

THE NEW ABNORMAL



Student Mental Health Two Years Into COVID-19

The New Abnormal: Student Mental Health Two Years Into COVID-19

Foreword by the Mental Health Commission of Canada

We, at the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), are pleased to support the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations and their work that has led up to the release of this report. We are grateful to collaborate on a comprehensive snapshot of the experiences of post-secondary students in 2022.

We were encouraged to learn that a majority of students felt their institution's administration and staff actively supported student mental health and well-being, including policies in place supporting student mental health, which are, together, critical to student success.

Post-secondary institutions' efforts in developing and implementing a mental health and well-being framework can be supported by the guidance of the National Standard of Canada for Mental Health and Well-Being for Post-Secondary Students (the Standard) – the first of its kind in the world. The Standard is a set of flexible, voluntary guidelines to help post-secondary institutions support the mental health and well-being of their students. It emphasizes the need for a holistic

approach to student mental health and well-being, offering post-secondary decision makers a framework for planning, designing, delivering, and evaluating services and initiatives.

The Standard was released in October 2020 as the first wave of the pandemic and growing concerns for student mental health were intensifying. Since then, the pandemic's impact on the post-secondary experience and on student mental health and well-being has been unprecedented: this report confirms that for the third year in a row 3 out of 4 students reported that their mental health has been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the majority of respondents reported that the pandemic has either worsened their pre-existing mental health challenges (74%) or created new mental health struggles (61%).

In their work to improve post-secondary student's mental health and well-being, institutions align with the guidance of the Standard by working not only to build accessible, timely, inclusive, and culturally responsive mental health supports, but also by taking into consideration the various protective and risk factors that can impact the wellness of students, at the individual,

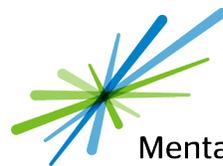
interpersonal, institutional, and societal levels (e.g., finances, organizational culture, etc.). With the Standard's guiding principle of equity, diversity, and inclusion in sight, we at the MHCC also wish to recognize that some students face additional challenges to their mental health and well-being, especially in the context of intersectionality.

Changemakers in post-secondary have an opportunity to prioritize identifying students who are more at risk and who do not have equitable access to supports that effectively reach and support them during times of need. This would be particularly impactful as 1 in 3 students reported that on-campus services do not meet the diverse needs of students, and only 28% of the respondents were aware of how to access services.

We at the MHCC congratulate CASA for initiating this survey and preparing this report that is rich with insights into the recent experiences of students. We hope many in the sector look to it for inspiration as institutions work to keep students and their diverse needs front and centre in all their work supporting their mental health and well-being, thereby honouring student-centeredness, the first of six guiding principles within the Standard.

We are optimistic that, together, we can react promptly and adequately to address the issues that contribute to stress and negatively impact students' well-being. Students, post-secondary institutions, and governments have shown tremendous resilience in facing the pandemic's multiple waves. We call on post-secondary communities from coast to coast to coast to continue to work together to improve mental health and well-being on campuses.

Visit our website to access a copy of the Standard, as well as implementation resources.



**Mental Health
Commission
of Canada**

**Commission de
la santé mentale
du Canada**

Executive Summary

This paper is a summary of public opinion research that surveyed post-secondary students across Canada from May 13 to May 27th 2022. The results are meant to capture a snapshot of the student experience two years into the COVID-19 pandemic. It also serves as a follow-up to CASA's May 2021 report, Continued Concerns: Post-Secondary Students One Year into COVID-19. Accordingly, this paper reflects how the

challenges, gaps, and barriers presented in 2021 have evolved over the past year, as well as identifies new or persistent concerns and priorities.

This public opinion research was commissioned by the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) and the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC), and was conducted by Abacus Data.

Methodology

The survey was conducted with 2,000 post-secondary education students in Canada from May 13th to May 27th, 2022. A random sample of panellists was invited to complete the survey from a set of partner panels based on the Lucid exchange platform. These partners are typically double opt-in survey panels, blended to manage out potential skews in the data from a single source.

The margin of error for a comparable probability-based random sample of the same size is +/- 3.1%, 19 times out of 20.

The data were weighted according to census data to ensure that the sample matched Canada's post-secondary education population according to age, gender, language, and region. Totals may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Introduction

In May 2021, CASA published *Continued Concerns – Post-Secondary Students One Year into COVID-19*, a report examining the effect that COVID-19 was having on students and their post-secondary education, as well as how the challenges, gaps, and barriers identified had evolved during the past year. In that report, CASA found that an overwhelming majority of students were worried about the impact of the pandemic on their financial situation, mental health, and on their studies. Two-thirds of respondents reported that the pandemic had made affording post-secondary education more difficult, and 61% of students were worried about their ability to pay Fall 2021 tuition. Furthermore, over 77% reported feeling stressed due to the pandemic, and 78% of students reported a significant increase in the worsening of pre-existing mental health challenges, including feeling despair (+16%), overwhelmed (+10%), and sadness (+6%). Finally, the majority of respondents indicated that their ability to learn had been negatively impacted by COVID-19, with 54% reporting problems related to Internet access, and 3 in 4 students reporting the quality of their educational content was poor.

Overall, the May 2021 report depicted a student population facing mental health challenges and a feeling of being left behind.

While the pandemic's impact on the post-secondary experience has lessened

over the past year, it has continued to negatively impact the mental health, financial, accessibility, and learning experiences of post-secondary students. 3 in 4 students indicated they struggled with mental health challenges during the course of their studies, with 75% indicating that their mental health had worsened due to the pandemic. Furthermore, due to changes in living expenses and educational costs, students have been forced to increasingly fund their education with personal savings, grants and loans, and employment income. Finally, with the return of in-person learning components and supports this past year, students have had to adjust to fluid learning environments and individually seek supports that best fit their needs.

Understanding these issues has been crucial to informing CASA's work over the past year. As ongoing waves of the pandemic continued to impact students' experiences, CASA immediately responded to their needs, working extensively to ensure that students would be properly and adequately considered in subsequent federal government policies.

On April 19, 2021, the Canadian Federal government announced Budget 2021 – A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth, and Resilience. This 2021 Federal Budget re-emphasized the government's desire to support students as they recovered from the effects of the pandemic. The

doubling of Canada Student Grants was extended until July 31, 2023, and the waiver on interest accrual on Canada Student Loans and Apprentice Loans was extended until March 31, 2023. Furthermore, the income threshold for loan repayment for those enrolled in the Repayment Assistance Program was raised to \$40,000, and the cap on monthly loan payments was reduced from 20 percent of a borrower's income to 10 percent.¹

The 2021 Budget also allocated \$109.3 million for the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy, \$239.8 million for the Student Work Placement Program, \$371.8 million for the Canada Summer Jobs program, and \$708 million over five years for Mitacs. Overall, these programs aimed to support the creation of nearly 94,000 job opportunities for students.²

Conversely, the 2022 Federal Budget did not provide the same significant, direct investments in post-secondary students. Instead, the budget made minor adjustments and re-announcements to existing programs, including extending the previously announced interest elimination policy on the federal portion

of Canada Student Loans, and the extension of their doubled investment in Canada Student Grants.³

The new investments announced in the 2022 Federal Budget were comparatively small, confined to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. This includes a \$47.8 million investment unfolding over 5 years, with \$20.1 million given towards Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, to help graduate students and researchers with employment prospects. Additionally, the budget proposed \$84.2 million over 4 years to double funding for the Union Training and Innovation Program, to support 2,500 apprentices each year from underrepresented groups.⁴ Further announcements by Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, Hon. Carla Qualtrough, expanded these Canada Student Financial Aid funding for students with a persistent or prolonged disabilities⁵, benefiting an estimated 40,000 students each year. Though these investments are welcomed, strong and sustained investments in student mental health are needed to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on students.

1 Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, "Budget 2021 - A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth, and Resilience", published April 19, 2021, <https://budget.gc.ca/2021/pdf/budget-2021-en.pdf>.

2 Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, "Budget 2021 - A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth, and Resilience", published April 19, 2021, <https://budget.gc.ca/2021/pdf/budget-2021-en.pdf>.

