



COVID-19 pandemic: Snapshot of young Ontarians' mental health needs

The mental health of young people has been affected by COVID-19, and these challenges will likely continue to be experienced post-pandemic. Lifestyle changes (like physical distancing and the shift to online learning) have created unique pressures for youth that influence their ability to cope, maintain their emotional and social well-being or seek mental health support. As life returns to a new normal in the coming months, we expect that there will be a surge in demand for child and youth mental health services.

Strategic service planning is critical, especially with an already strained mental health system. That's why we reached out to young people to better understand their needs and service preferences.

What we asked young people

We asked young people how their mental health changed since COVID-19 to understand who has been affected most. We used various social media and communications channels to invite 12- to 25-year-old Ontarians to share their thoughts and experiences regarding the pandemic via an online survey. We also asked about their preferences for future mental health services.

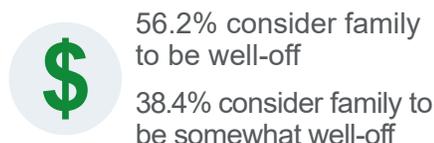
What young people said

A total of 1,341 young people completed the survey over a two-week period.

Average age: 18.3 years.

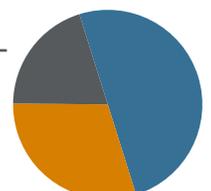


female 73.2%



Almost 20% had lost their job because of COVID-19

Nearly one-third of young people are currently employed



About 30% of young people said they were getting help for a mental health concern at the time of the survey. While another 30% reported not currently needing mental health services, almost all (92.4%) felt certain services might be helpful in the future. Young people who were not getting help but were feeling stressed because of COVID-19 preferred online sources of information and self-help supports (lower-intensity services). Young people who were already getting help for their mental health preferred to meet with a healthcare provider, either in person or online.



Nearly two-thirds of youth said that their mental health had gotten worse since the pandemic. Young people who were already getting help for their mental health before the pandemic were especially vulnerable for experiencing worsening mental health during the pandemic. Those who were older (18–25 years), female, living in a northern community, working or whose family was not so well-off were at an increased risk for mental health distress.

What this means for service planning

Most young people reported that they would be interested in future mental health services. As such, agencies and service providers must be prepared to meet the increased, and situation-specific, needs of young people to intervene as soon as possible.

A variety of services should be available based on individual needs — with those who have greater mental health needs matched to more specialized services, and those with milder symptoms provided with short-term resources or self-management tools. Early assessment of mental health, including key risk factors, and clear referral procedures will be needed to support service access.

What's next

Engaging youth and families in developing solutions that are meaningful for them is critical. Parents and caregivers play an essential role in young people's mental health and experience of accessing services. That's why we'll explore their perceptions of how the pandemic has impacted their child's mental health to ensure service plans include parent and caregiver input.

We are co-designing a mental health service plan in response to COVID-19 with a group of youth, caregivers and researchers. This service plan will be shared with healthcare providers, agencies and policy makers to suggest changes in mental health care delivery, from the perspective of those who may be using these services moving forward.

To learn more about this project, visit
cymh.ca/covid19

Research team

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