

The Impact of COVID-19 on Youth Mental Health



Tracy Vaillancourt, Ph.D. FRSC
Full Professor

Tier 1 Canada Research Chair, School-Based Mental Health and Violence Prevention

Counseling Psychology, Faculty of Education

School of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences

Brain and Mind Institute, Faculty of Medicine

Centre of Health Law, Policy, and Ethics, Faculty of Law

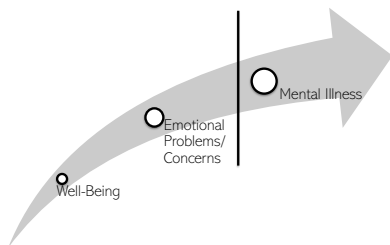
University of Ottawa



Youth mental health before COVID-19



Continuum of Mental Health



Distress and/or disability differentiates children across continuum

Children do not 'code switch' out of a MD

- exists across a variety of contexts
- entrenched



Scope of the Problem

- 15-22% have serious MH problems
- >20% report experiencing 2 or more psychological symptoms per week



Vaillancourt & Boylan, 2021

Canada's youth fare miserably in the area of well-being

- 30th out of 38 rich countries
- 31st on mental well-being



Risk is not equally shared

- Socioeconomically disadvantaged youth
 - 25-39% higher for children of low-income families
- Girls more affected than boys
 - exceptions are externalizing problems and ASD



Intolerance for Discomfort

Guhn et al., 2020; Vaillancourt & Boylan, 2021

- Being insulated from distress and discomfort increases anxiety in the future
- Higher accommodations associated with:
 - more severe symptoms
 - more impairment
 - poorer Tx outcomes

Lack of autonomy

- Youth are influenced by their environments more than adults
 - have less autonomy for their decisions
 - influences presentation of impairment or symptoms



Service Gaps

Most youth do not receive services

- Only 20%



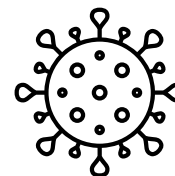
Youth with severely impairing mental disorders received Tx at 10% rate

- ADHD and behavioural disorders

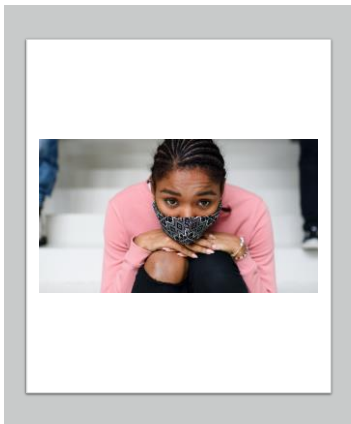
Recent immigrants to Canada are less likely to access mental health care

Durbin et al., 2015; Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2017; Merikangas et al., 2011

Disturbing trend pre-dates pandemic



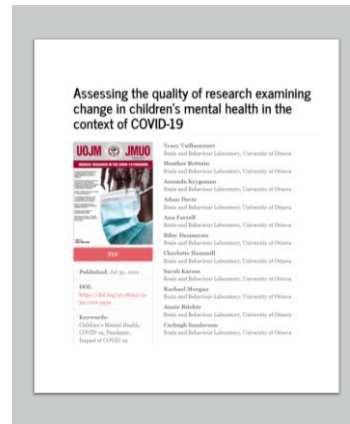
Since COVID-19



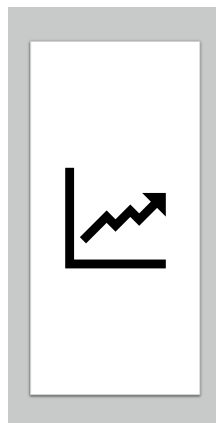
Vaillancourt et al., 2021

Gold standard

- Longitudinal studies
 - Ideally population-based
 - Assess real change
- Meta-analyses
 - Collated effects



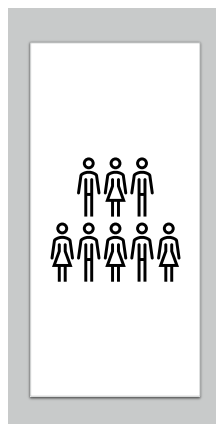
- Not everyone is suffering but a lot are...
 - differential exposure and vulnerability
- ↙
- differential outcomes