3 Ibid.

4 Employment and Social Development Canada, "Minister Gould highlights Budget 2022 investments in Job Growth and Cutting Taxes for Canada's Growing Small Businesses", published April 12, 2022, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2022/04/minister-gould-highlights-budget-2022-investments-in-job-growth-and-cutting-taxes-for-canadas-growing-small-businesses.html>

5 Employment and Social Development Canada, Government of Canada announces improved financial supports for students with disabilities. Published Aug 2, 2022. Accessed Sept 2, 2022 from: <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/government-of-canada-announces-improved-financial-supports-for-students-with-disabilities-887388437.html>

As a follow-up to CASA's 2021 previous work, this report serves as an important reminder that students are still facing challenges related to COVID-19. Despite having experienced two years of working, living, and studying in a pandemic, as well as continued investments by the federal government, students are still feeling left behind. Many of the same

worries continue to afflict students, from those surrounding their physical and mental well-being, to their finances, to their education⁶. Even with the end of COVID-19 seemingly in sight, these struggles should not be minimized or downplayed. Students are still feeling left behind and as they adjust to the new normal.

⁶ Lexi Ewing, et al., "A Qualitative Investigation of the Positive and Negative Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Post-Secondary Students' Mental Health and Well-being", *Emerging Adulthood* 0, no. 0 (2022): 1-16, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/21676968221121590>

Key Findings

Student Mental Health

- 3 in 4 students reported experiencing negative mental health during their studies
- More than 1 student out of 4 reports their mental health as poor
- Top positive drivers for mental health included: relationships with friends (71%), relationships with family (68%) and stable housing (59%)
- Top negative drivers for mental health included: poor sleep habits (42%), cost of living (38%), academic workload (38%), financial responsibilities (37%), and job/career pressures (35%)
- Those most at risk for negative mental health included: younger students, students in Alberta, students with lower income, students identifying as 2SLGBTQ+, and those living with a pre-existing mental health concern.

Impact Of Covid-19

- Three-quarters of students reported that their mental health has been negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, on par with 2021 levels
- Over the past year, the percentage of students who reported feeling stressed has not shifted since 2021 (75%)
- 70% of students reported their ability to maintain social connections has been negatively impacted
- The majority of students reported that the pandemic has either worsened their pre-existing mental health challenges (74%) or created new mental health struggles (61%)
- Students who identified as a visible minority, 2SLGBTQ+, Indigenous, living with a disability, or living with a pre-existing mental health concern were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic
- 68% of students indicated that the pandemic has worsened their overall health, negatively impacting their physical activity levels, diets, and ability to maintain social connections

Mental Health Supports

- 1 in 2 students reported accessing mental health services through their post-secondary institution
- In-person counselling and virtual counselling services were the most popular supports for students, followed by in-person peer support groups, and self-directed programs
- Student interest in mental health supports was strong, especially with supports for: general stress (68%), preventative mental health (61%), and seeking diagnosis/treatment (56%)
- Student interest in mental health resources was strong, especially on general mental health topics (79%), learning supports (77%), and relationship support (72%)
- Students overwhelmingly preferred to access their institution's mental health supports in-person (59%) rather than virtually (16%)
- 1 in 3 students reported that on-campus services do not meet the diverse needs of students, and only 28% of students were aware of how to access services

Barriers To Accessing On-Campus Services

- While students are generally aware of on-campus mental health services, many reported experiencing significant barriers to access

- The top barriers for access were wait times (65%), ignorance of services or how to access (63%), and perceived quality of services (63%)
- The most impactful factors when accessing mental health services were wait times (50%), confidentiality concerns (41%), and stigma (38%).

Other Student Factors

Online Learning

- Students indicated that while online learning was more accessible, it provided less support and value compared to in-person learning

Monthly expenses

- Student expenses vary widely per student
- The average student pays \$548 in housing/mo (including those living at home) and \$351/mo in other expenses

Funding for Post-secondary education

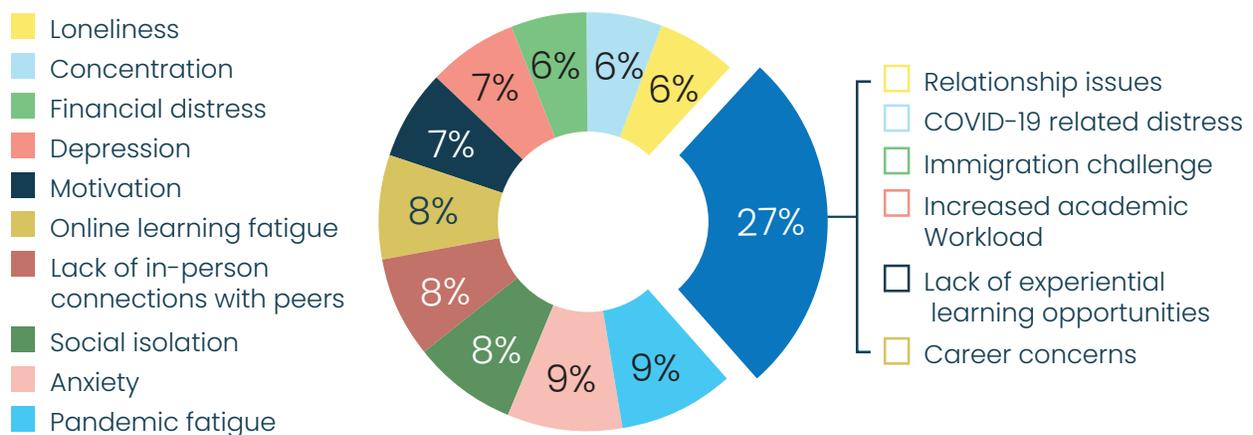
- The average student funds nearly half of their post-secondary education from both parental and personal savings (up from 2021)
- Student Loans and grants account for only 15% of funding
- Over 2 in 5 students indicated that government funding does not significantly help fund their education

Student Mental Health

Like all Canadians, the past two years of living with COVID-19 has taken its toll on the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of post-secondary students⁷. Prior to the pandemic, students were already among the most impacted by mental health challenges. As noted by the Mental Health Commission of Canada's 2022 report, post-secondary students across Canada reported experiencing high levels of pandemic fatigue (87%), social

isolation (83%), financial distress (64%), attention and concentration issues (62%), and loneliness (61%)⁸. Furthermore, recent research has shown that post-secondary students, defined as between 18 to 25 years of age, are particularly vulnerable to developing mental health disorders, and that high prevalence of mental health concerns amongst students has led to a mental health crisis across Canadian campuses^{9 10 11 12 13}.

Figure 1 – Top Ranked Student Concerns Impacted by COVID-19 During Their Post-Secondary Education



Source: Tayyab Rashid & Lina Di Genova, "Campus Mental Health Across Canada: The Ongoing Impact of COVID-19, Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) & Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), accessed July 11, 2022, <https://www.cacuss.ca/files/Docs/CampusMentalHealthAcrossCanada-TheOngoingImpactofCOVID-19.pdf>

7 Lexi Ewing, et al, "A Qualitative Investigation of the Positive and Negative Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Post-Secondary Students' Mental Health and Well-being", *Emerging Adulthood* 0, no. 0 (2022): 1-16, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/21676968221121590>

8 Mental Health Commission of Canada, "Campus Mental Health Across Canada in 2020-21: The Ongoing Impact of COVID-19", accessed July 20, 2022, <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/The-Ongoing-Impact-of-COVID-19.pdf>; Tayyab Rashid & Lina Di Genova, "Campus Mental Health Across Canada: The Ongoing Impact of COVID-19, Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) & Canadian Association of Colleges and University Student Services (CACUSS), accessed July 11, 2022, <https://www.cacuss.ca/files/Docs/CampusMentalHealthAcrossCanada-TheOngoingImpactofCOVID-19.pdf>

9 Zachary R. Patterson et al, "The Influence of COVID-19 on Stress, Substance Use, and Mental Health Among Postsecondary Students", *Emerging Adulthood*, 9, no.5): 516-530 (2021) doi: 10.1177/21676968211014080

10 Caitlin Monaghan et al, "Postsecondary Mental Health Policy in Canada: A Scoping Review of the Grey Literature", *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, vol 66(7): 603-615 (2021) doi: 10.1177/0706743720961733

