

Report: British Columbia mental health problems on the rise

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Mental health problems are on the rise in British Columbia, according to a recent report. The annual report by the province's health officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, found that perceptions of mental wellbeing among BC residents were among the lowest in the country, with increases in hazardous drinking and drug abuse also registered.

"Positive mental health has gone down," said Henry in a public statement. "This is one of the measures where we are actually falling behind in Canada and the rest of the world."

Henry noted that if the trend continues, the province would fail to meet its mental health target for 2023. In 2013, 69 percent of British Columbians said their mental health was good, and the government committed to increasing that figure to 80 percent within a decade. However, Henry now predicts it could actually fall to 65 percent.

Joseph Puyat, a public health researcher at the University of British Columbia who conducted a study on mental health conditions in BC in 2016, found that half of British Columbians who said they had depression could not access treatment. "I don't think that's good for our society to be encouraging people to be open to their symptoms and at the same time not providing adequate services," Puyat told *Global News*.

Henry's report noted an increase in kidney disease—an illness associated with alcohol consumption—and a decline in overall life expectancy, which has been linked to the opioid crisis that continues to mushroom in the province.

The report also found a sharp increase in hazardous alcoholic consumption among young women, which rose by 26 percent. Although male hazardous drinking rates rose more slowly at 5 percent, more males than females in overall terms engage in hazardous drinking.

"It is concerning because it's younger people that we're seeing with binge drinking, particularly young women," Henry stated.

Hazardous drinking is not merely a growing problem in BC. According to a recent report on the state of public health in Canada, the alcohol-attributed death rate for women increased by 26 percent between 2001 and 2017, compared with a roughly five percent increase over the same period for men.

"There's an increase in the rate of heavy drinking among women," observed Canada's chief public health officer who authored the report, Dr. Theresa Tam. "Men still have higher rates of alcohol consumption ... but women are catching up and this is really a worrying sign," she said.

Low income levels and poor working conditions are fundamental determinants of overall public health for men and women alike. In BC, recent years have witnessed a sharp decline in both.

The primarily female-dominated healthcare system has been beset by crisis for years. Nurses and medical staff complain of unsustainable workloads, systemic staffing shortages, injuries on the job, and the normalization of unpaid work. Seniors' care services—an expanding industry in the province—has one of the highest occupational injury rates, and acts of violence in the workplace are common. Such dire working conditions reflect some of the social outcomes of a decades-long campaign of privatization and defunding by a string of New Democratic Party and Liberal governments, including legislation that allows healthcare providers to lay off unionized workers and hire them back at lower wages.

For their part, healthcare unions have done nothing to stem the declining conditions in the industry. In the recent contracts for healthcare employees, the BC

Nurses Union and BC Hospital Employees Union agreed to pay “increases” below the rate of inflation. The BCNU abandoned the demand that more nurses be hired for short-staffed hospitals, a key demand of the rank-and-file during the bargaining process.

Employment insecurity and low wages are no less prevalent in traditionally male-dominated industries such as construction, manufacturing and transport, where men are twice as likely as women to die of unintentional injuries or due to preventable causes. An indication of the mental health effects of such terrible working conditions can be seen in the prevalence of drug abuse among men, who, in 2017, represented 82.8 percent of all illicit drug overdoses in BC. Over half of those who overdosed were employed, with half of those working in the trades at the time of their death.

The BC education sector also suffers from persistent staff shortages, student overcrowding, and a lack of resources. Even in the aftermath of a court-mandated hiring of teachers in 2016 after decades of government budget cutbacks, there are still 400 vacancies that are left unfilled in the province, leaving teachers overburdened and overstretched. Starting wages are considerably lower in BC, driving many teachers to seek work elsewhere.

The food and beverage industry, notorious for irregular work schedules and low wages, is also experiencing chronic labour shortages. Some restaurants, especially corporate chains, have introduced a no-tipping policy, effectively reducing servers’ income to barely above the legal minimum wage of \$12.65 an hour. This is well below the established livable wage of \$21.00 in Vancouver.

Domestically, women continue to be the primary caregivers for children and aging parents, limiting their work opportunities and increasing financial burdens. Daycare fees can be as high as rent, and there is a province-wide shortage of licensed child care facilities. Single parents are among the poorest in the province, with a median after-tax income of just \$17,710. It is therefore hardly surprising that half of children living in single-parent households are poor in BC.

The current NDP government, which is propped up by the Greens, has offered a vague promise to review how schools are funded, a process which could take years. More significant is the fact that the NDP has refused to overturn any of the brutal austerity measures

inflicted by the right-wing Liberals, who held power in Victoria for over 15 years until they lost the 2017 election.

The NDP’s bogus recent policy commitment to halve child poverty over the next five years is thoroughly cynical, given that the party waged its 2017 election campaign and has governed on the basis of the fiscal framework laid down by the pro-austerity and pro-corporate Liberals.

For everyone living in the region, the cost of housing and essential goods and services has skyrocketed. Vancouver is considered the second least-affordable city in the world, where many workers spend in upwards of 50 percent of their gross income on rent and utilities. BC boasts the lowest unemployment rate of all the provinces yet struggles with the highest poverty rates in the country, an indication that large numbers of workers are working poor.

The BC provincial health report states that “the health of British Columbians requires positive and supportive living and working contexts and conditions.” Evidently, these basic preconditions for social well-being cannot be met on the basis of a capitalist profit system that is producing vast wealth and riches for a tiny few at the top, and the financial starvation of public services and miserable living conditions for the vast majority of the population.

Similar indications of social hardship are evident across Canada. According to recent reports, almost 30 percent of Canadian workers are currently engaged in “gig work,” a third of whom reported that it was their only way to make an income. Roughly one in seven Canadians lives below the poverty line, and a fifth of Canadians with no children say their debt is overwhelming.



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