

Mental Health and Addiction in COVID-19 and Climate Change Policy Brief

Key Messages

- COVID-19 and Climate Change both have significant impacts on young people's mental health.
- Stay-at-home regulations caused unintended impacts on youth and children through disruptions in education and mental health services.
- Social inclusion and promotion of citizen productiveness through employment, housing, and the inclusion of nature is an effective form of treatment for addiction, and mental health issues.

Executive Summary

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing mental health issues due to drastic lifestyle changes. Similarly, the Climate Change crisis also negatively impacts mental health. Both these global emergencies have an impact on young people's well being and have implications not only on negative short-term consequences but also on long-term mental health outcomes. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has also allowed opportunities for reflection on how social constructs have a role in mental health and in addiction; the lessons from this knowledge can be used to take further action in improving planetary health.

Action from policymakers is needed in areas of mental health and addiction through recovery plans in collaboration with young people perspectives on mental health and the restructuring of addiction treatment. A post-COVID recovery demands we build back better to promote well-being and resilience.

Recommended actions are based on information presented by researchers during the webinar series "Learning and Relearning

for Planetary Health: Early Lessons from a Pandemic¹.

Importance of the problem

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing youth mental health was already an important public health concern. Mental illness affects about 1.2 million of Canadian children and youth and prevalence rises to about 7.5 million by age 25 (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021). Stay-at-home regulations produced many unintended impacts on the mental health of young people and have exacerbated pre-existing mental health illnesses. These impacts are due to educational disruptions, social isolation, reduced opportunities to play, and loss (or pause in) of access to health, support, and mental health services (Wang et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2020; Samji, 2020). Those in low-income families, neglectful homes, and in rural or remote communities have a higher chance of being impacted by these regulations; highlighting the importance of understanding how different groups of people are being affected (Samji, 2020).

These unintended impacts can put younger people at higher chances of negative mental health outcomes, especially since they are at peak periods of physical and emotional development

¹ On June 3rd, 2020, a webinar titled, "*Building it back better, mental health and substance use in the time of COVID-19*" was presented as a contribution to a series on "*Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health*". The presenters were Dr. Hasina Samji, an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University and a Senior Scientist at the BC Centre for Disease Control, and Dr. Julian Somers, a Professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University.

A recording of this webinar session and presenter slides can be accessed through this webpage: <https://learningforplaneta.wixsite.com/website/webinar-8>

(Samji, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic also demonstrates the need to rethink our social systems to better address addiction treatment and recovery. Social isolation and exclusion have demonstrated links with addiction and can have significant impacts on mental health (Somers, 2020).

Climate Change is another global crisis that has impacts on the health and well-being of young people. The WHO estimates that young people will suffer more than 80% of illnesses, injuries, and deaths attributable to climate change, such as higher chances of heat-related illnesses and exposures to environmental toxins from increasing global temperature (Sanson et al., 2019; McMichael et al., 2003; Berry et al., 2014). In addition to physical health, Climate Change can also impact mental health outcomes among young people (Samji, 2020; Sanson et al., 2019). The parallel impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and Climate Change must be mitigated and addressed to build back better in a post-COVID future.

Background Information

Dual impacts of COVID-19 and Climate Change on the mental health of young people

Research studies worldwide have undertaken work to understand the impacts of stay-at-home regulations on the mental health of young people and caregivers. In the UK, the [Co-SPACE study](#) found that 80% of families that had been receiving mental health support previously had stopped or had it postponed. (Waite et al., 2020; Samji, 2020). In Spain & Italy, Orgilés et al. reported that caregivers had noted an extreme change in their children's behaviours ranging from difficulty concentrating, restlessness, and loneliness (Waite et al., 2020; Orgilés et al., 2020; Samji, 2020).

In Canada, the Center for Addiction and Mental Health alarmingly found that “youth who had sought mental health services pre-pandemic were nearly 2x more likely to experience depression, anxiety, or other mental health challenges and nearly 4x more likely to have considered suicide since the pandemic began” (2020; Samji 2020). Moreover, a nationwide [survey](#) by the Association for Canadian Studies reported that female youth, visible minority youth, immigrant youth, and youth with disabilities had greater fears of becoming infected with COVID-19 (Association for Canadian Studies, 2020).

