

COVID-19 and the Well-being of Youth in Canada



From the Perspectives of Youth

December 2021

THIS BRIEFING ...

This Briefing Paper highlights how school and university closures have impacted the well-being of Canadian youth. Each section focuses on:

- How the pandemic has impacted youth in Canada
- Critical concerns
- Implications for future work

WELCOME | TATIANNA SITOUNIS & THEO CHIARA

We, as two youth impacted by COVID-19, came together in the summer of 2021 as part of the Participatory Cultures Lab, to produce this Briefing Paper. Since March of 2020, COVID-19 has disrupted the lives of all communities in Canada. The pandemic has pushed tribal, provincial, and the federal governments to implement new and unexpected policies to counteract the spread of the virus. Although each governing body took slightly different approaches, the one thing each shared is a concern for the well-being of Canada's youth. In this regard, Quebec health minister, Christian Dubé said in an open letter:

You [young people] may have felt like you weren't a priority, and I can understand why.

He goes on to say that he commends their sacrifice during the pandemic.¹ The sacrifices he speaks of include missing large social gatherings and being delayed in schools which has contributed to declining well-being for youth not only in Quebec, but all over Canada.

For this reason, we wanted to further understand the sacrifices that Canadian youth are making and the impact on their daily lives. As Faculty of Arts interns with the Participatory Cultures Lab at McGill University, we created this Briefing Paper which draws upon media articles from around the country including various empirical studies to document the perspectives of youth at this time, as well as the impact on youth and figure out what we will need in the future. We did this by focusing our research from March 2020 to August 2021. We used various national media and sources from various provinces including newspapers, radio segments, etc. This was done in order to fulfill the intent of this Briefing Paper, which is to provide an account of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on *all* Canadian youth.

CANADIAN INDEX OF WELL-BEING

The Canadian Index of Wellbeing² measures changes in well-being according to eight indicators: community vitality, democratic engagement, education, environment, healthy populations, leisure and culture, living standards, and time use.

While the pandemic impacted a number of these aspects in young people's lives, previous studies suggests that the pandemic has generally impacted youth in two key ways: **leisure and culture** and **education**.

WELL-BEING INDICATORS



Community
Vitality



Democratic
Engagement



Environment



Education



Healthy
Populations



Leisure &
Culture



Living
Standards



Time Use

GENERAL OVERVIEW

CHILDREN UNDER 12

The relationships built and the academic structure introduced in elementary education is vital for the child to learn how to make more social connections and achieve academic success more maturely in the future.³ In school, young children get their first opportunity to interact and socialize with people outside of their homes.

In February of 2021, a large cross-sectional study was published entitled *“Mostly worse, occasionally better: Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of Canadian children and adolescents.”* The study focuses on mental health changes in six domains for children aged 2-18:

DEPRESSION	ANXIETY
IRRITABILITY	ATTENTION
HYPERACTIVITY	OBSESSIONS/ COMPULSIONS

The study found that:

- 66.7%** Children aged 2-5 who fared worse in at least one of the domains assessed;
- 31.5%** Children who fared better in at least one of the domains assessed.⁴

Julie Beaulieu, professor in education at the Université du Québec à Rimouski, believes that school closures damage younger elementary students by taking away a semblance of normal life. If they live in confinement at home, then schools being open is the only outlet they have to grow somewhat normally. She also states that even those students who go to school but live in red zones are developmentally impacted because they have a lot of friends with whom they do not have face-to-face interaction.³ Therefore, whether or not a child’s school stayed open determined how severely their social development would be impacted. Some provinces, such as Québec required elementary school students to be in class so their learning has not been delayed as severely as Ontario, which saw its schools shuttered for a considerable amount of time:⁵



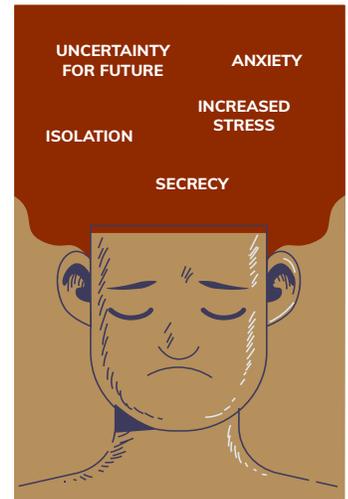
Those that could afford tutors enrolled their students in such programs where they did not fall drastically far behind. Many were not able to have a tutor, and as a result, reading and math scores declined in Canada.⁵

