



# Young people's mental health and service use in Ontario one year into the COVID-19 pandemic

## Research summary

Young people's mental health has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly two-thirds of those who participated in our [initial study](#) during the early months of the pandemic said that their mental health had deteriorated, and there are indications that overall mental health has continued to decline.



Since the beginning of the pandemic, mental health services that support young people have changed in two important ways:

- There has been an abrupt transition to virtual care and services that do not require face-to-face contact.
- The government has made several online counselling options, skill-building programs and mental health resources available to the public for free or at a low cost.

With these changes in mind, our research team had several questions:

- Has the mental health of young people changed since the beginning of the pandemic?
- What mental health services have they been accessing, if any?
- What insights can we glean about the mental health supports young people want and need to inform their care through and post-pandemic?

Together with a youth advisor, we developed a survey for young Ontarians from 12- to 25-years-old. The survey was launched on February 19, 2021 and remained open until March 18, during Ontario's second wave of the pandemic (when classroom-based learning was available to both elementary and high school students). The survey took approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete and was available in both English and French.

### About the survey participants

- Average age: 19.8 years
- 85.0% identify as white
- 78.2% identify as female
- 97.5% prefer communicating in English
- 65.8% reported having found it "easy" or "very easy" for their family to afford their basic needs



## Findings

- 1,373 young people completed the survey.
- 45.4% reported that they had a mental health diagnosis.
- 75.7% rated their current mental health as “fair” or “poor”.
- 86.7% rated their mental health as “somewhat worse” or “much worse” since the beginning of the pandemic.
- 19.0% were not previously meeting with a healthcare provider about their mental health but have done so since the beginning of the pandemic.
- 92.9% of those with a pre-existing mental health diagnosis have talked to a healthcare provider about their mental health.
- 30.7% of those without a pre-existing mental health diagnosis said they would like to see a service provider to support their mental health but have not yet.

Consistent with other emerging research, we have found that some young people’s mental health may be more affected than others based on several factors, including age, gender, income, geographic location and pre-existing mental health concerns or diagnoses.

We asked people what publicly funded mental health services in the province they are aware of and what services they have used. Overall, young people were not highly aware of the services we named. Nearly 80% of participants knew about Kids Help Phone, but the awareness of other services ranged from just 5% to 30%. More than 12% of participants said they were not aware of any of the listed services.

**Table 1:** Participants' awareness and use of publicly funded mental health services

| Service                  | Aware of service | Used service |
|--------------------------|------------------|--------------|
| Kids Help Phone          | 78.7%            | 10.6%        |
| Good2Talk                | 30.2%            | 3.5%         |
| Mental Health Helpline   | 27.5%            | 1.9%         |
| Ontario Distress Centres | 20.9%            | 1.5%         |
| BounceBack               | 12.5%            | 1.8%         |
| Wellness Together Canada | 8.7%             | 1.5%         |
| AbilitiCBT               | 6.5%             | 2.0%         |
| Mindyourmind             | 5.0%             | 0.6%         |
| MindBeacon               | 5.0%             | 1.6%         |

The most common form of mental health support young people have sought since the beginning of the pandemic is that from friends, family or a trusted adult (79%). However, young people have also sought support from healthcare providers, virtually or in person (45%), used an online self-help resource (25%) or a publicly funded online counseling service (20%). Those with a pre-existing mental health diagnosis were 1.5 to 3 times more likely to use these latter options.

#### How young people have learned about the mental health services they have accessed

1. friend, family member (41.6%)
2. healthcare professional (16.5%)
3. social media (14.2%)
4. at school (9.5%)
5. advertisements (internet, TV, radio, public spaces) (5.9%)
6. health website (4.0%)

We asked young people to select the ways in which mental health services could be improved. Their top three suggestions were:

1. Decrease costs.
2. Reduce wait times.
3. Help young people know what services exist.

**Table 2:** Young people’s suggestions for improving mental health services

| Suggestion                             | Percentage |
|--|------------|
| Decrease costs                         | 63.0%      |
| Reduce wait time                       | 53.8%      |
| Improve awareness of services          | 36.2%      |
| Make access to appointments easier     | 29.9%      |
| Remove the stigma                      | 28.7%      |
| Provide more options for help          | 24.2%      |
| Make appointments easier to schedule   | 17.3%      |
| Ensure better privacy                  | 17.1%      |
| Make services more fun and interesting | 10.4%      |

## Conclusion

Young people have reported a decline in their mental health since the beginning of the pandemic. This study provides valuable insights into what mental health services and supports have been used since the pandemic prompted changes to the way services are provided.

While some are already getting support for their mental health, there are others who are not. Nearly one-third of young people who are not currently receiving help would like to access mental health services or supports. This suggests that there will likely be an influx of young people seeking services, and the child and youth mental health sector will need to be ready to provide this support. To do this, we need strategies to increase the awareness and uptake of existing mental services and supports, and to explore ways to better meet their needs and preferences.