Eating Disorders

- Across Canada, children's hospitals experienced a **60% increase** admissions related to EDs
 - Children's Healthcare Canada, 2021
- In Ontario, admissions for EDs were **223% above capacity** in June 2021 for the province's five paediatric hospitals
 - Kohly, 2021
- In Western Australia, a **104% increase** in ER visits and admissions was observed at beginning of pandemic for children with anorexia nervosa compared with three previous years
 - Haripersad et al., 2021

- Longitudinal studies consistently point to notable **increases** in symptoms of anxiety and depression

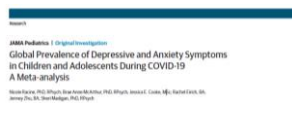


- Population-based studies also support that youth are not faring well during the pandemic

Barendse et al., 2021; De France et al., 2021; Hafstad et al., 2021; Magson et al. 2021; Rosen et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020

Mental Health of Children and Young People Study

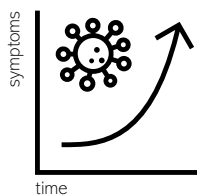
- increase in MH problems in UK
- 10.8% in 2017
- 16.0% in July 2020
- adolescent girls = 27.2%
 - Newlove-Delgado et al., 2021



- Clinically elevated symptoms were higher in studies collected later in the pandemic and in girls.
 - 1 in 4 youth experiencing clinically elevated depression symptoms
 - 1 in 5 youth experiencing clinically elevated anxiety symptoms

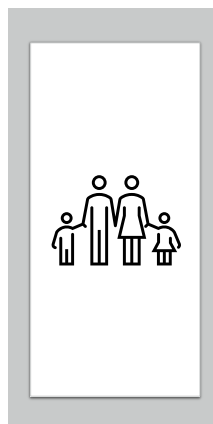
No Canadian population-based studies 🇨🇦🇨🇦

Why this level of impairment?



• Parental death

- Estimated and projected parental deaths from US are striking
- 17.5% to 20.2% increase in parental deaths due to COVID-19
 - Kidman et al., 2021



Family Violence and Maltreatment

- 10-50% increase in domestic violence helpline calls in some countries during the pandemic
 - WHO, 2020
- increase in child abuse-related factors and decrease in police reports and referrals to child protective services
 - Cappa & Jijon, 2021
 - Katz et al., 2021
- 3.34% increase in foster care placements due to maltreatment
 - Musser et al., 2021

Perfect Storm

- Child abuse risk increased due to...
 - increased parent-child conflict
 - employment loss
 - food insecurity
 - loneliness



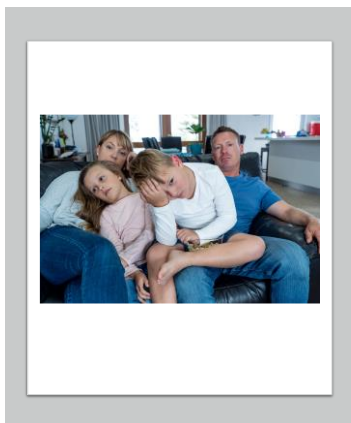
Rodriguez et al., 2021

Why decline in reporting?



- Educators are the primary reporters of child abuse and neglect
- With children and youth out of purview of teachers, this safeguard is no longer in place for many vulnerable students
 - Vaillancourt et al., 2021

Social Isolation



The need to belong is a fundamental human motivator

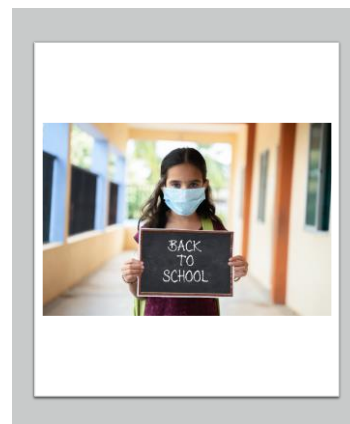


The priority of relationships

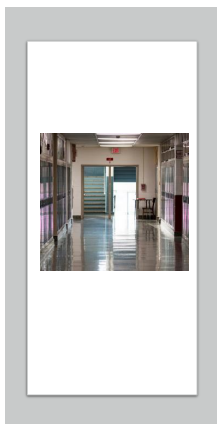
- Social ties are not just a luxury, they are essential for optimal development
- Evidence from social deprivation...
 - COVID-19 and school closures
 - Natural experiment



School Closures



- UNESCO's COVID-19 global monitoring of school closures
 - over 90% percent of the world's 1.6 billion students were impacted by school closures
 - half of the world's students were still affected by partial or full school closures, as of June 2021



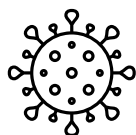
Pre-COVID-19, loneliness increased risk of...