YOUTH BETWEEN 13 TO 18

Various reports discuss the increased negative mental health impacts of the pandemic on youth between 13 to 18 years old. Mental health issues include mood swings, anxiety, and/or suicidal thoughts.⁶ According to research from the British Columbia’s Children’s Hospital, approximately two-thirds of youth in British Columbia report struggling with mental health issues, an increase from about one-third before the pandemic began. As well, research from the Provincial Health Officer found that:

53.1% Teenagers fifteen and over in BC reported *“somewhat or much-worse mental health during the pandemic.”*⁶

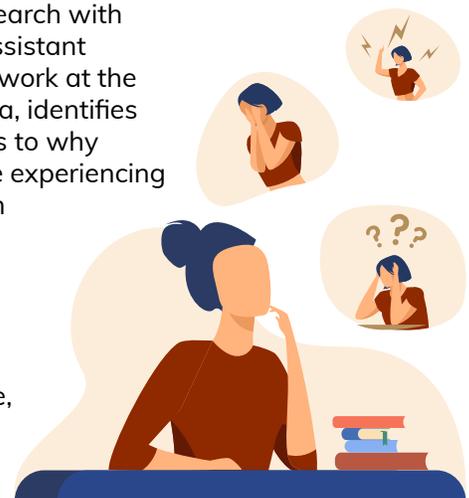
Similarly, the Eating Disorder Support Network of Alberta has reported a five and a half times increase in participants since the pandemic first started in 2020.⁷ It is difficult to single out any one specific factor as contributing to increased negative mental health for youth. According to experts, reasons include increased uncertainty for the future, increased stress, and isolation.⁷



POST-SECONDARY YOUTH BETWEEN 17 TO 24

Research from the Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Unit (SPHERU) and the Saskatchewan Health Research Foundation show that the rates of anxiety and depression both increased from August 2020 to February 2021, with the highest increases occurring in those aged 18-34.⁸

Nuelle Novik, a research with SPHERU and an assistant professor of social work at the University of Regina, identifies possible reasons as to why younger people are experiencing more mental health problems than older generations, which include: uncertainty of the future, trying to enter the workforce, and navigating university amidst a pandemic.⁸



A report by Statistics Canada echoes these findings, stating how the decline of mental health in youth was “the largest of any age group.”⁹ The implementation of social distancing policies have been especially negative on this group.¹⁰ A study from the Institut national de santé publique de Québec also identifies similar findings, highlighting how young Quebecers are reporting the highest increase in mental distress.¹¹

Coupled with these concerning findings, the same survey from Saskatchewan found that while more youth are struggling, less are reaching out to mental health resources, and those that do reach out are usually already in crisis. Prior to COVID-19:

34% Participants who reported accessing mental health services.

21% At the time of the study, participants who reported reaching out to a mental health professional.⁸

Very important to this particular age group is the labor economy youth face as they graduate from CEGEP, university, or prepare to begin their first chapters into independence. In this regard, a report from OECD¹² shows how the disproportionate impacts young people are facing in the labour market will potentially have important consequences concerning mental health “as long-term unemployment is a risk factor for poor mental health throughout the life course.” This is followed by data showing the fluctuation in the unemployment rate:

Unemployment rate for 15-24 year-olds



While it has somewhat returned, it still remains above pre-COVID levels, creating a difficult environment for young people to try and enter the workforce.¹²

CROSS-CUTTING CRITICAL CONCERNS

1



INDIGENOUS YOUTH

Due to historical and ongoing harm, Indigenous communities were often some of the most vulnerable at the beginning of the pandemic.⁴³ Additionally, due to the residential school system, many Indigenous families experience generational trauma and high rates of domestic violence at home. However, Indigenous communities have learned to be resilient as well, and the strong national and kinship bonds they have with each other encourages their compliance with restrictions and a drop in cases, as well as mental support.

