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TECHNOLOGIES

Karto On-Demand

Youth Mental Health in Grande Prairie

Drafted By:

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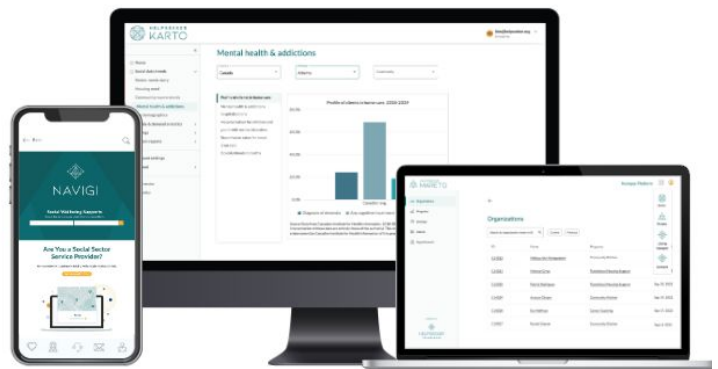
About us

HelpSeeker Technologies is a knowledge company solely focused on solving the social challenges of the current system, and supporting the transformation necessary for a new way.

Our team of 32 multidisciplinary experts spans the domains of data and social sciences, the arts, and engineering. We come from all walks of life and all corners of the world, and as a settler organization we acknowledge that the places we call home today have deep ties to the Indigenous Peoples that have stewarded this land since time immemorial.

We believe that to solve complex social issues, a shift is needed toward a holistic perspective that recognizes the interconnected nature of wellbeing and acknowledges the complexity of social problems.

We support innovators to create a social safety net that works for everyone through innovative data and software-enabled strategies.





Introduction

Mental health among youth in Canada is an urgent issue that requires immediate attention. Currently, 14% of young people across the country and 17% in Alberta are affected by mental health disorders.

The current state of youth mental health in Alberta paints a deeply concerning picture. Mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and ADHD are affecting an increasing number of young people. The economic toll of these challenges is steep, exceeding \$14 billion annually in Canada. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the situation, leading to worsening mental health conditions among youth.

This briefing delves into these issues and more, providing an overview to inform policy decisions and interventions. Topics covered include health disparities based on socio-economic factors, and the specific challenges faced by Indigenous and racialized communities. Additionally, we examine the role of municipal governments in shaping local mental health services, guided by a seven-step roadmap.

This briefing aims to equip readers with the knowledge and insights needed to create more effective, equitable, and responsive mental health services for the young people of Grande Prairie.

Youth and Mental Health: A Note on Definitions



What is “youth”?

In the context of this document, the term "youth" primarily refers to individuals **under the age of 18**. However, it's important to note that the definition of youth can vary based on cultural, legal, and social perspectives. While some frameworks extend “youth” up to the age of 24, especially when discussing issues like mental health, employment, or education, our focus here leans towards those under the legal adult age. There's no universally agreed-upon age range that encapsulates youth, and various organizations and jurisdictions might have their own specific definitions tailored to their needs and objectives.



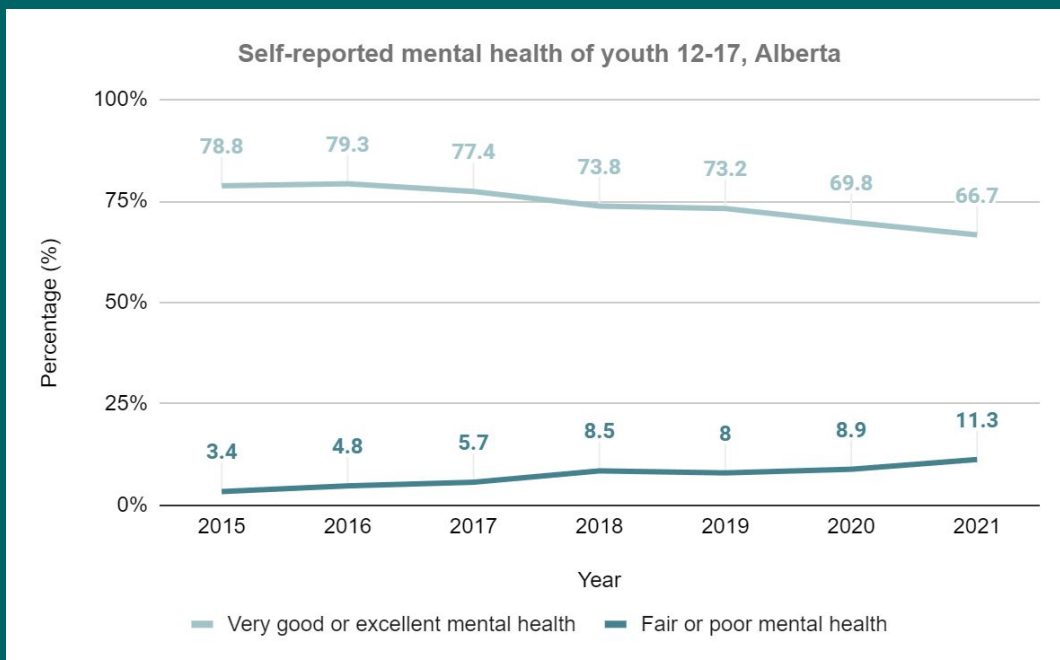
What is “mental health”?