11 Kathryn Wiens et al, "Mental Health among Canadian Postsecondary Students: A Mental Health Crisis?" *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 65, no. 1 (2020): 30-35, doi: 10.1177/070674371987417

12 Jennifer A. Appleby et al, "Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the experience and mental health of university students studying in Canada and the UK: a cross-sectional study", *BMJ Open* 12, (January 2022): e050187, doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2021-050187

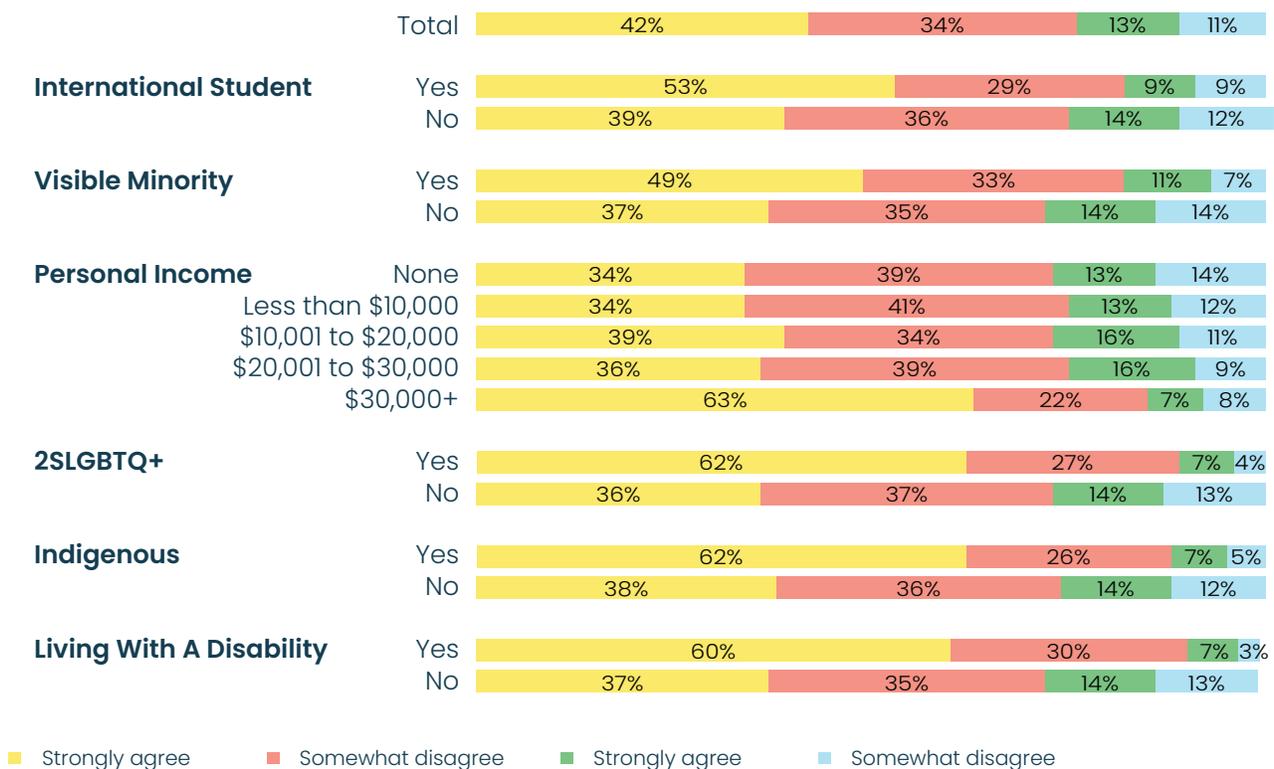
13 Brooke Linden et al, "Cross-sectional trend analysis of the NCHA II survey data on Canadian post-secondary student mental health and wellbeing from 2013 to 2019", *BMC Public Health* 21, no. 1 (2021): 1-13, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-10622-1>

According to the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health (CICMH), 75% of mental health-related problems are first diagnosed between the ages of 16 and 24, when many are going through post-secondary education¹⁴. Additionally, the most recent National College Health Assessment found that 52% of post-secondary students experienced debilitating depression so severe that it limited their ability to function in school¹⁵.

Our survey results indicated that 3 in 4 students reported they struggled with mental health challenges during the course of their post-secondary education. Overall, 1 in 3 students rated their mental health as poor. Those most likely to rate their mental health as poor included: younger students, students living in Alberta, those identifying as a visible minority, 2SLGBTQ+, Indigenous, and those living with a pre-existing mental health illness or disability.

Figure 2 – Worsening Student Mental Health During Post-Secondary Education, by Socio-Demographic Group

3 In 4 Students Agree To: “Over the Course of My Time At Post-secondary, I’ve Struggled With My Mental Health”



¹⁴ Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health, “The Impact of COVID-19 on post-secondary institutions”, last accessed June 20, 2022, https://campusmentalhealth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CICMH_COVID-19_Impact_Infosheet_EN.pdf
¹⁵ American College Health Association - National College Health Assessment. Canadian Reference Group. Executive Summary, Spring 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.cacuss.ca/files/Research/NCHA-II%20SPRING%202019%20CANADIAN%20REFERENCE%20GROUP%20EXECUTIVE%20SUMMARY.pdf>

In terms of improving their mental health, students reported that their top contributing factors included: relationships with friends (71%), relationships with family (68%), and stable housing (59%). Conversely, poor sleep habits (42%), academic workload (38%), cost of living (38%), financial responsibilities (37%), and job and career pressures (35%), and online learning structure (27%) were all considered to be the most negative factors impacting student mental health.

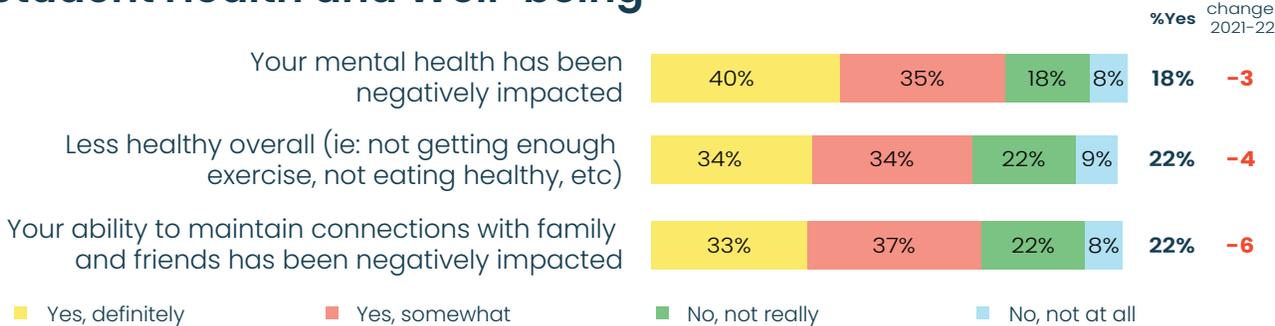
When reviewing aspects of the post-secondary experiences, students reported that grades (63%), peer support (60%), and physical learning environments (60%) were the highest contributing factors to positive mental health. Conversely, academic workload (38%), financial responsibilities (37%), and online learning structure (27%), were the strongest negative factors impacting student mental health.

Impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 continues to negatively impact post-secondary students across the country. 3 in 4 students reported that their mental health has been negatively impacted by the pandemic, which matches findings from last year. Additionally, 68% of students indicated that the pandemic has worsened their overall health, including physical activity levels and diets. Students have also had

a far more difficult time maintaining social connections, and are more likely to be stressed about their social connections and mental health due to pandemic impacts. Consequently, the majority of students (70%) indicated that the pandemic compromised their ability to maintain connections with family and friends, as shown in Figure 3.

