

**Canadian Mental Health Association on mental health issues of young adults in Canada**

**White Paper**

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## **Introduction**

Founded in 1918, Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is one of the most established and extensive community mental health organization in Canada. Through a presence in more than 330 communities across every province and one territory, CMHA provides advocacy, programs and resources that help to prevent mental health problems and illnesses, support recovery and resilience, and enable all Canadians to flourish and thrive. CMHA provide services and supports to over 1.3 million Canadians through the combined efforts of more than 5,000 staff and 11,000 volunteers (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2024).

CMHA mission is to develop and provide community-based support services that help people who are living with mental illness or mental health problems improve the quality of their lives in accordance with their defined needs, provide information and education to increase knowledge of mental health and services that promote mental health, as well as to advocate for public policies that lead to improved quality of life for people living with mental health problems (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2020).

The 2023 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey reveal that more than half of middle and high school students in Ontario are experiencing a significant level of psychological distress, a figure that has doubled over the past decade (The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2023). This issue is highly relevant to CMHA and its stakeholders, including policymakers, healthcare providers, educators and young Canadians who face mental health challenges.

To address this urgent issue, CMHA advocates for a universal mental health care system in Ontario that takes care of everyone, no matter what. A universal mental health care that is available for everyone is free and funded through the Ontario Health Insurance Plan. Universal mental health care recognizes that people from different communities have specific needs, and it also covers services that range from keeping people well, and out of crisis, to helping them on their path to recovery and everything in between (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2023).

## Background

Mental health refers to an overall state of well-being involving thoughts, feelings and emotions, whereas a mental illness denotes a specific condition, such as depression, anxiety, an eating disorder or schizophrenia. In about 70 per cent of cases, symptoms of mental illness begin before age 18, highlighting the importance of early diagnosis and treatment. About one in five Canadians is affected by a mental health illness by the time they reach age 25; however, many youth experience barriers to accessing mental health care services (Farrah & Norris, 2022). Despite the prevalence of mental health illness in youth, access to appropriate mental health services is inadequate for many young people. Only one in five youth in need of mental health services receives appropriate treatment as they transition to the adult health care system. Barriers to accessing mental health care are particularly pronounced for marginalized groups and youth in rural and remote areas (Malla et al., 2018)

According to Statistics Canada (2019), youth aged 15 to 30 were less likely to describe their mental health as “excellent” or “very good” compared to other age groups. Within this demographic, females and those from lower-income households reported positive mental health at even lower rates. The data also shows that young people aged 15 to 24 are more likely to experience mental illness and/or substance use disorders than any other age group (Pearson et al., 2013)

According to the results from the 2012 Canadian Community Health Survey–Mental Health, more than one in six Canadians aged 15 or older experienced a need for mental health care in the previous 12 months. An estimated 600,000 had a perceived unmet mental health care need, and more than 1,000,000 had a partially met need. The most common need was for counselling (Sunderland & Findlay, 2013). Half of Canadians wait about a month for ongoing counselling services in the community, while one in 10 waits nearly five months (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2023).

The most recent Ontario Student Drug Use and Health survey — which has been conducted every two years since 1977 to gauge Ontario students' health and drug use — shows a third of students said they needed mental health support from a professional but never sought the help. Some said they thought they could manage the problem themselves, while others worried

what others would think or were just "too busy." About half of students say their physical health is "excellent" or "very good," but around one in six (18 per cent) say their physical health is "fair" or "poor." The most common health issues reported are mental health problems like depression or anxiety (21 per cent), ADHD (12 per cent), and vision problems (9 per cent). When it comes to mental health, about one in three students (36 per cent) rate it as "excellent" or "very good," while a similar number (38 per cent) say their mental health is "fair" or "poor." (The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2023).

The percentage of students who rate their mental health as "fair" or "poor" has significantly increased since 2007, the first year of monitoring, from 11 per cent to 38 per cent. Over half (57 per cent) of students report that they know how to access school-based mental health support services. About one in five (22 per cent) report not knowing how to access school-based mental health support services, and a similar percentage (21 per cent) are "not sure." (The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2023).

The Canadian Community Health Survey–Mental Health confirms a high incidence and prevalence of mental health problems among youth, as well as poor or late access to care (Gravel & Béland, 2005). Suicide is the second cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds in Canada; this is the third highest youth suicide rate in the industrialized world. Among Indigenous men and women, suicide rates are respectively five and seven times higher than the Canadian average (Navaneelan, 2016). The recent crisis facing the country, with deaths from drug overdoses of fentanyl reaching epidemic proportions, has also largely involved youth under 25 years of age (Fischer et al., 2015).