- Poorer physical health
- Poorer mental health
- Lower academic achievement



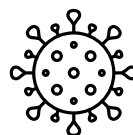
Gini & Pozzoli, 2013; Moore et al., 2017; Mulvey et al., 2018; Samara et al., 2021; Wentzel et al., 2021

During COVID-19



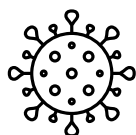
- For Belgian teens, loneliness had a greater negative impact on happiness than feelings of anxiety
 - Cauberghes et al., 2021

During COVID-19

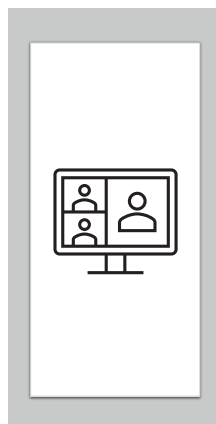


- For British teens, loneliness was associated with symptoms of mental health difficulties which was more pronounced in teens who had a poor relationship with their parents
 - Cooper et al., 2021

During COVID-19

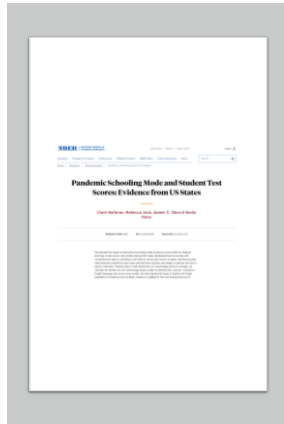


- For German children aged 9 to 18, the perception of social support was lower during the pandemic than before the pandemic and this impacted their sense of well-being
 - Vogel et al., 2021



- Evidence is accumulating on the negative impact of school closures on social, emotional, and academic development
 - Duckworth et al., 2021
 - Engzell et al., 2021
 - Tan, 2021

- Estimated impact of district-level schooling mode on test scores.
 - in-person vs hybrid or distance learning
- **Pass rates declined** compared to prior years; declines were larger in districts with less in-person instruction.
- Moderated by race and free and reduced price lunch eligibility.

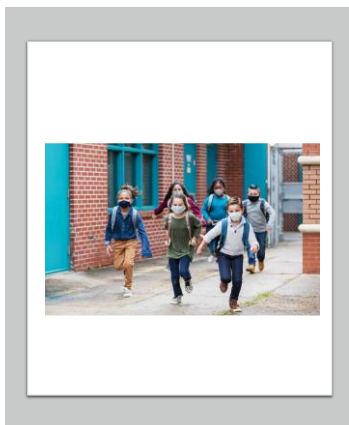


Schools must be the first to open and the last to close

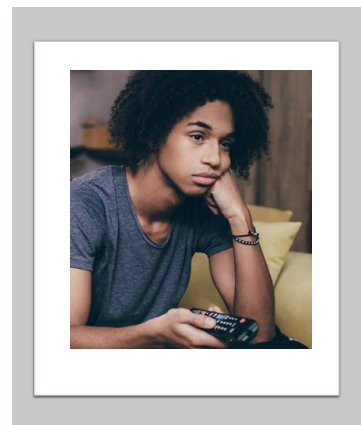


This block contains a collage of images and text. On the left, a silhouette of a runner is shown against a sunset sky. Below it, text from "theglobeandmail.com" states: "Physical activity—the forgotten core area of child development during the pandemic". On the right, a tweet from DrTracyVaillancourt (@vaillancourt_dr) dated 2021-07-16 says: "I predicted this would happen. We need to do a better job at retaining girls in sports. The benefits are enormous." Below the tweet is a photograph of a girls' soccer team in red and yellow uniforms. Another caption from "theglobeandmail.com" below the photo reads: "Thousands of Canadian girls not committed to playing sports post-COVID, study finds".

