

There is a mental health crisis at Ontario's post-secondary institutions, and addressing this crisis requires a "whole of community" approach. The current system is uncoordinated and underfunded, and its lack of resources means that students do not receive the timely, diverse care that they need in order to excel at post-secondary institutions.

SUMMARY

Post-secondary students in Ontario continue to face significant mental health struggles, and this prevents them from excelling academically and entering Ontario's workforce. According to a 2016 National College Health Assessment survey,¹ 2% of Ontario's post-secondary students had attempted suicide within the last year and 14% had seriously considered it (up from 11% in 2013).² Many students (46%) had felt so depressed that it was difficult to function (up from 40% in 2013). Contributing factors included overwhelming anxiety (65%, up from 58% in 2013), loneliness (67%), and academics, which 60% of students found traumatic or very difficult to handle.

The provincial government should provide dedicated funding for community-based mental health providers to supply culturally relevant and diverse counselling on campuses.

Providing students with timely, effective mental healthcare requires a "whole of community" approach. There is a lack of coordination between post-secondary stakeholders, community health partners, and the provincial government in their efforts to provide students with culturally relevant and diverse mental health care services. Students often face long wait times for mental healthcare services, with some waiting hours to see a triage specialist only to be told they need to wait several months to see a counsellor.³ **Universities continue to act as primary caregivers, despite not being designed or equipped to perform this role.** While there are off-campus options available, many students cannot afford to seek mental health support from community providers.

The provincial government should update Ontario's Comprehensive Mental Health & Addictions Strategy to formally recognize post-secondary students as a distinct population cohort.

The majority of mental health issues arise between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four — a period when many are pursuing post-secondary education.⁴ **Post-secondary students need mental health resources tailored to their unique needs, and these resources require dedicated funding.** Recognizing this group as its own population cohort is vital to ensuring that students receive the funding they need to maintain good mental health, complete their post-secondary studies, and secure jobs in Ontario's labour market.

The provincial government should provide funding to support research on effective mental health strategies, which includes funding the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health (CICMH).

Improving mental health supports on post-secondary campuses requires effective strategies on raising awareness, reducing stigma, and maximizing resources, which reduces wait times and increases the effectiveness of services. Funding organizations like the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health (CICMH) helps ensure that these strategies continue to adapt to students' changing mental health needs and that best practices are shared across the sector.

¹ "NCHA-II Ontario Canada Reference Group: Executive Summary, Spring 2016." American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment, 2016.

² "NCHA-II Ontario Canada Reference Group: Executive Summary, Spring 2013." American College Health

³ Hensley, Laura. "One Size Doesn't Fit All': Canadian Campuses Desperately Need Better Mental Health Services." Global News, October 9, 2019. <https://globalnews.ca/news/5969461/mental-health-canadian-campus/>.

⁴ Pearson, Janz and Ali (2013). Health at a glance: Mental and substance use disorders in Canada. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 82-624-X.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Canada-Wide Mental Health Data

The results of the 2019 National College Health Assessment, Canada Reference Group, were released earlier this year. This data is not specific to Ontario, but it nevertheless shows student mental health trends across Canada and, to some extent, in Ontario. Ontario-specific results have yet to be released.

In the previous twelve months, 52% of students across Canada had felt so depressed that it was difficult to function,⁵ compared to 44% in 2016.⁶ Similarly, 16% of students across Canada had seriously considered suicide, compared to only 13% in 2016. Anxiety has also become more common, with 69% of students across Canada saying they had felt overwhelming anxiety within the past twelve months, compared to 65% in 2016.

While these are Canada-wide comparisons, they show that the mental health crisis in Canada, and in Ontario, is getting worse — and that more needs to be done to address it.

Funding Community-Based Mental Healthcare Providers

Community-based mental healthcare providers play an integral role in providing services to students, but securing funding to maintain these operations can be difficult. In some cases, providers have partnered with student associations to make their services more accessible to students. For example, in 2017, the University Students' Council (USC) at Western University partnered with the Canadian Mental Health Association-Middlesex to provide free mental health care to students at a nearby clinic.⁷ Initiatives like this are a step in the right direction, and government funding would ensure that community organizations are able to provide mental health services to students across the province sustainably.

Recognizing Post-Secondary Students as a Distinct Population Cohort

Post-secondary students face unique challenges. Often, students are living on their own for the first time, which can lead to or aggravate existing mental health issues. Students are also under pressure to choose a career path, to line up a job for after graduation, and, in some cases, to maintain high grades to secure entry into increasingly competitive professional or graduate degree programs.

Post-secondary students are at a critical point in their social and psychological development, in addition to being in a transitory stage of their lives. They require a unique approach and targeted services and investments. If these are not met, they are at risk of not living productive and fulfilling lives.⁸

Funding to Support Research on Effective Mental Health Strategies

To ensure mental health funding is used effectively, it is important to support organizations that help post-secondary institutions develop efficient, high-quality student mental healthcare services. The Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health (CICMH) provides research, reports, and survey data for students, faculty, and institutions, and its annual *Whole Campus: Healthy Communities* conference gives post-secondary stakeholders from across the sector the ability to come together and exchange best practices. Ultimately, funding the CICMH and organizations like it helps promote student access to timely, diverse mental health services on campus.

⁵ "NCHA-II Canadian Reference Group: Executive Summary, Spring 2019." American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment, 2019.

⁶ "NCHA-II Canadian Reference Group: Executive Summary, Spring 2016." American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment, 2016.

⁷ Department of Communications and Public Affairs, and Western University. "Mental-Health Crisis Clinic Earns Community Backing." Western News, January 31, 2019. <https://news.westernu.ca/2017/11/mental-health-crisis-clinic-earns-community-backing/>.

⁸ Council of Ontario Universities, College Student Alliance, Colleges Ontario, Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance. "In It Together: Taking Action on Student Mental Health," 2017.