

Mental health crisis among Canada's youth exposes failure of Trudeau governments' pandemic response

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23 February 2022

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the response of Canada's ruling elite, led by the Federal Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, has been organized around the principle of defending corporate profits over the health, wellbeing and, indeed, the lives of the population.

The federal government and its provincial counterparts of all political stripes explicitly rejected the implementation of a Zero COVID policy. They refused to carry out mass testing and contact tracing, the shutdown of all non-essential production with full compensation for all workers affected, and the mobilization of the resources necessary to reinforce healthcare infrastructure and provide families with financial, social, and educational support to shelter at home.

Governments at all levels left health care workers, educators, students and their families, and the entire working class to fend for themselves without adequate personal protective equipment, including high-quality masks. Instead, the political elite concentrated on organizing massive bailouts to the banks and big business with virtually no strings attached. Only a pittance was provided to workers, and much of this support was quickly clawed back by the tax authorities. As a result, Canada's billionaires, millionaires and sections of the upper-middle class have seen their stock and real-estate portfolios balloon to unprecedented heights, even as more than 36,000 Canadians have succumbed to the virus.

The five successive waves of the virus have been driven by unscientific and premature school and workplace reopenings. Governments' primary concern was the need to step up the exploitation of the working class to guarantee corporate profits.

These homicidal policies have taken a devastating toll on the mental health of children and young people. The

possibility of getting sick and potentially getting Long COVID, as well as the danger of bringing home the virus from overcrowded schools and infecting family members, are constant fears for children. The cynical lies from politicians and the media about their desire to keep schools open at all costs to protect kids' "mental health" have left many young people feeling like their lives are worthless as far as the ruling class is concerned. The real reason governments were so determined to keep schools open was so they could function as a babysitting service for parents, whose labour power was needed by the capitalists to keep churning out profits.

Social isolation from friends and extra-curricular activities, a lack of robust online learning and social supports for students, and the general economic fallout from the pandemic have exacerbated the mental health challenges youth already face.

Community charity Toronto Foundation president and CEO Sharon Avery describes the mental health crisis as a "shadow pandemic." The charity's 2021 Vital Signs report documented "alarming increases in mental health challenges" for children and youth in Toronto over the previous two years based on data from hundreds of studies, interviews, and articles. The report showed trends of increased cases of eating disorders, feelings of loneliness, as well as emergency room visits for suicidal ideation at the Hospital for Sick Children located in Toronto.

Dr. Tyler Black, a British Columbia-based child psychiatrist, has noted that child admissions to hospital for attempted suicides increased most when lockdowns were lifted and the virus was spreading widely.

In an interview with CBC News, Avery explained, "We are concerned that long-term anxiety and depression become life-long illnesses and burdens for our children to

carry.” Underscoring both the tragic impact of decades of austerity on critical social and health infrastructure and services, and the urgency of the mental health crisis facing young people, she warned of the danger of the shadow pandemic “overrunning the mental health system, which was already overburdened, particularly for youth.”

According to a report by Children’s Mental Health Ontario (CMHO), the number of youth under 18 on waiting lists for mental health and addiction services more than doubled between 2017 and 2020 to 28,000. The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Waterloo Wellington, also in Ontario, reported a 40 percent increase in the number of youth accessing mental health services last year.

In Alberta, members of the Alberta Medical Association and the Alberta Psychiatric Association made an urgent call for a meeting with the provincial Health Minister Jason Copping. The doctors are advocating for significant increases in funding and an overhaul of the mental health system, including more preventative supports in schools.

Dr. Sterling Sparshu, section president of the child and adolescent psychiatry section with the Alberta Medical Association, told CBC earlier this month, “I’ve never seen so many kids suffering so badly. I’ve never seen so many families in need of hope and I’ve never seen so many colleagues struggling with the degree of burnout they are right now. The system is on the edge of collapse.”

The emergency room doctor at the Alberta Children’s Hospital in Calgary explained that the overburdened and underfunded mental health system has been overwhelmed with the additional stress of COVID. He pointed to a 200 percent increase in mental health related emergency department visits over the past decade. Since the start of the pandemic, admissions for attempted suicide have doubled. There are long waiting periods for community-based support programs, while average wait times for mental health treatment beds have jumped from 10 hours to 33 hours over the past two years.

A meta-analysis of 29 different studies involving 80,879 youth from across the globe published in August 2021 by the University of Calgary found that rates of depression and anxiety symptoms doubled during the pandemic. The analysis was printed in the medical journal *JAMA Pediatrics* under the title “Global Prevalence of Depressive and Anxiety Symptoms in Children and Adolescents During Covid-19.” The prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms were higher later in the pandemic, in older adolescents, and in girls.

Children’s Healthcare Canada (CHC), a national organization representing child health care providers, reported that Kids Help Phone received about 4.6 million calls in 2020. This was more than double the 1.9 million calls received by the toll-free distress hotline for young people in 2019. CHC also noted that children’s hospitals are recording higher volumes of young people being admitted for suicide attempts, substance abuse and complex eating disorders.

Rather than introducing the social and psychological supports that are desperately needed to combat these troubling developments, governments at all levels claimed that the answer was to force children to return to dangerous, overcrowded classrooms with almost no protections against COVID-19.

The strains and stresses on working class families are not limited to the younger generation. According to a study by the Angus Reid Institute published January 24, 36 percent of Canadians say they are struggling with their mental health. This was an increase from the 25 percent who said they were struggling in November, prior to the fifth wave driven by the Omicron variant, which has killed over 5,000 Canadians since the start of the year.

A Nanos Research poll commissioned by CTV and published in January found that 33.3 percent of respondents aged 18-34 sought help for their mental health during the pandemic, through either counselling or treatment. This was more than the 19.5 percent of 35-54 year-olds and 5.9 percent of those 55 and up. Nearly half of all respondents, including 64 percent of those aged 18-34, said their mental health had worsened since the start of the pandemic. This is a significant increase from April 2020, when 38 percent of all respondents reported a deterioration in their mental health.

Young adults, including post-secondary students, are also vulnerable to mental health challenges. International students have been particularly hard hit. A study of 1,000 international students from 84 countries conducted by The Conversation found that 55 percent of respondents were at risk of depression and about 50 percent were at risk of an anxiety disorder.



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