How can we fix it?



Create a national **school-based** mental health strategy



Why school-based mental health?

- Represent prominent sector for national strategy
 - established relationship teachers, administrators, and support staff have with children, youth, and their families

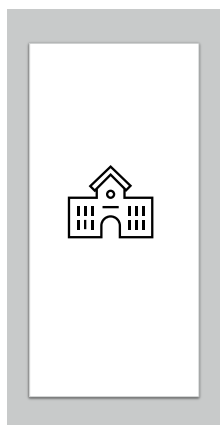


- Have capacity to increase awareness about...
 - mental health
 - identify students who are at-risk
 - provide prevention and early intervention services
 - connect students with community services



Vaillancourt et al., 2021; see also Halladay et al., 2020; Kutcher & Wei, 2020; NASEM, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013

Vaillancourt et al., 2021; see also Halladay et al., 2020; Kutcher & Wei, 2020; NASEM, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013



Already doing the job, and doing it well.

Schools are...

- first point of contact for students with MH concerns
- most common setting for the provision of MH services in Canada and elsewhere

Georgiades et al., 2019; Canada; Costello et al., 2014; Green et al., 2013; Merikangas et al., 2011; Ryan et al., 2014

- Also need to invest in the social-emotional development of children and youth through school-based **social-emotional learning** approaches.
 - Royal Society of Canada, 2021
 - National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021

Mattering

- Because youth are facing so many unprecedented and prolonged stressors...
- Now more important than ever for youth to feel that they matter
 - Royal Society of Canada, 2021
 - National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021
 - Vaillancourt et al., 2021



Brief Article

In-Person Versus Online Learning in Relation to Students' Perceptions of Mattering During COVID-19: A Brief Report

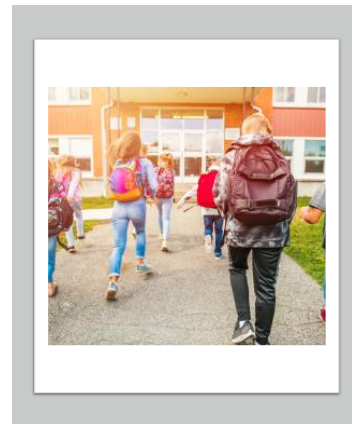
Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment
2021, Vol. 9(5) 1–11
© The Author(s) 2021
SAGE
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0734263121105368
jpe.sagepub.com/home/jpe

Tracy Vaillancourt^{1,2}, Heather Brittain¹, Amanda Krygman¹, Ann H. Farrell¹, Debra Pepler⁴, Sally Landon⁵, Zacharie Saint-Georges^{6,7}, and Irene Vitoroulis²



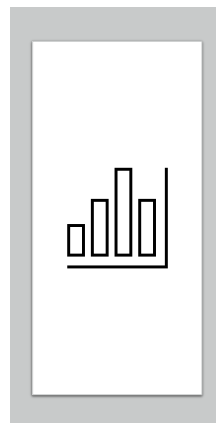
Caring + High Expectations

- High expectation with appropriate support leads to the best outcomes
- Structure + Support → Best Outcomes



Take steps to reduce inequality

Access to the internet should be free in Canada



Invest in comprehensive population-based follow-up studies



Prioritize recess and other forms of breaks as an essential part of the school day and ensure that every school is equipped with appropriate space for learning and socializing outdoors.





Be vigilant

Pandemic



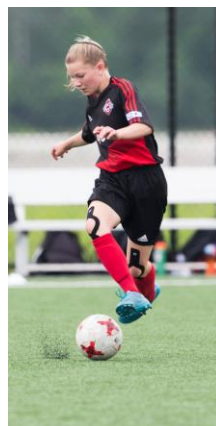
Endemic

If you want to improve the mental health of youth...

- focus on their fundamental need to belong
- prioritize SEL and development
- delivery programs where they are – at school
- keep schools open



“focusing on **healthy relationships** is one of the best ways to promote healthy development for youth”



Contact information

tracy.vaillancourt@uottawa.ca

[@vaillancourt_dr](https://twitter.com/vaillancourt_dr)