The term "mental health" in this document is used in a broad sense, encompassing **emotional, psychological, and social well-being** as it impacts one's ability to function in day-to-day life. It includes a range of conditions, symptoms, and experiences that may involve mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and other emotional and behavioral challenges. However, it's crucial to recognize that the definition of mental health is not universally agreed upon. It is a multifaceted concept that can vary depending on medical, cultural, and individual viewpoints. The scope can range from clinically diagnosed disorders to everyday stressors affecting mental well-being, especially in youth populations.

Current State of Youth Mental Health in Alberta

Mental health disorders among Canadian youth are a pressing concern, affecting 14% of the population nationally, and 17% in Alberta specifically.

The economic cost of the youth mental health crisis exceeds \$14 billion annually throughout Canada (Alimi et al., 2021). Furthermore, demands for mental health services in Alberta have been on the rise for the last decade, with the COVID-19 pandemic worsening the situation, leading to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and eating disorders among young people (Koftinoff et. al., 2023).



According to the annual Canadian Community Health Survey, youth mental health in Alberta has steadily been declining. In 2015, 78.8% of youth aged 12-17 in Alberta rated their mental health as very good or excellent, while in 2021 that number had dropped to 66.7%. In contrast, in 2015 only 3.4% of youth rated their mental health as fair or poor, which had risen to 11.3% in 2021.

A recent pediatric health study conducted by albertapatients.ca, in collaboration with the Alberta Medical Association, found that:

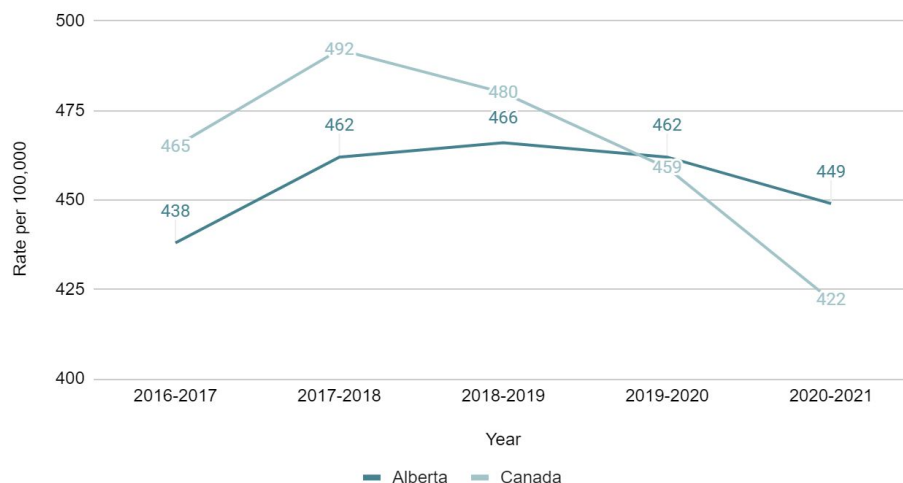
- The most common issues for youth include anxiety (36%), ADHD (31%), and depression (18%).
- Anxiety and depression increase directly with age, along with incidence of self-harm, substance abuse and gender identity concerns

Children living outside Alberta's two largest cities are more likely to face mental health challenges.

This increase in mental health concerns among youth has been accompanied by hospitalizations among children and youth in Alberta.

While the rate of children and youth mental health hospitalizations dropped dramatically in Canada between 2017-2018 and 2020-2021, the rate stayed relatively stable in Alberta, going from a high of 466 per 100,000 in 2018-2019 to 449 per 100,000 in 2020-2021. This is especially notable given the recommendations to avoid hospitals during that same period, the first year of the COVID pandemic (CIHI, 2022).

Children and youth hospitalized for mental disorders, Alberta and Canada, 2016-2017 to 2020-2021



High frequency (4+/year) mental health hospital visits, ages 10-14



The North Zone of Alberta Health Services often sees more hospitalizations per capita than elsewhere in the province.

Rates among 10 to 14 year olds have dropped. As of 2020-2021, the rate of youth ages 10 to 14 making frequent mental health hospital visits has fallen just below the provincial rate.

High frequency (4+/year) mental health hospital visits, ages 15-19



However, the rates of youth 15-19 making frequent mental health hospital visits, while falling from its peak in 2017-2018, is still considerably higher than the provincial average. In 2021-2022, the most recent time period that data is available, these visits happen at a rate that is **109.9 per 100,000 higher than the provincial average.**