In the context of Climate Change, research has demonstrated that it can impact mental health directly and indirectly. Direct effects on mental health include experiences from environmental degradation, extreme weather events, and changes in environment due to changes in temperature and precipitation (Berry et al., 2008; Samji, 2020). Indirect effects include food security, breakdown of familial/community support systems, and loss of cultural identity (Berry et al., 2008; Kowalczewski & Klein, 2018; Bartlett, 2008). Both effects can cause mental health outcomes such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety, compounded stress, feelings of anger and grief, and increased rates of suicide (Samji, 2020; Berry et al., 2008; Clayton et al., 2017; Sanson et al., 2019). Research among Inuit youth further highlights that Indigenous youth are heavily impacted, and that “environmental and climate change are compounding stressors that challenge well-being and resilience” (Cunsolo et al., 2012, Cunsolo et al., 2013a, Cunsolo et al., 2013b, Petrasek et al., 2013).

COVID-19 and Climate Change are changing how young people see and experience the world, and can invoke feelings of anxiety, sense of hopelessness and impending doom. Youth have

reported to experience more fear, sadness, anger, and eco-anxiety regarding climate change and the ability of their generation to invest in a future. (Samji, 2020). Despite this, young people continue to show resiliency, dedication, and solidarity for the demand for change as they are continuously leading and mobilizing several climate action and social movements. It is of essence to address, acknowledge and uplift the feelings and experiences of young people and Indigenous youth by working towards meaningful solutions in a collaborative way to lessen the burden of these global crises on future generations.

Addiction, Social constructs, and COVID-19

In the Opioid crisis in the 1950s, addiction arose as a consequence of social marginalization and exclusion with associations to poverty, crime, and racism (Somers, 2020). Recovery programs in this era like the one conducted by Dole et al. (1968), focused on social and citizen productiveness through meaningful connections and employment. This proved that social resources and empathy and support from staff were highly successful and more effective than medication-based recovery programs (1968). However, during the term of President Nixon, methadone clinics were increased ten-fold and addiction recovery shifted to prescription treatment; abandoning the objective of citizenship recovery, despite research that continued to show that social inclusive recovery on people experiencing addiction, homelessness, and mental illness allowed them to move forward (Somers, 2020; Somers et al., 2013).

This had serious implications, still relevant in the opioid crisis today and has formed two different forms of treatment. Private sector treatment addresses the need for productive citizenships, meaning and inclusion and is accessible to the wealthy (Somers, 2020; Merlo et al., 2020); while public funding treatment continues to use methadone treatment to treat its patients. There is higher risk for aggravated addictions which are dangerous for those who fall in the second form of treatment, especially among people without homes. The number of deaths associated with the opioid crisis in BC and Canada in the last months has highlighted truths on the need of scientific research to demand changes to the social construct surrounding addiction and ecology. A recovery of addiction and planetary health in synergy requires entering a commitment of ecology and biodiversity conservation. (Somers, 2020)

Policy Recommendations

Policy options include:

1) Consideration of COVID-19 and Climate Change impacts on Mental Health

Inclusion of the dual impacts of COVID-19 and Climate Change on mental health outcomes from existing and [current ongoing](#) research must be used for the improvement and future development of goals in mental health services for young people. (Samji, 2020). Existing guides such as the '[Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance](#)' can be used to further inform on the psychological and mental health impacts of Climate Change. (2017)

- i. Policy makers must ensure to focus on the social determinants on among young people, as different sub-groups are affected differently. This can inform the development of inclusive and equitable mental health services and strategic plans for a healthy recovery (Samji, 2020).

- ii. Commit to collaboration and engagement with youth and Indigenous youth voices on their perspectives to further understand the impact of mental health. Youth perspectives are crucial in the develop mitigation and recovery strategies for both global crises.

2) Recovery for Addiction and Planetary Health

- i. Changes are required in addiction treatment delivery. Harm reduction policy should commit to the development and design of strategic plans and services focused on social constructs that will promote employment, citizen productivity and social inclusion based on previous scientific research in the areas of substance use, addictions, and mental health. Private and public funding needs to be reassessed to ensure equitable treatment and recovery.
- ii. Advocate for addiction recovery treatment to readdress underlying social factors and move away from heavy reliance on methadone treatment, especially in publicly funded institutions (Somers, 2020).
- iii. Policy consideration for the inclusion of nature in a deliberate and coordinated renewal of our social constructs in collaboration with research and scientists to address addiction, ecology, and biodiversity preservation (Somers, 2020).

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(excluding the key messages box)

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