

Evidence to Inform Policy

Mental Health Research Canada's 2019 Pre-Budget Submission to
the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance

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Recommendation

A federal investment in Mental Health Research Canada of \$30 million over 5 years to fund mental health research advancing Canada's Gender Equality Goals and support mental health for Indigenous Peoples, LGBTQ2+ identified individuals and newcomers to Canada.

Executive Summary

Canadians are fortunate to be among the healthiest people in the world. However, inequalities mean some in Canada do not have the same opportunities for good physical and mental health. As there is no health without mental health, pursuit of good mental health for all builds a more productive and more equitable Canada.

The economic burden of mental illness in Canada is estimated at \$51 billion per year and each week half a million employed Canadians miss work for mental health reasons. Individuals with severe mental illnesses face an unemployment rate of 70 to 90%¹. LGBTQ2+ and gender-focused research also shows challenges such as increased risk of suicide for LGBTQ2+ youth.²

Research aids mental health policy-makers to address these challenges. In order to prioritize mental health for vulnerable groups including LGBTQ2+, Indigenous Peoples and newcomers, MHRC recommends:

- **A federal investment in Mental Health Research Canada (MHRC) of \$30 million over 5 years to fund mental health research advancing Canada's Gender Equality Goals and support mental health for Indigenous Peoples, LGBTQ2+ identified individuals and newcomers to Canada.**

MHRC will seek to leverage this annual federal investment of \$6 million to generate matching funds from other public and private-sector sources leading to innovative public-private partnerships.

MHRC is grateful for the opportunity to present these ideas to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance and would welcome the opportunity to appear before the committee to discuss this submission in more detail.

About Mental Health Research Canada

Mental Health Research Canada is a national charitable organization that supports mental health research at universities, teaching hospitals and research institutions across Canada. MHRC is answering the call for a leader on Canada's mental health research agenda, posed in 2012's *Changing Directions, Changing Lives: The Mental Health Strategy for Canada* from the Mental Health Commission of Canada.

MHRC is well-positioned to lead this agenda, with a five-decade history funding mental health research in Ontario under our predecessor organization, the Ontario Mental Health Foundation.

MHRC is uniquely qualified to coordinate a national mental health research funding process, as a collaborative, complementary charity. MHRC works in partnership with public and private stakeholders to identify mental health research priorities.

This submission was developed through consultation with senior policy advisors in the Minister of Health's office and reflects the federal government's commitment to Gender Equality Goals and support for Indigenous Peoples, LGBTQ2+ identified individuals and newcomers to Canada.

MHRC is enthusiastic to work with government and provide evidence to support any future mental health policies of the government.

Issue

Mental health matters to Canadians of all walks of life. One in five Canadians will experience mental health problems this year which will ripple through their life, affecting loved ones, caregivers and communities. Vulnerable populations also experience dramatic differences in achieving and maintaining good mental health, influenced in part by social and economic causes.

Mental illness in Canada is costing an estimated \$51 billion per year, including health care costs, indirect productivity costs and reductions quality of life. This impact dwarfs the economic burden of other public health concerns, such as physical inactivity (\$4.3 billion per year⁴) or heart failure (\$2.8 billion per year⁵). Globally, mental illness accounts for more of the burden of disease than all cancers combined.⁶ Statistics highlight the importance of mental health research through a gender-based lens:

- Schizophrenia and other psychotic illnesses impact women and men differently, as onset typically occurs later for women than men, while men experience higher occurrence rates. Treatment and outcomes can vary greatly based upon gender.⁷
- Maternal mental health remains an area of high concern with complicated issues such as perinatal depression facing women, while the economic impact of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder is estimated at \$2 billion per year.

- A recent Ipsos report found women to be at higher risk of mental health problems over their lifetime.⁸

Canadians identifying as LGBTQ2+ experience higher rates and impact of mental health problems:

- The rate of anxiety, mood and post-traumatic stress disorder, heavy alcohol use, and co-occurring disorders is twice the national average.⁹
- LGBTQ2+ youth face approximately 14 times the risk of suicide and substance abuse as their peers. Beyond health and quality of life consequences for this vulnerable population, this period is when many post-secondary and career paths begin and could have long-term implications for Canada's economic future.
- 77% of trans people in an Ontario-based survey reported seriously considering suicide and 45% had attempted suicide. Trans youth and those who had experienced physical or sexual assault were found to be at greatest risk.²

These challenges are not insurmountable. Through targeted investment, Canada can move the dial on improving mental health, not just for vulnerable groups, but for all.

Solution

MHRC shares the Government of Canada's commitment to advancing equality and participation in the economy through gender-based analysis. Our research program will provide evidence to inform mental health policy and ensure Canada is a world-class destination for mental health researchers, including LGBTQ2+, Indigenous and female-identified investigators.

