

One-third of Ontario kids get the mental health care they need concludes Offord Centre study

News Apr 18, 2019 by [Joanna Frketch](#) ([hamilton-author/joanna-frketch/044A62BB-AAB4-4E6C-80BF-FE7AA660C4DD/](#)) (<mailto:jfrketch@thespec.com>) The Hamilton Spectator

More than one million Ontario children have a mental health issue but the vast majority get no specialized care concludes a Hamilton study.

Fewer than one-third of affected kids had contact with a mental health provider found the much-anticipated 2014 update of the 30-year-old [Ontario Child Health Study](#) (<https://www.thespec.com/news-story/3256788-mcmaster-gets-13-2-million-for-health-research/>) (OCHS).

A big part of the problem is that care is funded and provided by a patchwork quilt of organizations with no effective governance or accountability.

"Underfunding of children's mental health services persists — evidenced by gaps in crucial services and by unacceptable wait times for community-based services, in turn contributing to increasing emergency room use," warns the researchers in the [Canadian Journal of Psychiatry](#) (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0706743719830033>). "Children's mental health services are also not tied to legislated mandates or required funding, in turn resulting in a continuous erosion of budgets."

The rate of one in five kids affected remains the same as the [original OCHS done in 1983](#) (<https://www.thespec.com/living-story/4168528-one-in-five-children-has-a-mental-health-issue/>) despite worry that mental health would be threatened by changes in demographics such as increased income inequality, family dissolution, discrimination of visible minorities and neighbourhood poverty.

"Despite concerns about an 'epidemic' of mental ill health among children and youth, another key finding is that the overall prevalence of mental disorders did not change between 1983 and 2014," stated an [editorial](#) (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0706743719834483>) by Dr. Scott Patten, chair in pediatric mental health at the University of Calgary.

The [entire issue of the medical journal](#) (<https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/cpab/current>) was dedicated to the study of 10,802 children aged 4 to 17 years done by the Offord Centre for Child Studies affiliated with McMaster University and McMaster Children's Hospital. It included eight papers primarily funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the Ontario government.

The research revealed key and unexpected differences from the original study of 3,290 children.

The most controversial is likely to be that poor kids living in affluent neighbourhoods are more likely to have mental health issues and behavioural problems. Potential reasons given are unfavourable social comparisons, threats to self-esteem, lower social status, marginalization and a lack of resources to cope with low-income issues.

"This is going to be something contentious because a lot of our urban policies have been focused on moving families that are poor out of poor neighbourhoods and into more affluent neighbourhoods and there may be some downsides to doing that," said Michael Boyle, co-principal investigator of both the 1983 and 2014 versions.

In fact the study didn't find poverty itself resulted in a higher mental health risk. Instead, it was the environment kids grew up in that had an effect.

"That's one thing we were a bit surprised at," said Boyle. "If you just look at poverty on its own, the link with mental health challenges isn't as strong as we would have thought ... However, they can be at risk if they are in environments that put them at risk."

The study suggests combating antisocial behaviour in neighbourhoods could be a far more effective tool as living in a harsh place with high rates of crime and bullying increases mental health risks.

Another surprise finding is that immigrant children have fewer mental health issues with the number dropping by almost 50 per cent since 1983. The study suggests this may be due to how Canada selects newcomers resulting in a healthier and better-educated population.

"There has been a lot of concern expressed around difficulty with immigrants," said Boyle. "Well, in this country that is not the case ... The risk of disorder among immigrant children is substantially lower."

However, newcomers needing mental health care are less likely to get the help they need.

Other substantial changes from 1983 include:

- Children living in urban centres are less likely to have mental health issues than those living in smaller or rural areas;
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- A steep increase in anxiety and depression among teens;
- A substantial drop in the number of boys with conduct disorder which involves getting into fights, breaking social norms and criminal activity.

Among the most concerning findings was a sharp rise in the number of parents who perceive their children need mental health care to about 19 per cent in 2014 from 7 per cent.

"We are unable to determine if this increase represents better mental health literacy, a greater willingness to disclose and seek help for mental health concerns or more children and youth with mental disorders who are not in contact with mental health services," states the [research](#) (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0706743719830035>).

The dire consequences of gaps in care are significant considering eight per cent of children are thinking about suicide while four per cent attempt it.

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jfrketch@thespec.com

905-528-3349 | @Jfrketch

jfrketch@thespec.com (<mailto:jfrketch@thespec.com>)

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jfrketch@thespec.com

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Joanna Frketch is a reporter with The Hamilton Spectator and thespec.com, covering the health beat. She lives in Hamilton and has been a journalist for more than 20 years, earning numerous Ontario Newspaper Awards including journalist of the year. She was also a National Newspaper Award finalist. Her Hamilton investigations have revealed post dysfunction among cardiac surgeons, dangerously low vaccination rates, students increasingly failing math standardized testing and hospital overcrowding.

Email: jfrketch@thespec.com (mailto:jfrketch@thespec.com) [Twitter \(https://twitter.com/jfrketch\)](https://twitter.com/jfrketch)

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