A recent survey conducted by the CMHA found that 87 per cent agree that people living in Ontario should have access to universal mental health care. The survey found that of the 37 per cent of Ontarians, who have experienced a mental health concern in the past year, 34 per cent did not reach out for help primarily because it is too expensive. The research also showed that 57 per cent of people living in Ontario would access mental health care through a community organization with a free program (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2023).

According to the CMHA, *The State of Mental Health in Canada 2024* finds:

- The mental health of Canadians is three times worse than before the pandemic, and millions of people can't get the care they need. Suicides, particularly in the north, and the toxic drug supply are claiming lives at an alarming rate.
- No province or territory is spending enough on mental health, in part because they're not obliged to. On average, provinces and territories are only spending 6.3 per cent of their overall health budgets on mental health. They should be spending 12 per cent.
- People receive drastically different care depending on their home province or territory and are doing worse in some places, including in the north and rural areas.
- Shortages of psychiatrists and other mental health care providers mean people aren't getting care when and where they need it.
- It's not a flashy topic, but we need more data about mental health. You can't fix what you don't measure, and Canada is failing to collect information about the mental health system and the ways it affects us.

Canada doesn't have universal mental health care, although nearly eight out of 10 Canadians want it, according to a 2023 Canadian Mental Health Association survey. More than one third of Canadians with mental health concerns don't get help because of cost or because they didn't know where to go (Statistics Canada, 2023). The CMHA suggests that universal mental health care can reduce the barriers to receiving proper mental health services for all, especially youth who may be unable to afford those services. Universal mental health can make services available and affordable through the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) accessible to all (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2023).

A recent survey conducted by the CMHA found that of the 35 per cent of people who have experienced a mental health concern in the past year, more than one-third did not reach out for help primarily because it is too expensive or because they don't know where to find it. The research also showed that more than half of people living in Canada (57 per cent) would access mental health care through a community organization with a free program (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2023).

Many of the services and supports we need aren't currently covered by public health insurance plans. Many of us can't afford to pay for services like counseling, psychotherapy, eating disorder treatments, substance use and addictions treatment. And only some people have access to these services through private health insurance plans. Cost shouldn't get in the way of care. Everyone should be able to get the supports they need. Whoever they are, wherever they live, whatever they need. Universal mental health care would not only reduce overall healthcare and other social costs, but it is essential for our well-being (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2023).

### **Solution**

The CMHA focuses on influencing the Ontario government to implement universal mental health care. The CMHA aim to work with provincial leaders because health care in Canada, including mental health care, falls under provincial jurisdiction. The provincial and territorial governments have most of the responsibility for delivering health and other social services (Government of Canada, 2024).

By advocating at the provincial level, CMHA proposed solutions include:

- Expand public health insurance coverage that includes essential mental health services, such as therapy, counselling and addiction treatments under provincial health plans.
- Increase funding and support for not-for-profit organizations that provide mental health services in local communities, ensuring they can meet growing demand.
- Address the unique mental health needs of diverse populations, including Indigenous communities and those living in rural and underserved areas, by providing appropriate and accessible care.

Funding is one of the biggest barriers to implementing a universal mental health care strategy. In 2021, the Trudeau government made an election promise to create a new \$4.5 billion Canada Mental Health Transfer that would be sent to provinces and territories over five years. However, there is still no information on when the transfer is happening (Dangerfield, 2023).

The CMHA report also offers decision-makers a roadmap for fixing the mental health system so that it best supports the mental health of people in Canada, recommending that the Government of Canada:

- Invest 12 per cent of health care spending in mental health, addictions and substance use (MHASU) health care.
- Write mental health care into federal law to guarantee funding for mental health.
- Eliminate poverty, which leads to poor mental health, and ensure that people with mental health disabilities have livable incomes and adequate housing
- Collect more and better data to improve the mental health care system and the mental health of Canadians.

## **Conclusion**

By looking at Canada's mental health care system, it is clear that the care currently available to Canadians is far from universal. A lack of investment at all levels of government into mental healthcare has resulted in a nationwide mental health crisis, and its impacts are felt beyond just the health care system. By making mental health services more accessible to all Canadians, the provincial government could help decrease the stigma associated with mental health. Additionally, as highlighted by the CMHA, providing consistent funding for community organizations that provide mental health services is imperative to ensure meaningful access to mental healthcare for all, particularly within vulnerable communities. To successfully address this mental health crisis, investing in primary and hospital-based care for mental health is not enough (Kay, 2023).

The CMHA advocates for a universal mental health care system in Ontario that takes care of everyone. By expanding public health insurance to cover essential mental health services, strengthening community-based programs and ensuring equity in access, we can build a system where everyone gets the care they need, when they need it, regardless of their financial situation or where they live. By making mental health and substance use health care integral parts of our universal health care system would greatly reduce human suffering and vastly improve quality of life for millions of Canadians (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2022).

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