One example of this is on Kahnawá:ke in Quebec, where community support enabled effective compliance of the band council's restrictions which allowed them to be able to lift lockdowns during the holiday period so community members could see each other and ease the mental strain.⁴⁴ It is important to note that Indigenous nations can implement different rules than the province they are in. For example, Kahnawá:ke did not have the strict 9 pm curfew that was implemented in Montréal in January 2021 in order to reduce the number of large gatherings. In addition, the differing experiences Indigenous people have depending on what province or locality they live in. While some may have clean water, food, and healthcare available to quarantine safely, many others do not; indeed there are 58 communities under a boil water advisory across the country. Furthermore, in British Columbia a survey of 2,700 Indigenous people was conducted and found that:

84%

People that have experienced discrimination in the health care systems.⁴⁵

Provincial and federal health systems have also been reported to provide inadequate or inaccessible care for Indigenous communities time and time again.⁴⁵

When a pandemic is added to pre-existing suffering and worry it can take a drastic toll on the people involved. Across Canada, First Nation's lesser access to basic rights has already left them with higher rates of:

- asthma,
- heart disease, and
- diabetes

This makes contracting COVID-19 more likely and deadly. Thus, this increases the need for children to follow the safety measures which also harm their academic and social development.⁴⁵

Housing has been another crisis for Indigenous people across Canada, some do not have homes and cannot be isolated, while others live in a home with a large family where it is hard to isolate the children from the elderly. This creates a lot of hardship on families and as a result, the children become distracted from school due to familial concerns which deteriorates their mental health.



The abrupt end to social gatherings and school activities brought on particular hardships to students with special needs because in addition to regular classes and friends, these students had to endure the abrupt end to therapy sessions and doctor's visits.¹⁶ Missing out on opportunities to socialize with friends and experience a structured classroom setting is vital for the development of children with special needs as well as for the teachers to understand the particular needs of the student.¹⁷

Moreover, the caregivers at home become exhausted and drained financially which further impacts the well-being of these children at home. Students with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or

Oppositional Defiant Disorder suffer academically in the absence of the structured schooldays and normal schedules. One example from the CBC details a student making academic improvements in a specialized class, but regressing sharply at the start of lockdown.¹⁷

For educators, it is difficult to understand the particular needs of students through zoom so that they can assist them in developing the life-skills they will need such as self-esteem, self-expression, and attentiveness. Notably, some students with special needs have been thriving in the pandemic due to them being able to benefit from one-on-one instruction with a parent or caregiver. However, not all caregivers have the resources to provide this amount of academic support for their child.¹⁷



In 2020, an article by CBC titled, "*Immigrants, refugees nearly half of Ontario's COVID-19 cases but only a quarter of the population: Study*" reflects on societal weaknesses which the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly exacerbated.¹⁸ With immigrants and refugees being significantly more impacted by the pandemic, it is necessary to acknowledge the children of these parents or in these families.

The **Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) Youth Network** designed and sent out a survey targeting newcomer youth (ages 16-25 years old) in April 2020.¹⁹ The respondents identified the key challenges they have been facing:



MENTAL HEALTH

Concerning mental health, some respondents cite the large loads of stress they are experiencing, with some being reminded of past experiences of war and displacement. As well, unsafe living conditions, potential for family conflict, and lost support from peers/mentors are contributing to even greater negative mental health outcomes.



ACADEMIC ISSUES

In terms of academic issues, newcomer youth report that they feel like they are lagging behind or losing academic and language development since they must stay at home and do not have the same accessibility to resources, as many newcomer youth do not have access to computers or stable internet.



SHIFTING RIGHTS

Shifting rights concerns the increased surveillance and policing due to the implementation of strict quarantining and social distancing protocol. For racialized youth, this has been challenging to navigate. Additionally, many newcomer youth may face documentation difficulties as there are many changes occurring they are not aware of.

Respondents were also asked what they would like to see change so that there is better support for newcomer youth:



IMPROVED ACCESSIBILITY

This includes access to information in multiple languages, better access to technology for newcomer youth and families, and support for parents helping their children with schooling.



MENTAL HEALTH

Hopes for improved mental health support include resources and counselling tailored for people who have experienced trauma, access to social, youth, and settlement workers, and education/activities that promote mental health.