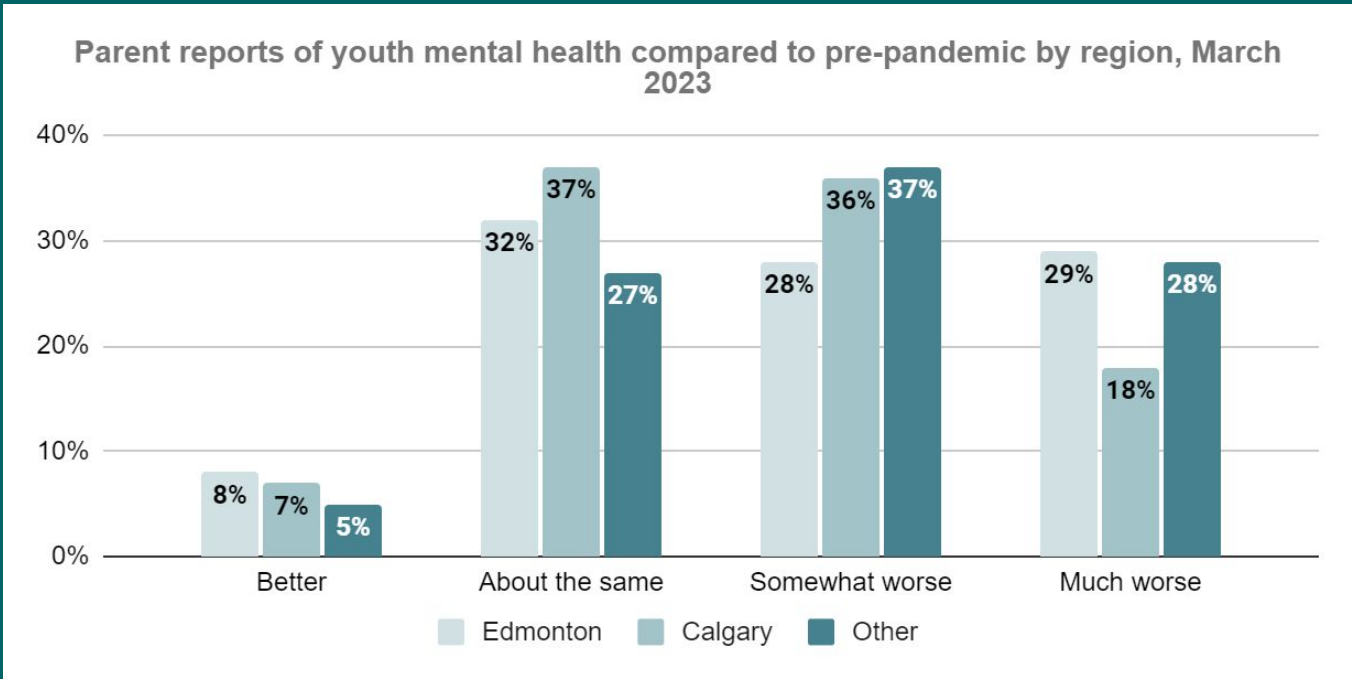
COVID and Youth Mental Health

The **Child and Youth Well-Being Review Final Report** (Government of Alberta, 2021) outlined the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and public health measures on the well-being of children and youth in Alberta. A panel of experts gathered perspectives from thousands of Albertans, including children, parents, educators, and service providers. The review found that public health restrictions significantly disrupted daily routines and social connections for children and youth. This contributed to feelings of isolation, declines in mental health, reduced physical activity, and disruptions to learning (Government of Alberta, 2021).

Specifically, **75% of parents and 90% of professionals surveyed believed the mental health of children and youth had worsened during the pandemic** (Government of Alberta, 2021). Children and youth reported increased stress, loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Physical health also declined due to less participation in sports and recreational activities. For example, 60% of parents indicated their child's physical wellness had worsened, which they attributed to reduced physical activity (Government of Alberta, 2021).

The 2023 albertapatients.ca and Alberta Medical Association survey of parents found that:

- 59% of parents report at least one child experiencing a decline in mental health due to the pandemic.
- 25% of parents report that their child's mental health is 'much worse'
- Children outside of Calgary and Edmonton are experiencing the greatest decline in mental health: while 54% of Calgary parents and 57% of Edmonton parents report their child's mental health is somewhat or much worse, **65% of parents from outside of those cities see a decline in mental health** since the pandemic began.



Accessing Youth Mental Health in Alberta

Parents struggle to navigate Alberta’s mental healthcare system, which they describe as fragmented and difficult to understand.

Challenges include long wait times, lack of continuity in care, and inadequate treatment plans. Emotional and financial burdens are additional obstacles faced by families (albertapatient.ca, 2023).

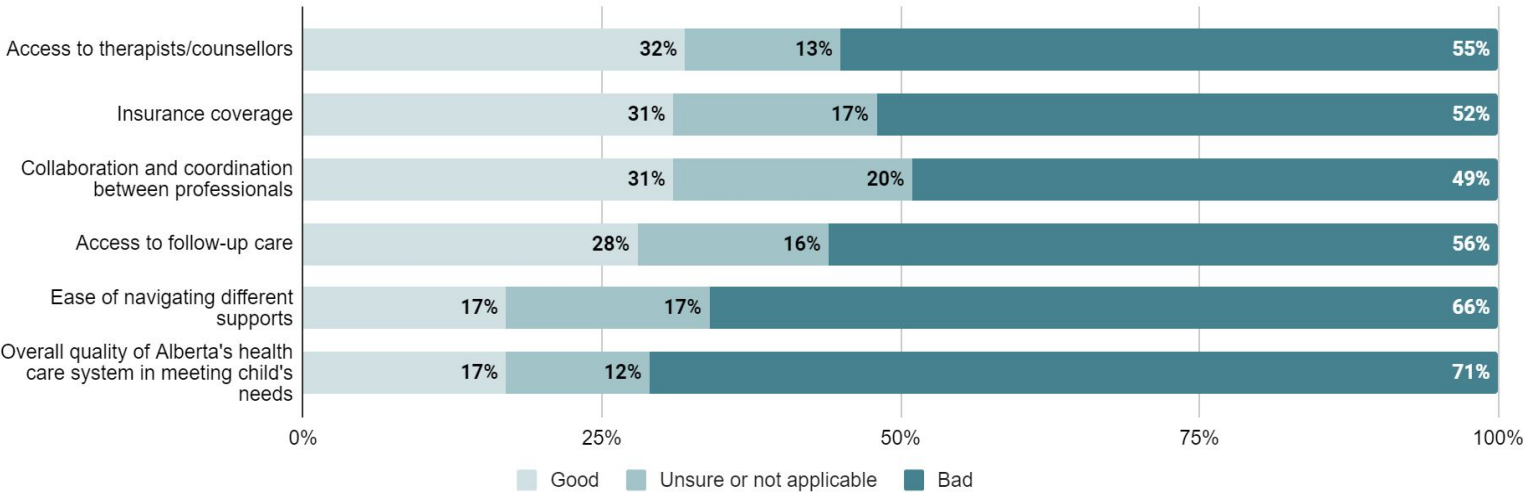
- 71% of parents whose children have a diagnosed mental health issue rate the overall quality of the healthcare system for pediatric mental health as "Bad."
- 49% say there’s a lack of coordination among mental health professionals.
- The most pressing challenges are system wait times (27%), availability of healthcare professionals (23%), uncovered costs (22%), and quality of care (22%).
- Top priorities for improvement include increased availability of care (28%), reduced financial barriers (16%), and quicker access to care (15%).

