



Written Submission to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women

November 2022

About Us

Founded in 1922, the Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS) is a voluntary professional association that represents more than 3,600 paediatricians, paediatric subspecialists, paediatric residents, and others who work with and care for children and youth.

Mental Health of Young Women and Girls

Thank you for undertaking this incredibly important study on the mental health issues experienced by young women and girls and for committing to consider ways in which the Government can strengthen mental health supports for all young women and girls in Canada.

Mental health problems are common among children and youth. Yet while emotional, behavioural, and psychosocial problems serious enough to disrupt functioning and development affect approximately 1.2 million children and youth in Canada, fewer than 20% receive appropriate treatment.¹

Even before the pandemic, children and youth often faced long wait lists and limited access to quality mental health care. Fragmented services and supports, insufficient accountability measures and inequitable access are common problems that have left many young people languishing for years with little improvement to well-being.

The direct and indirect effects of the pandemic have significantly eroded the mental health and wellness of many Canadians, with specific and unique impacts on children and youth. Children's hospitals across the country are reporting increased – and in some cases unprecedented – numbers of youth presenting with anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, substance misuse and eating disorders.²

While the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health and well-being of people of all sex and gender identities, young women and girls have been uniquely impacted by the rise in eating disorders we have seen not only across the country, but globally.³

Canadian Paediatric Surveillance Program: Anorexia nervosa

The Canadian Paediatric Surveillance Program (CPSP), a joint project of the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Canadian Paediatric Society, launched a study in September 2021 that will run until August 2023 to determine the minimum incidence rate of first-time hospitalizations for anorexia nervosa during the COVID-19 pandemic, as compared to the three years prior to the pandemic. The study focuses on patients 11 to 18 years of age who have been hospitalized with a primary admitting diagnosis of anorexia nervosa for the first time.

¹ Mental Health Commission of Canada. Children and Youth: <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/what-we-do/children-and-youth/> (Accessed November 8, 2022).

² Children First Canada. Kids are in Crisis – Canada's Top Advocates and Experts Unite to Declare #codePINK, May 2021: <https://childrenfirstcanada.org/code-pink/kids-are-in-crisis-canadas-top-advocates-and-experts-unite-to-declare-codepink/> (Accessed November 8, 2022).

³ Hartman-Munick SM, Lin JA, Milliren CE, et al. Association of the COVID-19 Pandemic with Adolescent and Young Adult Eating Disorder Care Volume. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2022 Nov 7. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2022.4346.

This study is designed to address an important and timely paediatric health issue with significant scientific and public health importance by providing valuable data on the incidence, clinical characteristics, severity and key individual, family system, and other pandemic-related factors thought to be driving the observed increase in the number and severity of children and adolescents with anorexia nervosa seeking care at hospitals across the country.

In an analysis of very preliminary data collected between September-December 2021, 41 cases were verified as meeting the case definition and an additional 47 cases were pending verification (excluding cases reported in Québec).⁴ Over 90 percent of these cases were female and cases ranged in age from 11 to 17 years. Most cases (66%) were aged 14-17 years and the remainder (34%) were aged 11 to 13 years.⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic was identified by the reporting physician as a precipitating factor in the development of anorexia nervosa in almost half (49%) of cases and was identified as having precipitated hospitalization in 37% of cases.⁶

Recommendations

Paediatricians across Canada are seeing unprecedented numbers of children and adolescents with anorexia nervosa presenting to their practices. Hospitalizations due to pediatric anorexia nervosa increased 63% and 132% at Alberta Children’s Hospital and at SickKids respectively in the first year of the pandemic as compared to the previous six years.⁷ Several pandemic-related factors that may be contributing to this increase include heightened feelings of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic symptoms, a lack of control, disruption and restrictions to daily routines, closures of schools and recreational facilities, loss of regular connections with peers, and loss of extracurricular and social activities.⁸

The CPSP study [“First-time hospitalizations for anorexia nervosa during the COVID-19 pandemic”](#) will help to determine the minimum incidence rate of first-time hospitalizations during the COVID-19 pandemic as compared to the three years prior to the pandemic. Even the very preliminary data analyzed to date demonstrates that the pandemic was identified as a precipitating factor in the development of anorexia nervosa serious enough to require hospitalization in almost half of reported cases.

Despite having the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric disorder,⁹ eating disorders often fall between the cracks of mental health and medicine, as they are complex biopsychosocial illnesses that do not fit neatly into the silos of mental or physical health. As such, they have been overlooked and underfunded for years and the status quo is no longer tenable.

⁴ Canadian Paediatric Surveillance Program, Canadian Paediatric Society. CPSP 2021 Results. Ottawa, 2022: 27-29.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Vyver E, Han AX, Dimitropoulos G et al. The COVID-19 Pandemic and Canadian Pediatric Tertiary Care Hospitalizations for Anorexia Nervosa. J Adolesc Health. 2022 Oct 3. S1054-139X(22)00541-9. doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2022.07.003.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Targeted funding to the provinces and territories to support hospital-based services and community-based paediatric eating disorder programs and supports is needed to help meet current and future needs and ensure that all young women and girls can access the services and supports they need, when and where they need them. National mental health standards that include specific metrics relating to treatment for eating disorders could also be of significant benefit and would help to reduce health inequities and variabilities in access to care across the country. Unfortunately, most of the recommendations and evidence from the 2014 report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women "[Eating Disorders Among Girls and Women in Canada](#)" continue to apply today. The fact that the scope of the problem has only worsened in the years since its publication only further highlights the need for urgent and dedicated action now.