SHARING BEST PRACTICES

This includes creating opportunities for youth workers to share information, regular webinars, or events for youth workers to learn useful information to better support youth, and organizing in different provinces for greater accessibility for newcomer youth across Canada.



The lived experiences of LGBTQ2S youth across Canada during the pandemic necessitates special attention as this group has faced different barriers than general youth as whole. With forced lockdowns and lack of in-person socializing, youth have spent more time online.

Fostering Open eXpression among Youth (FOXY)'s, a Yellowknife-based organization that provides information and support for gender-diverse youth and women, report shows cyberbullying and cyberviolence have increased during the pandemic. Amanda Kanbari, the Director of Programs, stresses how more resources are needed to support LGBTQ2S youth, as the bullying they face often involves more stigma. Kanbari says:²⁰

“Not having all the tools available and not having folks who know intimately the issues that LGBTQ2S youth face, sometimes it means they don't get the support they need.”

Similarly, The **All Genders Yukon Society (AGYS)**, which provides free mental health support and counselling programs for trans, two-spirit, non-binary Yukoners, as

well as to their immediate support systems, has seen a rise in the use of their services:

27%

Increase service use since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020.

This reflects the lockdown protocol and social distancing where many spaces where LGBTQ2S youth could gather were suddenly unavailable.²¹

These cases emphasize the different reality experienced by youth across Canada and how important it is to acknowledge the diverse ways in which this pandemic has exacerbated certain social issues. For LGBTQ2S youth, increases in mental health issues and inaccessibility to helpful resources have been serious issues that must be acknowledged and addressed.



Students who have had to endure Canada's flawed child welfare system and the pandemic at the same time are losing out on education and struggling to survive once they age out of foster care and into a world that they find themselves ill-prepared for.

58%

800-1000 children who age out of foster care in Ontario who are faced with homelessness.

These kids could not isolate nor find work during the pandemic.²² Additionally, Canada's child welfare system contains a shockingly disproportionate amount of Indigenous children:

52.7%

Indigenous children that make up the youth in foster care despite comprising 5% of the total population.²³

The fact that these kids are constantly changing schools makes it hard for them to hit their academic stride and become settled in a school setting. Furthermore, they have trouble integrating themselves in a group of friends before moving to a new school.

44%

Students in the program that finish their high school degrees.²²

During COVID-19, the resources that would usually help them combat homelessness, loneliness, and unemployment were less accessible and overrun. For children in foster care, it is not just the social and academic development that they miss out on but they are also being left out of primary needs with little to no support to fall back on.²² Even before the pandemic, foster care youth were not making use of the same in-school opportunities to flourish academically and socially due to them moving between schools; now many of these children are all but lost.²² Worse than under-prioritized, these children have been completely thrown out onto the streets. Canada needs to reform its child welfare system to ensure that these children will not be in such a precarious position if another public health crisis should rear its head in the future.



IMPLICATIONS

Our analysis has brought attention to how the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted Canada's youth, with a focus on well-being. Our research has emphasized many critical points in young people's' lives that are being negatively affected. Depending on the situation, varying degrees of impacts outside of age present themselves is particular for Indigenous youth, marginalize youth, economically and socially, youth in foster care homes, and youth with learning disabilities.

1

THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Some parents are concerned for their children moving forward with the curriculum without understanding the material in the prior grade. Since Canada's education system builds on material in previous years, they argue that the option to keep their children in the same grade to catch up with what they lost should be part of the conversation. Similar to how parents choose whether or not their child attends school in-person or online, they want the option to have their child repeat the grade for more learning time with lost material.²⁴



Furthermore, the losses/gaps in education due to the pandemic require a targeted response from educators and policymakers so that these students are supported to succeed in their future endeavors, whether in university life or in entering the workforce.

2

THE FINANCIAL NEEDS

For students, the pandemic will certainly have short and long term impacts. Given the economic challenges that many youth face concerted efforts must be made in order to provide opportunities or financial relief. The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically showcased the fault lines within education and in labor markets, with youth being one of the most severely impacted groups.