Fragmented Services: Parents describe the current system as fragmented, with a lack of coordination among healthcare providers. This leads to a disjointed approach to diagnosis and treatment, making it difficult for parents to secure comprehensive care for their children (Leung et al., 2022).

Navigational Challenges: Alberta’s mental healthcare system is complex and difficult for parents to navigate. They report long wait times, gaps in treatment, and a lack of continuity in care as major barriers to accessing adequate services (Leung et al., 2022).

Emotional and Financial Strain: In addition to these systemic issues, parents also face emotional, financial, and stigma-related challenges when seeking mental healthcare for their children. This multi-layered burden complicates their ability to provide effective support (Leung et al., 2022).

Experiences accessing mental health care for children, March 2023
For parents whose child has a diagnosed mental health issue

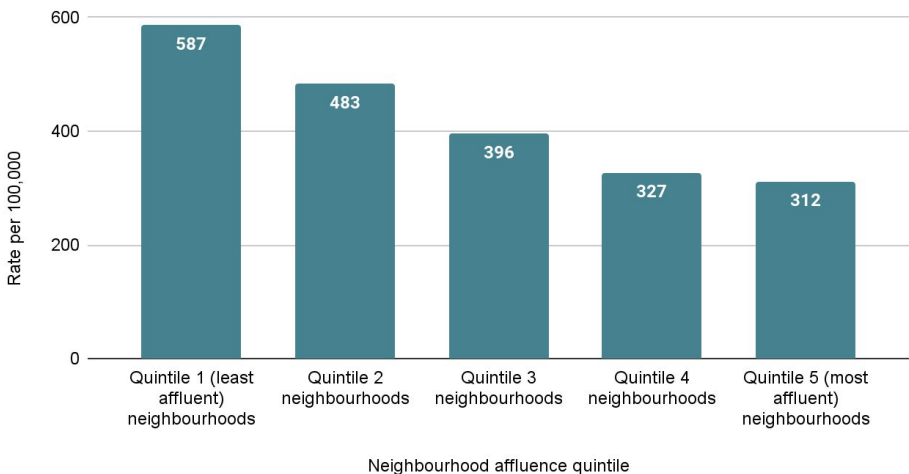


Youth Mental Health and Income Level

Addressing youth mental health requires an understanding of the broader socio-economic context in which young people live. Research has found clear disparities in mental health services for children and youth, especially among low-income and rural families, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these inequities. Families with low income, who already face greater barriers accessing services, were more affected by the pandemic’s negative impacts on children’s mental health (Koftinoff, 2023; Government of Alberta, 2021).

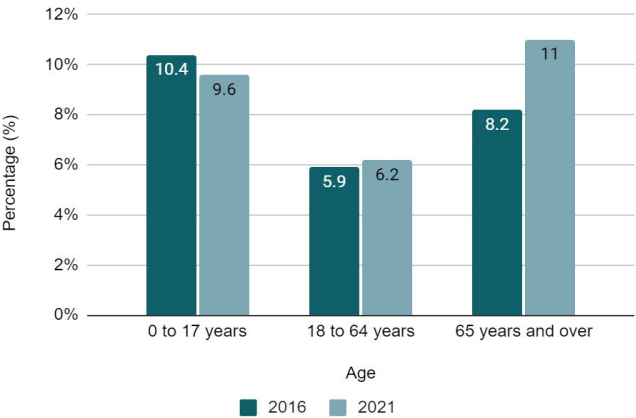
The rate of youth hospitalizations for mental health issues in Alberta varies notably between the least and most affluent neighborhoods. Youth who live in the least affluent areas are hospitalized at a rate of 587 per 100,000, while those residing in the most affluent areas report a rate of only 312 per 100,000 (CIHI, 2022). This stark difference highlights the urgency of directing resources and support to lower-income communities to mitigate these disparities .

