

Canadian youths' mental health woes a 'ticking time bomb'

May 31 2023



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Canada is grappling with a ticking time bomb of violence, addiction and suicide linked to failing mental health services for its young people.

In the streets and subways of Toronto, Canada's largest city, an ultra-modern metropolis that acts as a window into the nation's economy and culture, many [young people](#) can be seen wandering, their eyes staring into space, shouting incomprehensibly.

Newspapers are filled with accounts of unprovoked attacks on strangers, [opioid overdoses](#) and other societal ills linked to addiction and [mental health problems](#).

This was an acute phenomenon in big cities in the United States before also trending north of the border.

In Canada, decades of chronic underfunding of [mental health services](#) has left many young people struggling in the wake of the punishing COVID-19 pandemic, sometimes with fatal consequences.

"The number of young people with [mental health](#) and addiction problems across Canada has been growing exponentially for more than a decade," says Bjug Borgundvaag, an emergency room doctor at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto.

"We try to do our best but we have very limited things that we can offer," he says.

In Toronto, the situation has reached a crisis level, such that former mayor John Tory called for a national mental health summit to address it.

Crystal meth

"Historically, we've underfunded mental health," says David Gratzer at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto.

"In Canada, for every dollar we spend on health care, we spend seven or eight cents on mental [health care](#)," which is far less than most other developed countries, he notes.

Canada made a big mistake in the 1960s and 1970s by eliminating many hospital beds for people with mental illness, said Gratzner, who is a psychiatrist.

In 2022, demand for psychological services in Ontario increased by 50 percent, with more than one in two youths living with mental illness.

Charities have tried to fill the gap left by shortfalls in public services, but have been unable to keep up with the large influx of people in distress.

"It's a ticking time bomb," said Jacques Charland of the Quebec help line Ecoute Entraide.

Long waitlists

"It is a crisis because it affects all aspects of the population. In the young adult and youth populations, the numbers have become so much more alarming," laments Nzinga Walker, executive director of Stella's Place.

Located a few blocks from Toronto's Chinatown, Stella's Place offers free mental health support to people aged 16 to 29 in psychological distress.

"Services are not available. Almost anywhere you look for help, there's a wait list and when someone has a mental health need or a mental [health crisis](#), the last thing you want to see happening is that you're going on a wait list," Walker adds.

Stella's Place opened in 2013 and recently moved into a shiny new

facility, where youths can access counseling, group programs and psychiatric services.

Kat Romero, her long hair streaked with blue highlights, says the facility changed her life.

"I felt lost, and it taught me different kinds of coping mechanisms to help deal with being in crisis and also maintaining my day-to-day mental wellness," she said, a support dog at her feet.

Today, Romero helps the center set up programs.

The organization is also training young people on how to reach out to certain communities in which [mental illness](#) is stigmatized.

"If you are from [immigrant families](#), just coming to Canada is really hard. You're told not to seek help and that you should be strong and all of the stuff that's happening to you is normal," confides Chantelle Cruzat-Whervin, a black client at Stella's Place.

"For people of color, I feel like we don't have access to a lot of resources," she added.

© 2023 AFP

Citation: Canadian youths' mental health woes a 'ticking time bomb' (2023, May 31) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-05-canadian-youths-mental-health-woes.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--