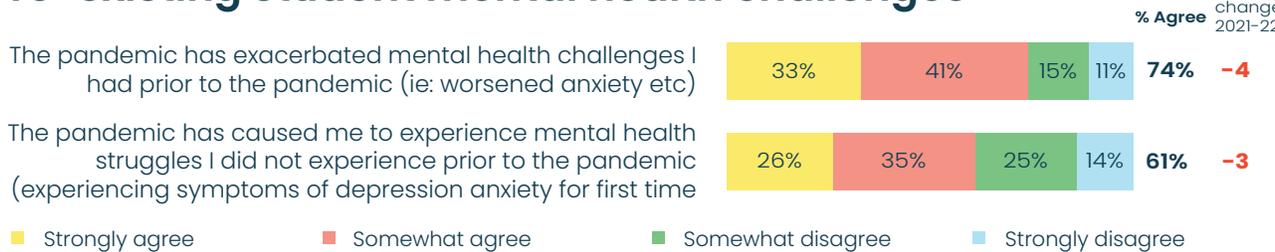
Figure 3 - How the Pandemic has impacted Student Health and Well-being



Given that social connections were reported as the highest contributing factor to positive student mental health, it is unsurprising that students identified that the pandemic both exacerbated pre-existing mental health illnesses (74%), and also created new

mental health challenges for 61% of students. These findings have declined only slightly compared with the past year, indicating that the majority of students continue to face both new and worsening mental health conditions, as highlighted in Figure 4.

Figure 4 - How the Pandemic has exacerbated Pre-existing student mental health challenges

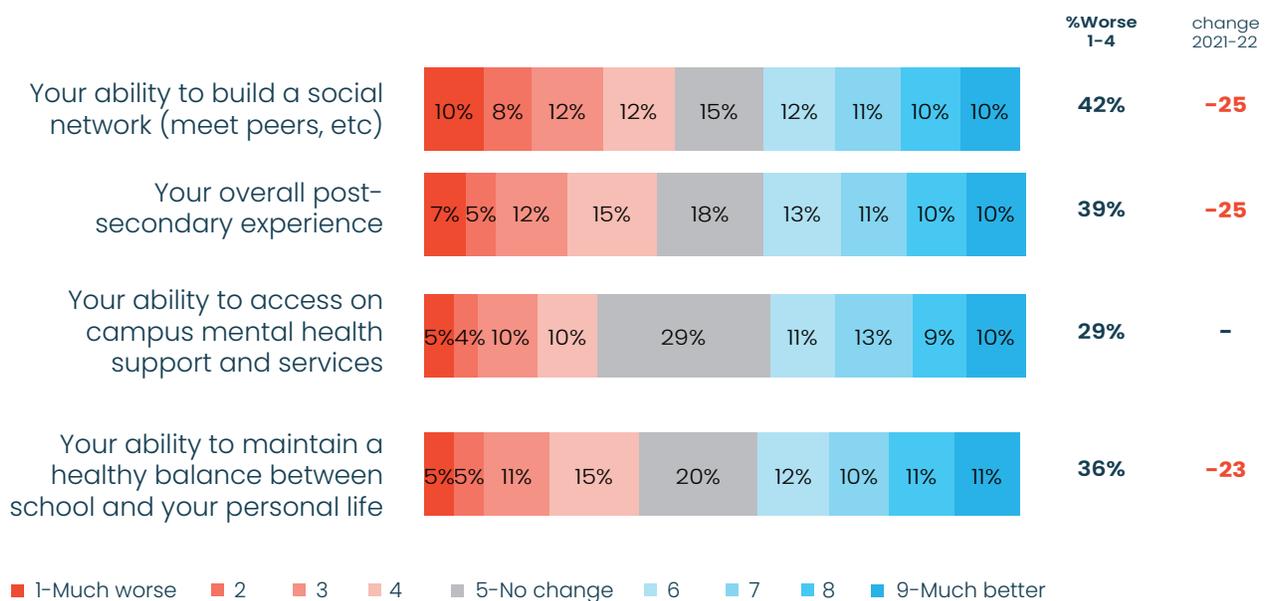


Students most likely to have their mental health negatively impacted by pandemic disruptions identified as: belonging to a visible minority group, 2SLGBTQ+ or Indigenous, having a disability, or living with a pre-existing mental health illness.

Overall, the pandemic continues to have a profound impact on the social connections, mental health, and overall post-secondary experience of students. While 42% of students indicated their ability to build a social network has worsened, and 39% of students reported that their overall post-secondary experience has declined, it is encouraging to note these figures have each declined 25% since last year, suggesting an overall lessening of the pandemic’s impact on students. The return of in-person learning and on campus supports since 2021 appears to have had a positive impact on student mental health.

Although these pandemic-related challenges, including worsening mental health outcomes and pre-existing conditions, are broadly shared across the student population, certain demographics have fared worse than others. Following the trend seen in May 2021, female students, low income students, and those identifying as belonging either to a visible minority group or identifying as 2SLGBTQ+ reported higher levels of negative mental health outcomes. Geography also played a role, with students from Alberta and Ontario reporting higher rates of negative mental health compared to their peers elsewhere. As we transition into various COVID-19 recovery phases, the asymmetrical nature of the pandemic’s impact on students’ mental health will need to be taken into consideration.

Figure 5 – Impact of COVID-19 on Lessening the Social, Health, and Overall PSE Experience for Canadian Students



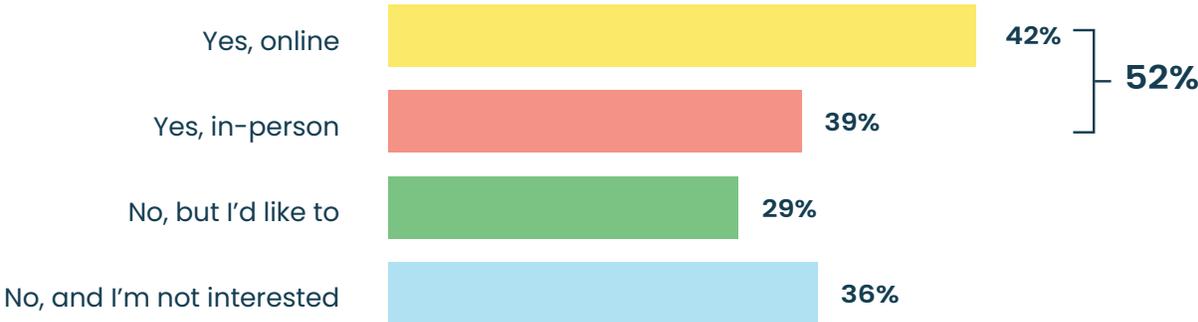
Accessing Mental Health Supports

In terms of addressing new and pre-existing mental health challenges, students reported seeking out mental health services, both through off campus services (70%) and through their post-secondary institutions (52%).

Figure 6 illustrates that for those who sought mental health services through their post-secondary institution, 37% accessed online services, compared with 26% who sought in-person services.

A further 22% of students who did not access any services indicated they were interested in mental health services offered by their post-secondary institution (PSI). Within this group, the students most likely to have not accessed services but have a desire to do so were: undergraduates, females, aged 22 or younger, in a science-based university program, or those who rated their mental health as poor.

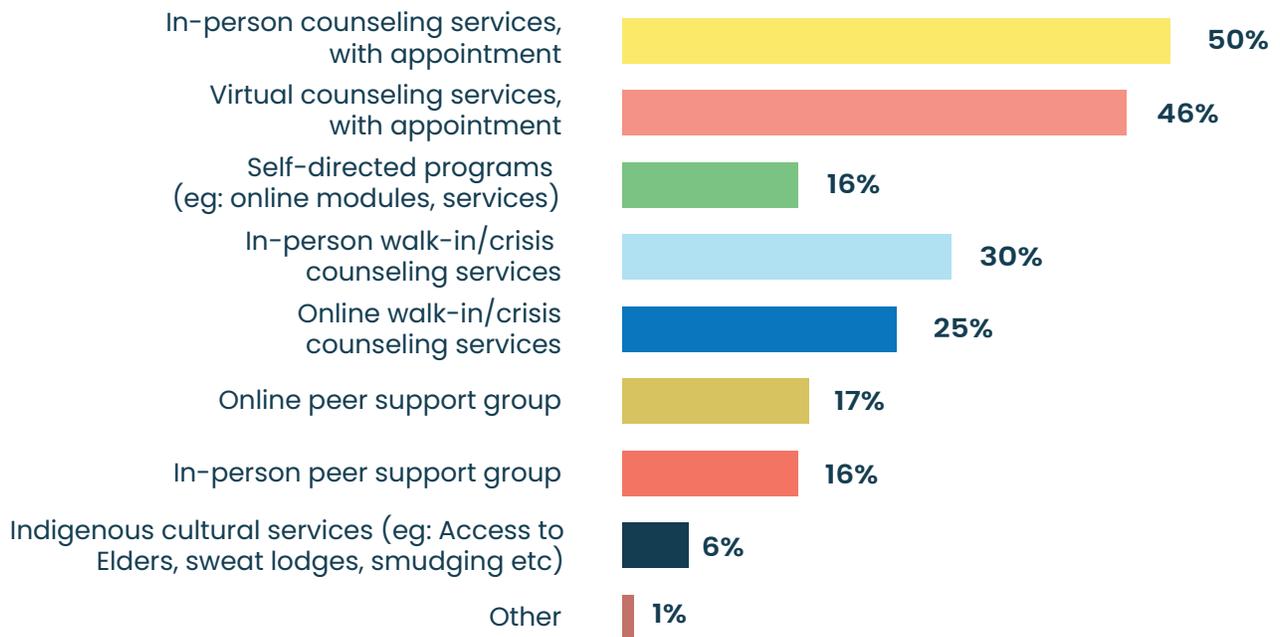
Figure 6 - Access to Mental Health Services by Students Through their Post-Secondary Institutions