Mental health hospitalization rate by affluence of youth’s neighbourhood, Alberta, 2020-2021

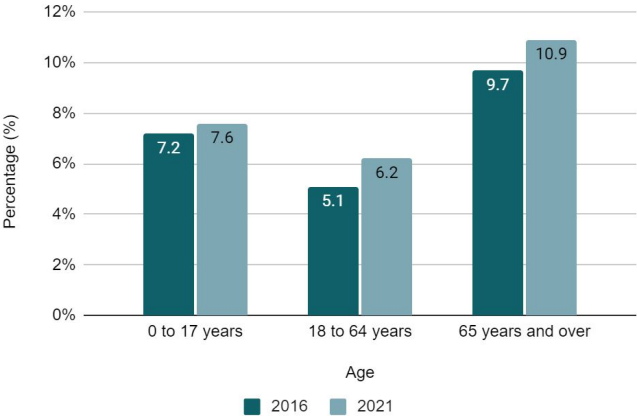


In the City of Grande Prairie, 9.6% of youth aged 0 to 17 years live in low-income households. These youth have a greater risk of mental health issues, and of future hospitalization.

Proportion of individuals in low-income by age, Grande Prairie, 2016 - 2021



Proportion of individuals in low-income by age, Grande Prairie County, 2016 - 2021



In Grande Prairie County, only 7.6 % of youth aged 0 to 17 years live in low-income households. However, with these rates rising between 2016 and 2021, youth mental health resources may become more in demand.

Youth Mental Health among Indigenous and Racialized Populations

Indigenous and racialized communities face specific and significant mental health challenges, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indigenous communities faced isolation due to public health measures, disrupting social connections and cultural practices, and likely worsening mental health. Indigenous parents reported their children's well-being across various domains (mental, physical, social, educational) as worse than what non-Indigenous parents reported, signaling disproportionate effects (Koftinoff, 2023; Government of Alberta, 2021).

Immigrant, refugee, and racialized youth have been particularly affected, with factors such as racism, poverty, and family stress contributing to heightened mental health issues. Intersectional identities and systemic racism have intensified the negative mental health impacts among Indigenous and racialized youth (Koftinoff, 2023; Government of Alberta, 2021).

Case study: Mental health service access for Black youth in Alberta

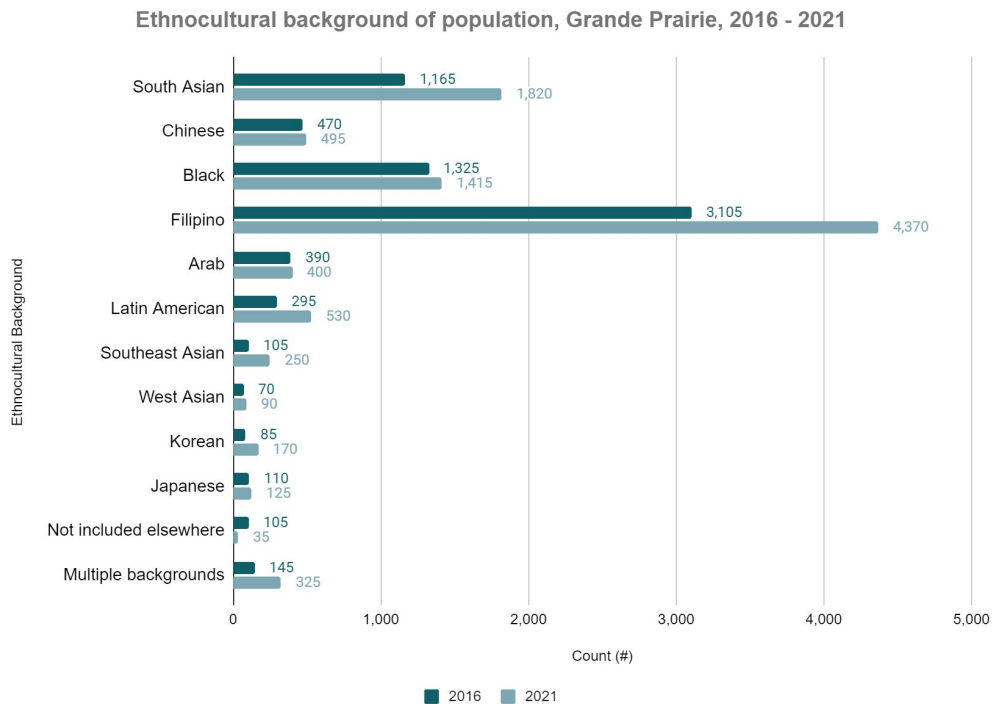
A recent study on Black youth in Alberta highlights six key barriers affecting their access to mental health services (Salami et al., 2021).

- **Cultural Gaps:** Services often aren't tailored for Black youth, making them less likely to seek care.
- **Information Deficit:** Black youth lack specific, accessible information about available mental health services.
- **Cost and Location:** High service costs and their location in wealthier areas create additional hurdles.
- **Community Stigma:** Within the Black community, mental health issues are often stigmatized.
- **Self-Sufficiency Norms:** A cultural emphasis on handling problems individually deters help-seeking.
- **Intersectional Issues:** Being young and Black while needing mental health services leads to cumulative barriers.

To address these issues, the study suggests workforce diversification, more localized services, and antiracist practices (Salami et al., 2021).

Racialized populations in Grande Prairie

Both the City and County of Grande Prairie are growing in terms of their racialized populations.

