">Vancouver Island Health Authority</a>	Victoria, B. C.
<a href="#">Vancouver Coastal Health Region</a>	Vancouver, B. C.
<a href="#">Fraser Health</a>	Surrey, B. C.
<a href="#">Alberta Health Services</a>	Calgary + Edmonton, AB
<a href="#">Saskatchewan Health Authority</a>	Saskatoon + Regina, SK
<a href="#">Winnipeg Regional Health Authority</a>	Winnipeg, MB
<a href="#">Middlesex-London Health Unit</a>	London, ON
<a href="#">Hamilton Public Health</a>	Hamilton, ON
<a href="#">Ottawa Public Health</a>	Ottawa, ON
<a href="#">Peel Public Health</a>	Mississauga, ON
<a href="#">Region of York Public Health</a>	York Region, ON
<a href="#">Toronto Public Health</a>	Toronto, ON
<a href="#">Montreal Public Health</a>	Montreal, QC
<a href="#">Monteregie Health and Social Services Agency</a>	Longueuil, QC
<a href="#">Quebec City Health and Social Services Agency</a>	Quebec City, QC
<a href="#">L'Agence de la sante et des services sociaux de laval</a>	Laval, QC
<a href="#">Centre integre universitaire de sante et de services sociaux de l'Estric</a>	Estric/ Sherbrooke, QC
<a href="#">New Brunswick- Saint John Area</a>	Saint John, NB
<a href="#">New Brunswick-Fredericton Area</a>	Fredericton, NB
<a href="#">Capital District Health Authority</a>	Halifax, NS
<a href="#">Eastern Health</a>	St. John's, NL

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