In-person counselling and virtual counselling services were the most popular PSI mental health supports for students, followed by in-person peer support groups, and self-directed programs, as shown in Figure 7. Overall, students overwhelmingly preferred to access their institutions' mental health supports in-person (59%) rather than virtual (16%), while 1 in 4 preferred a hybrid combination.

For those who were able to access PSI mental health services, the majority of students expressed that they received the help they needed, and that overall they held a positive view of their quality (75%). However, only 28% of students were certain how to access mental health services through their PSI. Furthermore, 1 in 3 students reported that mental health services at their PSI do not meet the diverse needs of students. The students least likely to report not receiving adequate

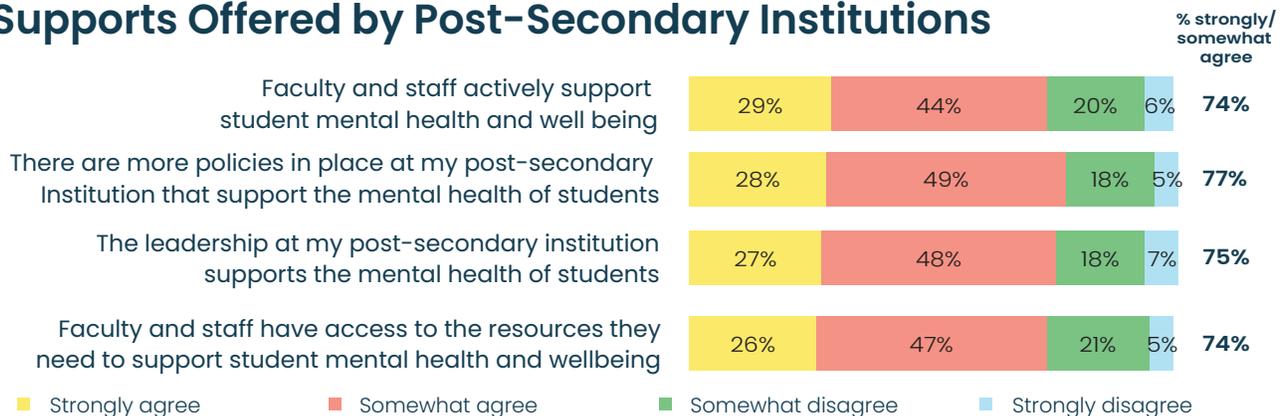
Figure 7 – Types of Services Students Accessed through Post-Secondary Institutions



support were: younger students (22 and under), undergraduates, low income students, and students who evaluated their own mental health as poor. It is important to remember that these most at-risk students most often reported that the existing services did not match their needs.

These findings seem to suggest that if students are able to access mental health services at their PSI, they will receive the support they need, however there are significant barriers to accessing these services.

Figure 8 – Student Opinions on Mental Health Policies and Supports Offered by Post-Secondary Institutions



Barriers To Accessibility

The most prominent barriers that post-secondary students expressed when accessing mental health supports were: wait times, lack of awareness on how to access services, perceived quality of services, stigma, and confidentiality. In the survey, these barriers disproportionately impacted certain student groups, as discussed below.

Wait Times

Overall, 65% of respondents reported wait times to receive services as their biggest barrier in accessing mental health services through their PSI. Geographically, students from BC and Atlantic Canada were most significantly impacted by wait times (72% vs 71%). In terms of demographics, students groups most likely to report experiencing long wait times included: those living with a disability (74%) and 2SLGBTQ+ students (71%). Students living with a disability, international students, and those belonging to a visible minority all ranked wait times as their top barrier. This remains a crucial barrier to address, given that long wait times leave students feeling disempowered and can cause them to seek out external services.

Unaware/Lack of Info how to Access

The majority of students (63%) also reported being unaware of the range of services offered by their institutions,

making them difficult to access. In particular, certain demographic groups were disproportionately impacted by this lack of awareness and information available on services, particularly for 2SLGBTQ+ students (71%), those living with a disability (70%), 2SLGBTQ+ students (70%), and Indigenous students (69%). Being unaware of accessible services was ranked a top 3 priority for international students and no-income students.

Perceived Lack of Quality

Respondents also reported concerns regarding the perceived lack of quality services offered by their institutions, with 63% of all students citing this as a top barrier to access. Geographically, Alberta students were far more likely to report their PSI's mental health services as lacking quality, according to 71% of respondents, as well as 69% of students from Atlantic Canada. Certain demographics reported their PSI services as low quality, including: those living with a disability (72%), Indigenous students (73%), International students (68%), and 2SLGBTQ+ students (68%). Perceived lack of quality was ranked a top three barrier for students who had rated their mental health as poor. Given how closely perceived quality matches with services that meet student groups' needs, it is evident that services unable to meet the needs of certain student groups are ranked much lower.

Stigma

Over 1 in 2 students across Canada also indicated that stigma played a significant role in their inability to access mental health services. Compared with the student average (57%), the following groups indicated they experienced more stigma when accessing mental health services: Indigenous (70%), high income students earning \$30,000+ (67%), those with new mental health challenges (65%), and 2SLGBTQ+ students (64%). Stigma was ranked a top 3 barrier for: international students, new graduates, visible minority students, low and no-income students, 2SLGBTQ+ students, Indigenous students, male students, and students living with a disability.

Confidentiality/Lack of Trust

In comparison, confidentiality was another strong barrier to accessing mental health services for students. Overall, 57% of respondents said that confidentiality was a significant barrier to accessing mental health supports. Student groups who reported confidentiality/lack of trust as a significant barrier included: indigenous (71%), those Living with a Disability (68%), international students (66%), and those identifying as a visible minority (64%). It is important to have confidentiality in mental health services, as it is a reflection of the trust student groups have in their institutions. Confidentiality was ranked a top 3 barrier by both male and female students, international students, 2SLGBTQ+ students, students

living with a disability, students living with a mental illness, students with a new mental illness, and high income students. Lastly, confidentiality was the top ranked barrier for Indigenous students.

Not Culturally Appropriate

While not ranked as a top 5 barrier, cultural safety or concerns that services are not culturally appropriate was reviewed, as it provides an effective review of whether mental health services are reflective of student groups and their needs. 1 in 2 students across Canada indicated they did not believe their institution's mental health services were culturally appropriate. A wide range of socio-demographic groups indicated that their institution's services were not culturally appropriate, including: international students (67%), indigenous students (64%), 2SLGBTQ+ (60%), and those living with a disability (60%). Furthermore, 72% of students from visible minorities, 71% of indigenous students, and 71% of 2SLGBTQ+ students confirmed that their institution's mental health services did not represent their own needs.

It is evident that students across a broad geographic and socio-demographic spectrum are faced with a wide range of barriers that significantly impact their ability to access mental health resources. However, there are additional student factors that have a demonstrated impact on student mental health, as shown below.