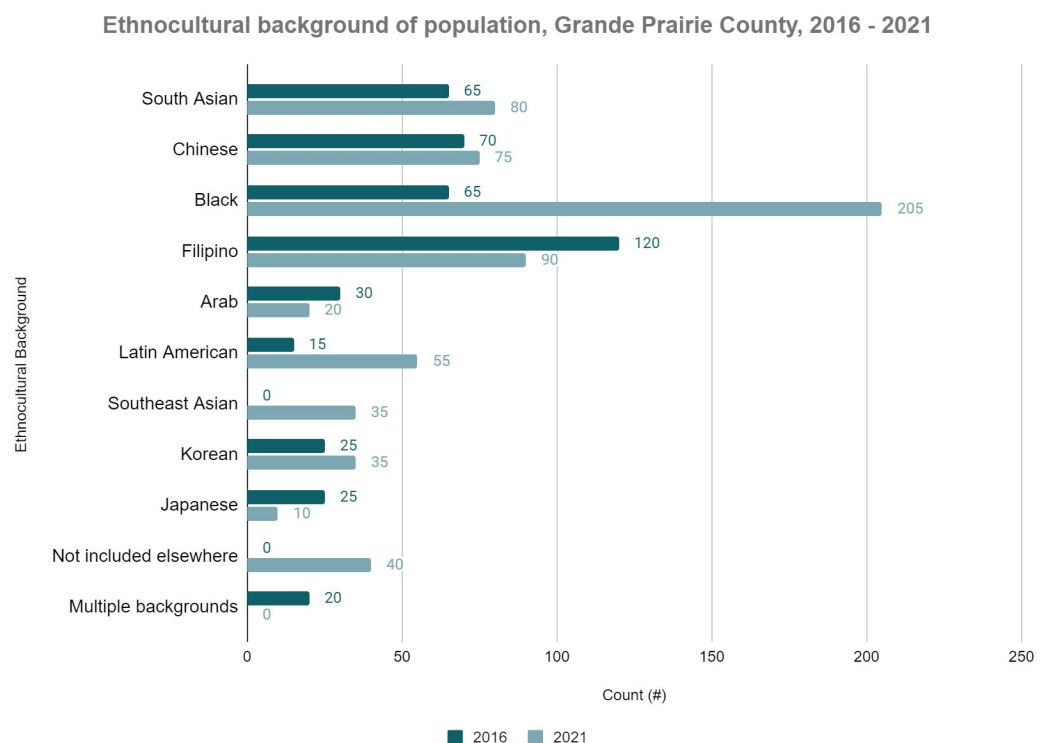


The City of Grande Prairie has a total of 10,035 individuals from racialized backgrounds, making up 15.6% of their overall population.

Between 2016 and 2021, a great deal of growth has happened in the Filipino and South Asian communities. Youth from these backgrounds could be better served by culturally tailored mental health services.

Grande Prairie County has a smaller racialized population, but it is growing quickly. This population increased by 47% between 2016 and 2021, with the Black population increasing in size by 215%.

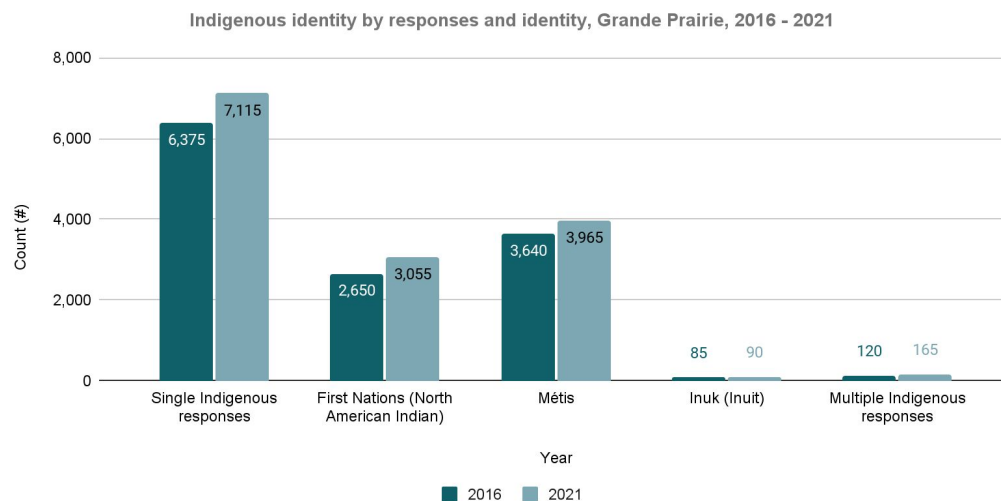
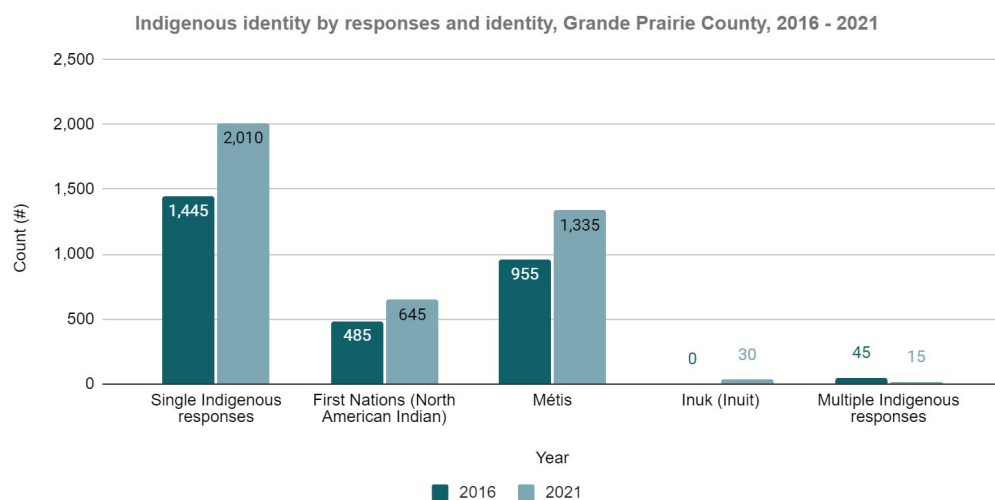
The rural nature of the county and the smaller racialized population may contribute to feelings of isolation among racialized youth. This may increase demand for youth mental health resources.



