

Reports of mental health issues rising among postsecondary students: study

 [theglobeandmail.com/news/national/reports-of-mental-health-issues-rising-among-postsecondary-students-study/article31782301/](https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/reports-of-mental-health-issues-rising-among-postsecondary-students-study/article31782301/)

Simona Chiose - EDUCATION REPORTER

A fifth of Canadian postsecondary students are depressed and anxious or battling other mental health issues, according to a new national survey of colleges and universities that finds more students are reporting being in distress than three years ago.

Reports of serious mental health crises such as depression and thoughts about suicide also rose.

"The survey tells us what the situation is, it doesn't necessarily tell us the why," said Rachelle McGrath, a team lead for Wellness Services at Mount Royal University. "It's our job to try and figure out why." Ms. McGrath is a member of the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS), the group that released the study.

Called the [National College Health Assessment](#), the survey has been used in the United States since 2000. But this is only the second time Canadian students were surveyed. Forty-one Canadian postsecondary institutions participated this year and about 44,000 students responded.

One of the most striking findings was that 8 per cent fewer students than in 2013 felt their health was very good or excellent. Between 3-per-cent and 4-per-cent more said they had experienced anxiety, depression and stress that had affected their academic performance.

Five-per-cent more women said they had experienced sexual touching without consent, as did 1-per-cent more men.

Some of the increases could actually be a positive sign that more people are willing to talk about how they feel, rather than reflecting a decline in mental health among postsecondary students.

"It could be that there is increased occurrence of mental illness, but it could also be that campuses are creating environments where students feel it's safe to come forward," Ms. McGrath said.

Still, some of the statistics in the report should raise immediate alarm and lead to action, she added.

The number of students saying they seriously considered suicide in the prior year was 13 per cent, up 3.5 per cent from 2013, for example.

"That is something that is clear, we don't want people to be considering suicide," she said.

The increase in stress and anxiety is happening at the same time that students say they are exercising and sleeping less. In 2013, over a quarter of students said they hit the gym for at least 20 minutes three times a week or more. Last year, only 22 per cent had been that active.

"It's all interconnected, bad sleep means less capacity to manage your emotions, means more anxiety," said Janine Robb, the executive director of the Health & Wellness Centre at the University of Toronto and also a member of CACUSS. "It's hard for students to see the importance of resting and taking time away. It's counterintuitive to them when they feel they should be studying and doing an all-nighter," she said.

Not all trends were negative. More young women said they had the HPV vaccine that protects against cervical cancer. Several provinces offer the vaccine for free through public school boards. Vaccinations against other infectious diseases were also up.

As well, fewer college and university students said they had driven after drinking. Binge drinking is on the decline too: The percentage of students who said they had more than seven drinks at one time was down 1 per cent.

Improving mental health could take more resources, said Jennifer Hamilton, the executive director of CACUSS.

The survey “builds a case for increased resources to help support student mental health on campus and for health professionals to be able to understand what is really happening with our students,” she said.

Editor's Note: An earlier version of this story said that 9,000 students responded to the Canadian postsecondary survey. In fact, 44,000 students completed the survey. This version has been corrected.

[Report Typo/Error](#)

Follow Simona Chiose on Twitter: [@srchiose](#)