Other Student Factors

Given the wide-ranging impact of geographic, economic, demographic and social factors that influence student mental health, it is important that post-secondary institutions adopt a holistic approach to mental health. This approach needs to recognize the impacts of systemic, institutional, interpersonal, and individual actors, and provide mental health services that address each of these factors.

The survey results identified several other student factors that played a key role in impacting student mental health, and their ability to access mental health services.

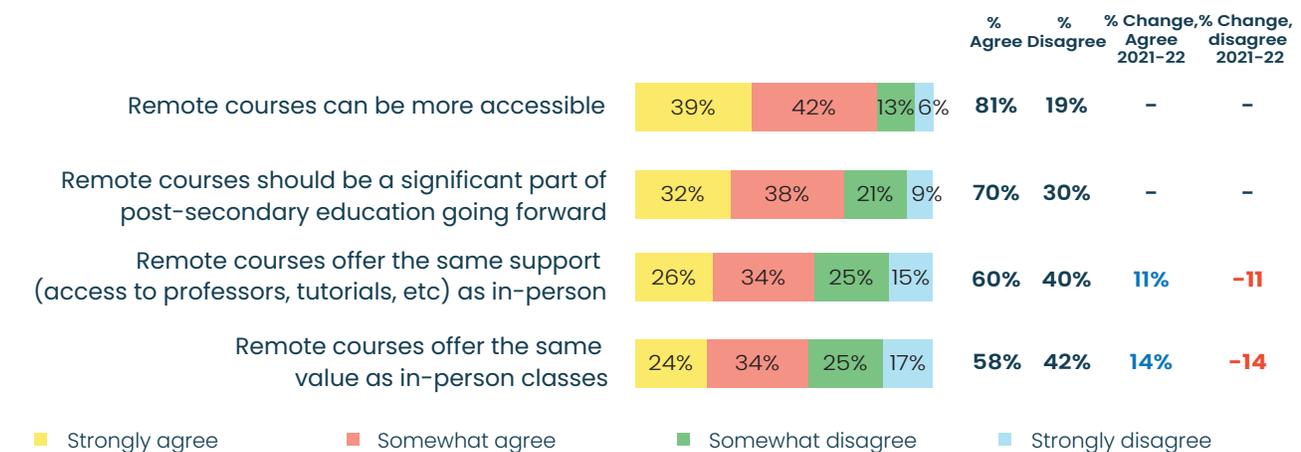
Online Learning

Since the beginning of the pandemic,

online learning has become a core feature of learning across Ontario post-secondary institutions. The last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic have dramatically increased institutional reliance on remote learning to such an extent as to worry students, instructors, and stakeholders as to the long term negative impacts of online learning^{16 17 18 19 20 21}.

In this study, while some respondents did acknowledge the value in keeping remote courses as an aspect of post-secondary learning, and that remote courses were viewed as being more accessible, a significant proportion of students found that they did not offer the same support and value as in-person components, as shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9 – Student Support for Online Learning Experiences



16 Maryam Azimzadehirani, "Is effective online learning bad for the environment: Teaching may be more rewarding when students' cameras are on, but it comes at a cost" University Affairs, August 23, 2021, <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/news/news-article/is-effective-online-learning-bad-for-the-environment/>

17 Katie Dangerfield, "Online learning has become a COVID-19 reality. But experts say kids aren't thriving online" Global News, April 15, 2021, <https://globalnews.ca/news/7757076/remote-learning-covid-19-consequences/>

18 Caroline Alphonso, "Ontario considers move to make remote learning permanent for all boards going forward", The Globe and Mail, last updated March 25, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-ontario-considers-move-to-make-remote-learning-permanent-for-all/>

19 Maan Alhmidi, "University students struggling with impact of online classes as pandemic wears on, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, January 25, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/covid-ont-universities-1.6326620>

20 Dannielle Piper, "Flexibility of virtual learning prompts some post-secondary students to pursue more online studies", Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, March 5, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/online-learning-post-secondary-science-degrees-1.6364340>

21 Alex Usher, "Examining Learning Experiences During COVID", Higher Education Strategy Associates, January 28, 2021, <https://higherstrategy.com/examining-learning-experiences-during-covid/>

Monthly expenses

Gaps in available funding and increasing rates of student reliance on parental income and student loans have further been impacted by shifting financial pressures. For example, in Ontario, students face an average annual cost of living of \$25,552²², which has continued to rise significantly over the past year. Student monthly expenses continue to grow, as shown in Figure 10²³.

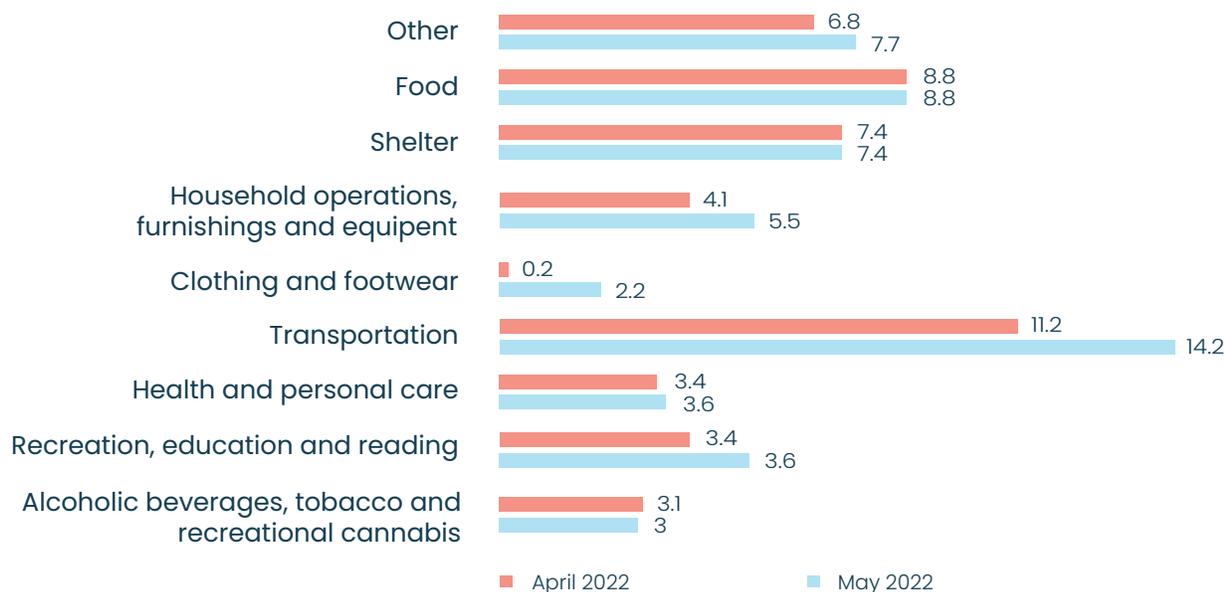
Furthermore, unprecedented new financial costs are negatively impacting students. Consumer inflation has risen 7.7% since last year, the highest annual increase since January 1983, along with the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which has risen a record

Figure 10: Estimated Monthly Student Expenses, 2021-22



7.7% since last year²⁴, and the highest inflation rates seen in Canada since 1991²⁵. In Canada, inflation skyrocketed to 8.1 percent in July 2022, continuing to inflame all levels of student expenses, including food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and healthcare^{26 27}.