Researchers from across Canada will be invited to submit research proposals addressing mental health from a perspective of gender, Indigenous Peoples, LGBTQ2+ identified individuals and newcomers to Canada.

An independent, national merit panel comprised of senior investigators, and stakeholders – ranging from people with lived experience, family members and caregivers – will convene to review, rank and recommend for funding the top researchers from across Canada. PhD, fellows and senior investigators at Canadian universities, teaching hospitals and research institutes will be eligible to apply for multi-year grants ranging from \$25,000 to \$75,000 per year. Knowledge translation will be a mandatory requirement for each project to ensure that research can be used to improve the lives of Canadians.

MHRC is filling a gap identified in *Fit for Purpose: The External Review of Pan-Canadian Health Organizations (2018)*. This report suggested that PCHOs might not be best suited to conduct research, noting:

“Some informants even questioned the appropriateness of PCHOs undertaking any research at all, whether or not they commission such work from academics through

competitive processes, stating that research dollars should not be part of the PCHOs' core budgets."

MHRC can fill the federal government's need for mental health research to inform policy outside of the PCHO framework. This is our sole mandate, as a collaborative, knowledgeable charity that can coordinate mental health research which aligns with the Federal Government's priorities.

The PCHO External Review also noted that only a small portion of CIHR's overall budget (eight per cent) was applied to health service and policy research and the portion earmarked for mental health research in this field is smaller still. With CIHR's Spring 2018 Project Grant applicants having an overall success rate of 14%, it is clear that many excellent research projects with policy implications could go unfunded.

MHRC currently funds important gender-based research including MHRC Studentship recipient Carley Pope, PhD Candidate at Lakehead University. She studies preventative strategies for postpartum depression, a serious mental health disorder that affects up to 20% of women who have recently given birth. Postpartum depressive symptoms negatively affect the day-to-day lives of mothers and can be adverse in the development of infants.

This submission embraces Canada's *Gender Equality Goals*, including:

- *Education and Skills Development*: by supporting more diversified educational paths and career choices
- *Economic Participation and Prosperity*: better gender balance across occupations, by funding women in natural and applied sciences.
- *Poverty Reduction, Health and Well Being*: by funding research through a GBA+ lens, leading to improved mental health and a higher proportion of adults with high psychological well-being, by gender.

MHRC will work collaboratively to avoid duplication and create partnerships across sectors to maximize funding and further these important goals.

Recommendation

The federal government made a strong commitment to fundamental research in 2018's Budget. Now is the time to support gender, LGBTQ2+, newcomer and Indigenous-focused mental health research with the same forward-thinking commitment and ensure that all Canadians can experience equality through opportunities. The economy can work for everyone, and as stigma is challenged, Canadians agree:

- 67% of Canadians would treat mental and physical health equally
- 27% of Canadians think mental health conditions should be given a higher rather than lower funding priority (4%) than physical health conditions.¹⁰

To prioritize gender, LGBTQ2+, Indigenous and newcomer-based mental health issues for research, MHRC recommends:

- **A federal investment in Mental Health Research Canada of \$30 million over 5 years to fund mental health research advancing Canada's Gender Equality Goals and support mental health for Indigenous Peoples, LGBTQ2+ identified individuals and newcomers to Canada.**

Our vision is a Canada with the best mental health for all. With the support of the Canadian government, we can move closer to making it a reality.

Impact

MHRC will fund mental health research to improve the lives of all Canadians, while fostering career advancement for researchers. Along with furthering Canada's reputation as global leader in mental health, funding this request would create lasting impact:

- Supporting gender, LGBTQ2+, Indigenous Peoples and newcomer-focused mental health research by funding experienced and emerging researchers.
- Dedicated funding to priority topics through PhD studentships, fellowships and grants.
- Dedicated funding for projects led by women, LGBTQ2+ and Indigenous-identified principal investigators.
- Representation will be a key priority, LGBTQ2+, Indigenous and gender-inclusive review panels that ensure the voices of all stakeholders are heard.

MHRC has a strong history of supporting woman-led research projects. Through our predecessor organization over 80% of studentships, and 62% of total funded grants were awarded to women. These results occurred through a highly-competitive and blind peer-review process.

Conclusion

We face a future in which the next three decades could see the total economic cost of mental health problems at \$2.5 trillion.¹

The increased participation of women has accounted for approximately one third of Canada's real gross domestic product per capita growth over the last forty years. The evidence shows that supporting careers and mental health research through GBA+ develops a more productive economy that works for everyone, regardless of gender.

Our country cannot wait. Effective, evidence-based mental health research and opportunities for academics to flourish will advance Canada's Gender Equality Goals and help all Canadians be productive and achieve their best mental health.

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