The prioritization of recovery plans in labor and education must take precedence, so that future generations do not suffer through some of the projected losses that experts predict.²⁵ Some plans to alleviate financial pressure have already been implemented from the federal government such as additional grants, not having to pay back loans immediately, and creating more opportunities for employment so students can gain experience.²⁵ While this is certainly promising, it will require continued action and equitable distribution of such government benefits so that all youth can recover and succeed in their futures.

3

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Previous research emphasizes, in many cases, the important issue of resource accessibility, including things like mental health resources and support groups, that was largely negatively impacted with the onset of the pandemic. Many resources became even more inaccessible as organizations were forced to close and funding was scarce, leaving particularly vulnerable young people even more exposed to the negative consequences of the pandemic.



At this point, it is important to highlight that the experiences of the pandemic are not singularly negative for all young people. There are many young people who found online education more enjoyable than being in person, while others feel that they have been able to pursue hobbies or activities that they always wanted to but felt that they never had the time to. The research discussed in this Briefing Paper is centered around mental health well-being, which the pandemic has largely negatively impacted. Thus, it is these findings that are discussed here.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussing these impacts, pinpointing vulnerable groups within this broad population, and identifying the likely lingering consequences of the pandemic, is of utmost importance for the collective recovery of the nation.

We have learned how this pandemic impacted every facet of life for youth, and hope that this unique period of time is one where serious change can be made to build a stronger, more resilient community. This includes:

- prioritizing mental health resources,
- supporting vulnerable populations, and
- focusing on equity so that every person receives what they need not only to survive, but to thrive.

This age group is extremely critical, and life events that happen now have impacts that may linger well into adulthood. It is, therefore, necessary for a recovery strategy that has Canada's youth as one of the top priorities to be implemented. Our experience of the pandemic, like the experiences of many other young people came at a very critical moment, when we were at the beginnings of independence and self-discovery. We believe the needs of the youth must be prioritized even as cases continue to decrease and the country opens.



GRAPHIC NOVEL

BY TATIANNA SITOUNIS

This graphic novel *Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Canadian Youth Well-being: A Graphic Story* was inspired by the research conducted in this Briefing Paper.

The intent of the story is to provide the reader with something that they can relate to, no matter if the entire story or one part resonates with them. The pandemic impacted each of us in so many different ways. This graphic novel is meant to be a piece of solidarity that recounts just one story within the millions of others of how we can navigate and make it through periods of time that are the most daunting. Available on: https://issuu.com/thelaststraw/docs/graphic_booklet

IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CANADIAN YOUTH WELL-BEING

A Graphic Story



Welcome Georgia, a 21-year old university student. This is her story of the COVID-19 pandemic as she lived and experienced it.



January
2020

A weekly call from Mom checking in:



Mom: Hi sweetie. How are you?

Georgia: Hi, Mom. I'm okay. Classes are kicking back up now.

Mom: I bet. I wanted to ask, too, if you've heard about that new virus? Corona-something?

Georgia: Uhh, no I don't think so. I honestly don't watch the news much but what is it...

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



TATIANNA SITOUNIS

Tatianna is currently in her final year as an undergraduate student at McGill University, pursuing a major in Environment and Development, and minoring in Health Geography. Her academic pursuits highlight her passions surrounding environmental and social justice, as well as human health and community well-being.



THEO CHIARA

Theo is a 4th year Political Science and Philosophy student at McGill University and is originally from Philadelphia. He is interested in researching and analyzing issues of public policy, including social injustice, which is what led him to become an intern at the Participatory Cultures Lab. In his freetime, Theo enjoys watching new movies, hiphop music, and hiking new trails.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Briefing Paper was supported by the [Participatory Cultures Lab \(PCL\)](#) and the [Institute for Human Development and Well-being \(IHDW\)](#) in the Faculty of Education at McGill University. We are particularly grateful to Dr. Claudia Mitchell for her valuable feedback and Nesa Bandarchian Rashti for all of her support. We also thank Fatima Khan for her beautiful design. Finally, we would like to recognize the generous support of the McGill Faculty of Arts Internship Program.

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RECOMMENDED CITATION

Sitounis, T., & Chiara, T. (2021). *COVID-19 and the Well-being of Youth in Canada: From the Perspectives of Youth* [Briefing Paper]. McGill University, Participatory Cultures Lab.

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