Figure 11 - Price Increases in Canada, by Category



22 Nawid Sayed, "A Call to Action Against Rising Medical Student Tuition", UOJM 9, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.18192/uojm.v9i1.3840>

23 Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, "Student Financial Aid", last accessed June 1, 2022, https://assets.nationbuilder.com/ousa/pages/37/attachments/original/1652465100/Student_Financial_Aid_2022_brief.pdf?1652465100

24 Statistics Canada, "Consumer Price Index, May 2022", last modified June 22, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/nl/daily-quotidien/220622/dq220622a-eng.htm>

25 Statistics Canada, "Consumer Price Index: 2021 in review", released January 19, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/nl/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2022004-eng.htm>

26 Trading Economics, "Canada Inflation Rate", last accessed July 15, 2022,

<https://tradingeconomics.com/canada/inflation-cpi#:text=Canada's%20annual%20inflation%20rate%20rose,below%20market%20expectations%20of%208.4%25>

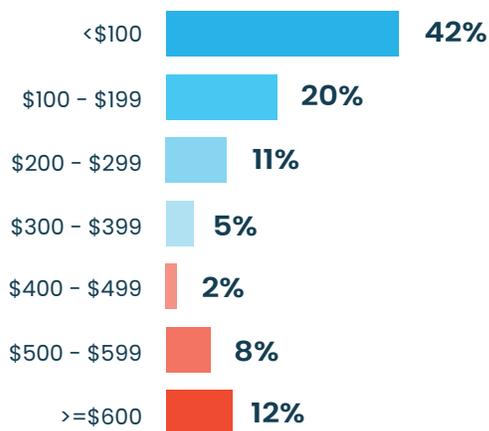
27 Statistics Canada, "Consumer Price Index, May 2022", last modified June 22, 2022, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/nl/daily-quotidien/220622/dq220622a-eng.htm>

In the study, monthly expenses across the country were found to vary widely from student to student. The average student paid \$538 in housing per month (including students living at home) and \$351 per month in other living expenses

(including groceries), as shown by Figure 12. Both the rapid increase in monthly expenses and unstable fluctuation of PSE funding sources have had strong impacts on student mental health this past year.

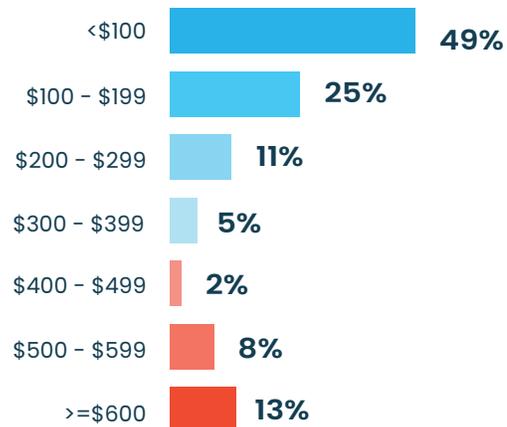
Figure 12 – Estimated Monthly Expenses for Students Attending Post-Secondary Institutions

**School-Related Expenses
Aside From Tuition**



Average = \$364
Median = \$100

**Transit (Public Transit
Pass, Gas, Etc)**



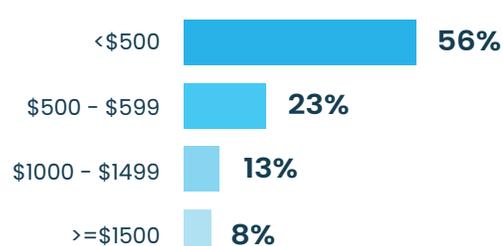
Average = \$584
Median = \$300

**Other Living Expenses
(Groceries, Etc)**



Average = \$173
Median = \$100

Rent



Average = \$351
Median = \$200

Funding for Post-Secondary Education

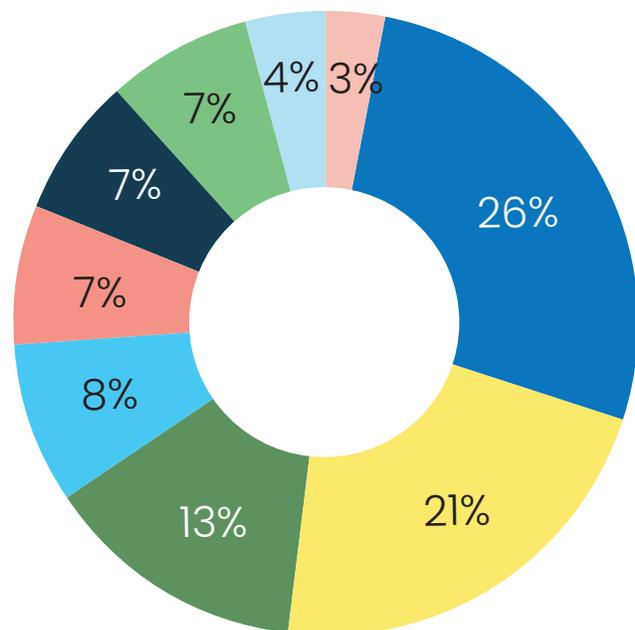
Funding for post-secondary education also presented a significant impact on student mental health and their ability to seek services. Financial responsibilities was ranked in the top 5 factors negatively impacting student mental health. Furthermore, regarding aspects of the PSE experience contributing to negative student mental health, financial responsibilities ranked as the second highest negative driver.

More concerning, many of the drivers of negative student mental health, including cost of living, academic workload, and online learning structure, are all influenced by a student's ability

to fund their post-secondary education. Survey results indicated that the average student funds nearly half their post-secondary education through a combination of parental and personal savings (up from 2021), with students loans and grants accounting for only 15% of all PSE funding. Dependency on personal savings (+8 points), grants and loans (+7 points), and employment income (-4 points) all changed significantly over the past year, compared with 2021 previous findings, as shown in Figure 13. Consequently, strains on accessing stable and adequate PSE funding also weakens traditionally positive drivers of mental health, including grades, housing situation and relationships with family.

Figure 13 - Sources of Income for Students Attending Post-Secondary Institutions

- From my parents / guardian / family
- From personal savings
- Student loans from the government (federal / provincial)
- Student grants from the government (federal / provincial)
- From summer employment
- Scholarships grants from other sources
- From employment during the year
- Student loans from a bank
- Dedicated COVID-19 relief (ie:CESB, CERB)



While overall the amount of student financial aid has nearly tripled in the past 25 years, and the Canadian student financial aid system is less loan-based than in previous decades, it is important to note the alarming rate of increased student lending, up 24% since 2018²⁸. For students, lending is not simply replacing types of non-repayable assistance (eg grants), but instead supplementing it, which has led to a 15% increase in the number of student borrowers of loan-based financial aid²⁹.

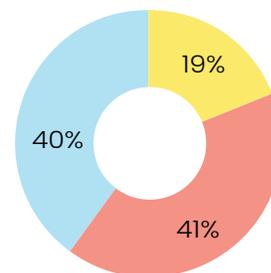
Numerous recent studies have demonstrated that student debt has a substantial negative impact on student

mental health and well-being^{30 31 32}, academic performance^{34 35}, career choice^{36 37}, and long term financial health³⁸.

However, in the study, 41% of students indicated that federal and provincial student financial aid did not significantly helped them fund their PSE studies, as shown in Figure 14. Alarminglly, 19% of students indicated they were not aware of government support programs for funding PSE. In order to help ensure that student mental health and access to mental health services is strong, post-secondary institutions need to work to ensure that students are able to easily access government funding.

Figure 14 – Student Opinions on the Efficacy of Government Support Programs for Students in Post-Secondary

- The funds currently provided by federal and provincial grants and loans for post-secondary education are not enough to be a significant help to those who need them
- The funds currently provided by federal and provincial grants and loans for post-secondary education are enough to be a significant help to those who need them
- I am not aware of funds provided by federal and provincial grants and loans for post-secondary education



Students are divided on whether the funds provided by the federal government are enough to provide the supports they intend to deliver. Lower income students are particularly critical of the supports.

