

Policy Brief

Reducing Youth Mental Health Services Wait Times in Canada



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Fall 2014 Internship Cohort



In the fall of 2014 the IHSP welcomed eleven McGill students from across the University for a 14-week Internship. Training sessions focused on communicating research findings to the media or general public, and gaining insight into different disciplinary approaches. In addition to in-depth research projects carried out in collaboration with faculty and staff, interns devoted ten to fifteen hours to short policy projects on a topic of their choice. Students were asked to frame an issue, find at least two points of supporting evidence and develop rudimentary policy recommendations. The following document reflects the short timeframe given to students to complete this task, and may not be a polished product.

Please note the opinions reflected in this document do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

REDUCING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES WAIT TIMES IN CANADA

THE ISSUE

At any point in time, over 1 million Canadian children are experiencing mental disorders that make it difficult to function, such as anxiety, depression and ADHD. Less than one fifth will receive proper treatment. Prompt, effective and accessible mental health services are absolutely critical for the long-term healthy development of our youth.

STAKEHOLDERS

This brief builds on work by organizations such as Partners for Mental Health, as well as the Canadian Association for Mental Health, who have done an excellent job of raising awareness and lobbying for increased attention and resources for youth mental health services. This brief calls Health Canada to action, in consultation with the above groups as well as provincial and territorial governments.

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WHAT IS WRONG WITH CURRENT MENTAL HEALTH CARE?

Youth mental health services in Canada have been referred to as a “two-tier” system. This label refers to the fact that lower-income Canadians who seek psychiatric care for their children face long wait times, while those who can afford private care from psychologists or social workers do not.

In many cases, mental health service providers do not meet the minimum wait time standards. A study of youth mental health care in Canada found that over 4 in 10 participating agencies could “never” or “rarely” meet the 1 month wait time standard for scheduled care set by the Canadian Psychiatric Association. Current standards set by the Canadian Psychiatric Association are 24 hours for emergent care, 2 weeks for urgent care, and 1 month for scheduled care. We need to ensure that these standards are met. Mental health often deteriorates if timely care is not received.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Health Canada should introduce a comprehensive study on wait times for youth mental health services in Canada. The study should be followed up with an action plan that addresses wait times.

In order to effectively address excessive wait times, more data needs to be collected on the factors affecting wait time length. Current evidence on wait times is preliminary and is based on surveys with response rates from centres that are usually around 30 percent. It is difficult to assess the extent to which current wait times are generally an issue of administrative inefficiency or simple lack of resources.



For these reasons, the federal government should commission an independent study that does the following:

Implement data collection procedures that apply to all mental health centres in Canada that track appointments, wait times, no-shows, distribution of severity, organizational systems, stocks of resources etc.¹

Use this data to assess the relative efficiency of different administrative strategies, and determines whether more resources, or alternative resources are needed (e.g. more social workers)

Put in motion an action plan that acts on these findings, with a concrete time horizon for converging wait times so CPA standards.

- 1. Gather data on what is working and what is not**
- 2. Maximize efficiency and provide additional resources**
- 3. Develop an action plan and implement it**

A WORTHWHILE INVESTMENT

Youth mental health intervention is the kind of investment with immense social and economic returns. In the UK, improving a child's mental health rating has led to lifetime savings of as much as \$140 000 per child. Providing fast and efficient care to children prevents long-term costs to the government and to individuals from piling up. When it comes to youth mental health services, the government's direct economic interest is well aligned with the notion of equitable health care.

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