Indigenous Populations in Grande Prairie

In both the City and County of Grande Prairie, the Indigenous community has seen notable growth in recent years. This expansion in population can have implications for youth mental health among Indigenous groups in the area.

Given that Indigenous communities often face unique mental health challenges, such as the enduring impact of historical trauma and systemic inequities, the growth suggests an increased need for culturally effective and accessible mental health services. Furthermore, the rising population may require service providers to adapt and expand their offerings to meet the specific needs of Indigenous youth, such as incorporating traditional healing practices alongside mainstream approaches.



This population growth, therefore, presents both an opportunity and a necessity for the local government and healthcare systems to prioritize mental health support for Indigenous youth.

Alberta's Provincial Policies on Youth Mental Health: External Reviews

Alberta has made some strides in its approach to youth mental health, notably being one of the four Canadian provinces that meet WHO's minimum criteria for child mental health policies.

Despite this achievement, gaps remain in several areas, including legislative clarity on minors' consent and confidentiality, access to psychotropic medications for youth, inconsistency in patient outcome metrics, and gaps in equitable outcomes among marginalized youth.

- **Legislation and Human Rights:** When it comes to legislative aspects related to consent and confidentiality for minors, Alberta's policies are relatively ambiguous. The absence of clear guidelines complicates the service delivery process and potentially hinders minors from seeking the help they need (Alimi et al., 2021).
- **Access to Medications:** Alberta faces challenges in improving access to psychotropic medications for youth. The issues include a lack of regulatory approval for certain medications and the prescription of medicines for off-label use, both of which can put young patients at risk (Alimi et al., 2021).
- **Inconsistent Metrics:** Alberta currently lacks a standard approach for tracking patient outcomes, making it difficult to compare results across different organizations or jurisdictions. This inhibits the province's ability to make data-driven decisions and adapt policies effectively (Koftinoff et al., 2023).
- **Equity Gaps:** Another worrying trend is the widening equity gap among marginalized youth, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of targeted strategies for these groups increases the risk of their falling through the system's cracks (Koftinoff et al., 2023).

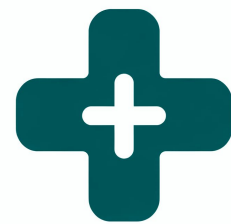


Strengths

Despite these areas for improvement, Alberta does fare well in several aspects such as advocacy, organization of services, and inter-sector collaboration. This suggests that the foundations for an effective mental health policy are in place, but refinement is needed (Alimi et al., 2021).

Spotlight: Access to medical services in Alberta

Access to medical staff and services is a growing issue across Alberta, particularly in the North Zone. Both data and local stories highlight the problem, painting the picture of a strained system and inadequate healthcare quality. Here are some key points to consider:



- **Decline in Available Family Physicians:** Data from Alberta's Find a Doctor website shows a 79% decrease in family physicians accepting new patients from 2020 to 2023, making it increasingly difficult for residents to get the primary care they need.
- **Lack of Specialists:** According to a CBC article, in-person child psychiatry in the North Zone is (as of fall 2022) only available in Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray. While Grande Prairie has access to this specialist, the lack of specialists in the area means that many from outside the area may be travelling for specialist care, causing longer wait times.
- **Residency Vacancies:** The Canadian Resident Matching Service (CaRMS) reported 268 unfilled family medicine residencies nationwide in its first round of matching for 2023. Of these, 42 were in Alberta, indicating a pipeline issue for new medical staff.
- **Local Exodus:** According to the Alberta Medical Association, many rural communities in Alberta are experiencing an exodus of family physicians, leading to understaffed and overwhelmed local hospitals.
- **ER Closures:** The North Zone has faced regular emergency room closures due to physician shortages. This reroutes patients to facilities like those in Grande Prairie, contributing to the overload of already stretched resources.

This scarcity of medical staff and services hits youth mental health hard. Without enough doctors and mental health specialists in rural areas, young people face long wait times and may forego treatment, exacerbating mental health issues over time.

The Government of Alberta has been actively engaged in addressing the mental health challenges faced by children and youth during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both the Child and Youth Well-Being Review Final Report and the subsequent Alberta Child and Youth Well-Being Action Plan provide critical insights and plans for action.