28 Alex Usher, "The State of Postsecondary Education in Canada", Higher Education Strategy Associates. Last accessed July 4, 2022. https://higherstrategy.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/HESA_SPEC_2021.pdf

29 Alex Usher, "The State of Postsecondary Education in Canada", Higher Education Strategy Associates. Last accessed July 4, 2022. https://higherstrategy.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/HESA_SPEC_2021.pdf

30 Sylvia Nissen et al, "Student debt and wellbeing: a research agenda", New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences 14, no. 2 (2019): 245-256, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1177083X.2019.161463>

31 Monique Simone Pisaniello et al, "Effect of medical student debt on mental health, academic performance and specialty choice: a systematic review", BMJ Open 9, no. e029980 (2019): 1-15, <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/bmjopen/9/7/e029980.full.pdf>

32 Nawid Sayed et al, "A Call-to-Action Against Rising Medical Student Tuition", UOJ 9, no. 1 (2019): 25-32, <https://uottawa.scholarsportal.info/ottawa/index.php/uojm-jmuo/article/view/3840>

33 Merryn Sanders Maynard et al, "Experiences of Food Insecurity Among Undergraduate Students: 'You Can't Starve Yourself Through School' ", Canadian Journal of Higher Education 48, no. 2 (2018): 130-148. <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/cjhe/1900-vi-n1-cjhe04386/1057107ar.pdf>

34 Monique Simone Pisaniello et al, "Effect of medical student debt on mental health, academic performance and specialty choice: a systematic review", BMJ Open 9, no. e029980 (2019): 1-15, <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/bmjopen/9/7/e029980.full.pdf>

35 Merryn Sanders Maynard et al, "Experiences of Food Insecurity Among Undergraduate Students: 'You Can't Starve Yourself Through School' ", Canadian Journal of Higher Education 48, no. 2 (2018): 130-148. <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/cjhe/1900-vi-n1-cjhe04386/1057107ar.pdf>

36 Ng & Johnson, 2021; Nawid Sayed et al, "A Call-to-Action Against Rising Medical Student Tuition", UOJ 9, no. 1 (2019): 25-32, <https://uottawa.scholarsportal.info/ottawa/index.php/uojm-jmuo/article/view/3840>

37 Merryn Sanders Maynard et al, "Experiences of Food Insecurity Among Undergraduate Students: 'You Can't Starve Yourself Through School' ", Canadian Journal of Higher Education 48, no. 2 (2018): 130-148. <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/cjhe/1900-vi-n1-cjhe04386/1057107ar.pdf>

38 Monique Simone Pisaniello et al, "Effect of medical student debt on mental health, academic performance and specialty choice: a systematic review", BMJ Open 9, no. e029980 (2019): 1-15, <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/bmjopen/9/7/e029980.full.pdf>

Looking Ahead

Although it is still far too early to declare that the COVID-19 pandemic is over, the end is slowly moving into view. Across the country, young people and students are becoming increasingly vaccinated, and plans are beginning to emerge regarding a full return to in-person classes for the Fall 2022 semester. Though there is cause for optimism, the impact of COVID-19 will remain with students for some time.

This data illustrates how hard the past two years have been for students. The pandemic disruptions have led to a significant negative impact on student mental health, including 3 in 4 students who reported negative mental health during their PSE experience. The pandemic has prompted the resurgence of new and pre-existing mental health conditions for many students, as well as widened the existing barriers to mental health services available through many post-secondary institutions. Specific groups of students also face disproportionate impacts in several areas, including barriers to access, long wait times, lack of awareness how to access services, quality concerns, stigma, confidentiality,

and lack of culturally appropriate services. In addition, other student factors, including online learning models, external funding options, monthly expenses, and lack of available government funding have further exacerbated many of these challenges and barriers. Indeed, the stress of living, studying, and working throughout the pandemic will certainly have a lasting influence on students^{39 40 41 42}.

That said, students are resilient and have overcome numerous barriers in their pursuit of post-secondary education. As the past year has shown, when faced with the challenges of having to adapt to an ever-changing learning environment, students have an incredible amount of dedication. Even through this resilience, it is equally important that students receive the support they require. At CASA, we will continue to advocate for increased mental health supports for students and a post-secondary education sector that is affordable, accessible, innovative, and of the highest quality.

39 Lexi Ewing, et al., "A Qualitative Investigation of the Positive and Negative Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Post-Secondary Students' Mental Health and Well-being", *Emerging Adulthood* 0, no. 0 (2022): 1-16, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/21676968221121590>

40 Statistics Canada, "Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary students", last modified May 14, 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200512/dq200512a-eng.htm>

41 Statistics Canada, "Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary students", last modified May 12, 2020, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2020032-eng.htm>

42 Government of Canada, "The economic impact of COVID-19 on Canada's international education sector in 2020", last accessed Aug 12, 2022, <https://www.international.gc.ca/education/report-rapport/covid19-impact/index.aspx?lang=eng>

Recommendations

In recent years, the federal government has acknowledged the urgent need to address mental health challenges across the country by increasing new and existing supports for Canadians. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) indicates the annual economic cost of mental illness in Canada at \$50 billion, projected for 2021 to reach over \$79.9 billion⁴³ ⁴⁴. The 2021 Federal Budget outlined funding both to support mental health interventions (\$100 million over 3 years) and programming (\$50 million over 2 years) for disproportionately-impacted populations, including youth⁴⁵. Building on this commitment, the 2022 Federal Budget announced its intention to develop a “new Canada Mental Health Transfer to support the expansion and delivery of high quality and accessible mental health services across Canada.”⁴⁶, costed at an initial investment of \$4.5 billion over 5 years⁴⁷. Furthermore, the government announced further funding to develop a national standards for mental health care (\$45 million over 2 years), as well as support to Indigenous co-developed mental health and wellness strategies (\$598 million over 3 years)⁴⁸.

In addition, in the Mandate Letter to the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions and Associate Minister of Health, the Prime Minister called to “Introduce a new fund for student mental health that will support the hiring of new mental health care counsellors, improve wait times for services, increase access overall and enable targeted supports to Black and racialized students at post-secondary institutions across Canada.”⁴⁹

CASA believes in a quality public post-secondary education system that is properly funded, effective, accountable, cooperatively maintained and enhanced by the federal and provincial governments. Given the ongoing challenges associated with student mental health across the country, it is essential that the federal government enact policies that address the mental health needs of students across Canadian post-secondary institutions, particularly those most disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

43 Canadian Mental Health Association, “Fast Facts about Mental Health and Mental Illness”, published July 19, 2021, <https://cmha.ca/brochure/fast-facts-about-mental-illness/>

44 The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, “Mental Illness and Addiction: Facts and Statistics, last accessed August 16, 2022, <https://www.camh.ca/en/driving-change/the-crisis-is-real/mental-health-statistics>

45 Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, “Budget 2021 – A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth, and Resilience”, published April 19, 2021, <https://budget.gc.ca/2021/pdf/budget-2021-en.pdf>

46 Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, “Budget 2022 – A Plan to Grow Our Economy and Make Life More Affordable”, published April 7, 2022, <https://budget.gc.ca/2022/home-accueil-en.html>

47 Liberal Party of Canada, “A Comprehensive Plan for Mental Health Care Across Canada”, accessed Aug 15, 2022, <https://liberal.ca/our-platform/a-comprehensive-plan-for-mental-health-care-across-canada/>

48 Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, “Budget 2022 – A Plan to Grow Our Economy and Make Life More Affordable”, published April 7, 2022, <https://budget.gc.ca/2022/home-accueil-en.html>

49 Rt. Hon. Justin Trudeau, “Minister of Mental Health and Addictions and Associate Minister of Health Mandate Letter”, published December 16, 2021, <https://pm.gc.ca/en/mandate-letters/2021/12/16/minister-mental-health-and-addictions-and-associate-minister-health>

To help address student mental health concerns across Canadian post-secondary institutions, CASA is excited to see the commitment from the federal government to create a new fund for post-secondary student mental health professionals on campuses, to support the hiring of new mental health counsellors, improve wait times for services, increase access overall, and enable targeted support to Black and racialized students at post-secondary institutions across Canada.

Post-secondary students are essential to Canada's economy, society, and global reputation. Given the intensified challenges faced by students immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to develop and maintain effective campus mental health supports, now more than ever. Investing in their mental health and well-being is not only an effective means of reducing the annual \$50 billion economic burden of mental illness in Canada, but is key to promoting Canada's vision as an innovative, affordable, and equitable leader in post-secondary education.

About CASA

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) is a non-partisan, not-for-profit advocacy organisation representing students at 22 student associations across the country. Through our partnership with the Quebec Student Union/Union étudiante du Québec (UEQ), CASA represents 365 000 students across Canada. CASA advocates for accessible, affordable, innovative, and high quality post-secondary education in Canada. For over 25 years, CASA has done so successfully through policy and research development, awareness campaigns, government relations efforts, and partnerships with other stakeholders in the education sector. Part of this work is ensuring that conversations surrounding post-secondary education are undertaken with the most up-to-date information and with direct feedback from students and other leading advocacy stakeholders across the country.

 130 Slater Street, Suite 410, Ottawa ON, K1P 6E2

 casa-acae.com  @casaacae

 613.236.3457  /casaacae

 info@casa.ca  @casaacae



Our Members

