

Survey reveals mental health crisis among Canada's international students during pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has now claimed over 37,000 lives across Canada and millions worldwide. The more infectious Omicron sub-variant BA.2 threatens to unleash a catastrophic sixth wave as governments in every province and territory remove the few remaining mitigation measures left across the country.

The capitalist imperative of prioritizing profits over the protection of human life, on top of record-setting inflation, and years of savage austerity and privatization for health care, education and other public services have taken a terrible toll on the living conditions, physical wellbeing and mental health of workers and young people.

In addition to hospitalizations and deaths associated with COVID-19 and the debilitating symptoms of Long COVID, there are alarming signs of increased mental illness in the population, especially among young people.

A study of 1,000 international students in Canada from 84 countries conducted by researchers at Carlton University and published on The Conversation found that 55 percent of respondents were at risk of depression and about 50 percent were at risk of an anxiety disorder.

Difficulties accessing community and campus supports, online educational resources, culture shock, language barriers and being great distances from family and familiar surroundings, often in conditions of isolation, were cited by respondents as the main problems they faced. Many students said they suffered from loneliness, mental exhaustion, panic attacks and social isolation. International students found it hard to reach school counselling centres, with attempts to make appointments failing due to the high volume of students seeking these services.

The survey found that academic and financial stresses were among the greatest challenges students faced. Many

students said they had difficulty adjusting to online instruction. At the start of the pandemic, as universities shut down campuses and residences and moved to online learning in order to prevent community transmission of COVID-19, border restrictions prevented international students from returning to their home countries.

This stressful situation was compounded by the combined effects of loss of parental or spousal income and loss of wages from off-campus employment. Almost 80 percent of respondents reported that they were either “concerned” or “very concerned” about their ability to pay for education.

Surveyed students also pointed to the steep tuition costs as well as the reduction in quality of education, student services and access to campus amenities. As one respondent put it, “...now it feels like I’m paying \$10,000 per semester to teach myself.”

The precarious economic situation facing international students in Canada is being exacerbated by increases in the cost of living, including a 6.5 percent rise in food prices, forcing many to turn to food banks. Food Banks Canada recorded a 20 percent rise in food bank visits during the pandemic, including 1.3 million visits in the month of March 2021 alone—the largest increase since 2008. Guru Nanak Food Bank, which operates in Surrey, British Columbia, recently told CBC News that 1,500 of their 2,200 food bank members are students.

International students comprise a highly exploited section of the labour force, with many being paid below minimum wage, often in the service industry. They are often at the mercy of their employers, since they must obtain a letter from them if they wish to apply for permanent residency after completing their studies. This dependence makes it all but impossible for international students to challenge the brutal conditions of exploitation

they often face.

The number of international students enrolled in Canadian universities and colleges has grown rapidly over recent years, from 142,170 in fall 2010 to 338,782 in fall 2019, according to Statistics Canada.

University managements and governments alike have seen them as a lucrative form of revenue for the increasingly corporatized post-secondary institutions. In Ontario, Canada's most populous province, international students pay three to four times the tuition of domestic students. The average cost of tuition for undergraduate students in arts or sciences is \$23,510 compared to only \$6,327 for domestic students.

In 2015-16, the most recent year for which statistics are available, the tuition fees from international students accounted for \$1.28 billion in revenue, up from \$620 million in 2011-12. The federal government estimates the economic impact of international students in Canada at \$11 billion a year, and \$5.4 billion a year just in Ontario.

This revenue stream has become all the more crucial for university budgets as governments of all political stripes have taken the axe to public funding for post-secondary institutions since the 1990s. (See: "Ontario's Laurentian University declares insolvency, slashes hundreds of jobs, dozens of programs")

After forking out tens of thousands of dollars for the privilege of attending a university or college, international students are frequently exposed to unscrupulous employers only too eager to take advantage of their plight.

Brampton, Ontario resident Statinder Grewal originally came to Canada as a student. She was recently awarded just over \$16,000 after she filed an employment standards claim alleging \$18,000 in unpaid wages. The unpaid wages were accrued during a six-month period between June and December 2020, when she worked as a server, cook, cleaner, and cashier. Initially, she worked 12-hour shifts for \$60 a day, which increased to \$100 a day after six weeks.

She said she had agreed to the low wage because the offer included the provision of a letter to help secure her permanent residency. The situation became so unbearable that she contemplated suicide at one point. She told CTV News Ontario in a recent interview, "I went through a lot of things, because it's very sad. ... I gave my whole life for six months to them."

Ekam Sandhu, a recent graduate from Hanson College in New Westminster, British Columbia, had his work permit application denied, despite his classmates being approved, on the grounds that graduates from his college

are not eligible. He told Global News, "After studying so hard for 16 months and paying \$32,000 in fees, and now I'm not even allowed to work or stay in this country—it seems unfair to me."

Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), a federal government agency, sent a statement to Global News claiming that the BC campus in question was exempt from the program. However, according to Subbalakshmi Arunachalam Pillai, a regulated Canadian immigration consultant, that is not the case.

Pillai explained to Global News that although his denial seems to be an error due to inconsistencies in handling applications and pandemic-driven back-logs at IRCC, Sandhu's precarious situation is far from unique. Moreover, the application process can take months and hundreds of dollars and he no longer has status in Canada, which means he has no medical coverage or right to legally work. Explaining his situation, Sandhu added, "There is my mental health, there is my financial situation, I feel disturbed when I see how I am going to survive the next five, six months of my life without having any income and so many bills."

Pillai explained to Global News, "The processing time has been extended so much that some students are in the stage they are becoming suicidal."

Migrant workers on temporary work visas face the same indifference to their plight by government authorities and the same ruthlessness from unscrupulous employers that are permitted to house workers in unsafe conditions, which led to at least three deaths at the start of the pandemic. The plight of highly exploited migrant workers came to public attention once again in January, when a Jamaican agricultural worker was found dead in a hotel room during his compulsory two-week COVID-19 quarantine upon arrival in Canada. (See: "Damning Auditor General report exposes failure of Canada's government to protect migrant workers from COVID-19.")



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