The Child and Youth Well-Being Review Final Report serves as a comprehensive guide for the Government of Alberta, outlining actionable policy recommendations to address the mental health challenges faced by children and youth due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alberta's Child and Youth Well-Being Review

Streamline Access and Referrals:

- Simplify the process for families to access mental health services
- Create clear entry points and straightforward referrals

Enhance Schools' Role:

- Promote interdisciplinary mental health supports in schools
- Foster partnerships across ministries, health services, and communities

Affordable and Accessible Services:

- Make mental health services more budget-friendly, and accessible in rural and French-speaking areas

Whole-Government Approach:

- Review and realign mental health services to address gaps and meet new needs
- Use a multi-ministry approach to strengthen the mental health system

Data-Driven Policy:

- Improve data collection on child and youth mental health

Unique Needs and Voices:

- Factor children and youth's distinct developmental needs into all policy decisions, including in pandemics
- Include youth perspectives in policy decisions

Alberta's Child and Youth Well-Being Action Plan

The Alberta Child and Youth Well-Being Action Plan is a comprehensive strategy to support young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan focuses on several areas relevant to youth mental health.



Mental Health Services in Schools:

The plan calls for \$110 million in targeted education funding over 3 years, with an emphasis on expanding mental health services within educational settings.



Adult Support: Recognizing the role of caregivers in a child's mental health, initiatives like parenting support groups and teacher training on mental health issues have been recommended.



Data Strategy: While not explicitly mental health-related, tracking learning impacts via assessments and data strategy could offer indirect insights into the mental well-being of students.



Technology Access: The shift to online learning has revealed gaps in technology access, which can exacerbate stress and mental health issues. To this end, the plan commits \$780 million over 4 years to improve rural internet access.



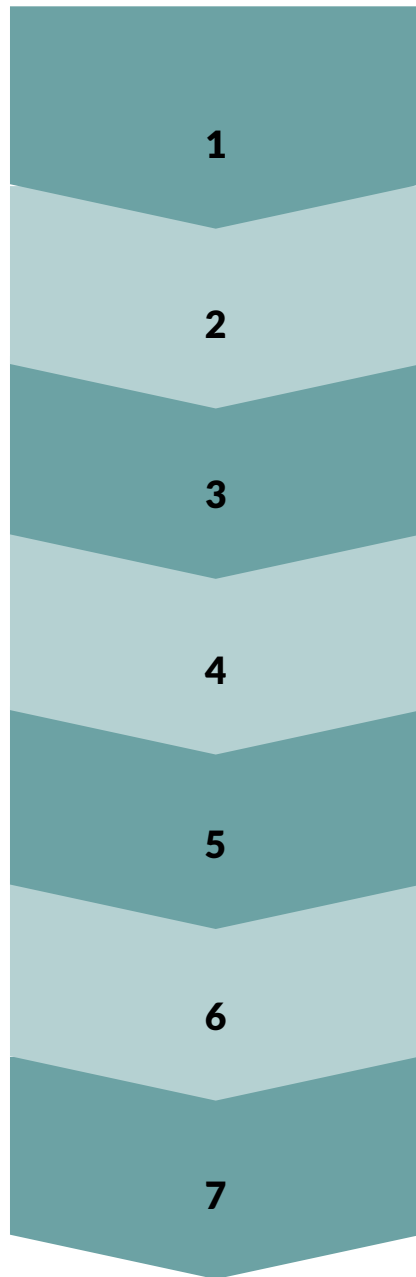
Streamlining Access: To make mental health services easily accessible, the plan aims to align various programs and create "universally accessible pathways." This involves a blend of online resources, dedicated mental health hubs, and cross-ministry integration.



Schools as Support Centers: The plan emphasizes the importance of schools as centers for integrated mental health support, enhancing their role in students' well-being.

Municipal Action on Mental Health

Municipalities hold a significant role in shaping the mental health landscape within their communities. A roadmap developed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Wellesley Institute outlines a seven-step approach for local governments to follow.



Environmental Scan: Begin by identifying current services, systems, and areas lacking adequate resources.

Community Engagement: Use surveys and focus groups to understand community needs.

Partnership Building: Align with organizations and community groups to set objectives.

Leadership and Accountability: Appoint accountable leaders to steer the initiatives.

Measuring Outcomes: Establish metrics, such as health and social indicators, to track progress.

Program Implementation: Roll out programs that respond to community-specific needs.

Ongoing Evaluation: Regularly assess the programs, making adjustments as needed.

Municipal Action on Mental Health



Focus on Youth Mental Health

Different community groups, including children and youth, require targeted attention. Early intervention, school programs, and peer support services can be particularly effective for this demographic.



Community Engagement

Involving a range of community members ensures that the strategies developed are both inclusive and effective. This is essential for youth, who often need different types of support than adults.



Investment and Coordination

Municipalities should invest in and better manage mental health services. This implies efficient use of municipal budgets, government grants, and partnerships for funding.



Reporting and Accountability

Accurate and regular reporting on selected indicators is essential for understanding program effectiveness and making data-driven decisions.



Conclusion

Youth mental health in Alberta is a critical issue that has worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite some progress on the policy front, gaps remain in service coordination, access, and equity.

The provincial healthcare system is currently under strain, described as fragmented and difficult to navigate by parents. This results in long wait times and insufficient treatment plans, adding emotional and financial burdens on families. The situation is especially concerning among marginalized communities and those outside of Alberta's largest cities. Meanwhile, existing legislative gaps and a lack of standardized metrics hinder effective policy making and implementation.

Municipalities are key players in mitigating the youth mental health crisis in Alberta. Through a structured roadmap that includes community engagement and targeted investment, local governments can significantly improve the situation. An integrated, multi-sector approach is essential, with policies rooted in data that account for the unique needs of youth.

By focusing on breaking down systemic barriers, municipalities can contribute to a healthier and more promising future for young residents.



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