

Councillors/Members

As today, May 7, marks National Child and Youth Mental Health Day, I am writing to you to highlight the impact the pandemic is having on the mental health of children and youth.

Despite the notion that "we are all in this together," Toronto has, rightly, consistently highlighted the inequitable reality of Covid – disproportionately impacting lower income and racialized families and communities and essential and precarious workers.

However, less attention has focused on the inequitable impact on children and youth: 15 months of fear, uncertainty and isolation; extended spells with no in-school learning and the ability to connect with friends; and more than 7 continuous months with no access to the well-known benefits of organized sports.

We have placed a huge burden on our children and youth. They have done their part, conscientiously adapting to and observing the changing rules and guidelines.

But this contribution has not come without significant costs for many.

According to a growing body of research, including from Sick Kids, McMaster and CAMH, children and youth are dealing with increases in anxiety, depression, eating disorders and suicides. A recent report by Statistics Canada found that youth aged 15-24 have reported the largest declines in mental health since the start of the pandemic.¹ Another recent article describes the current situation as follows:

"Since the pandemic began, physicians who care for children and youth have seen a surge of mental health problems — much of which can be attributed to social isolation. Instead of viruses, our clinics and hospitals have been overrun with families seeking care for children and youth in distress — eating disorders, anxiety, hopelessness, depression, problematic substance use, and more.

Years of research tells us that only a small minority of children with mental distress present for help. There are untold more we are not seeing — those whose symptoms are not yet acute enough, or whose parents are not well-resourced enough to bring them to our hospitals and clinics.

Ontario data justify our fears: Youth have reported difficulties with mood and ability to focus, and feeling hopeless about the future. In a SickKids-led study, 70 per cent of Ontario school-aged children (six to 18 years old) reported deterioration in their mental health."²

Given this context, the attachment to report HL28.1, risks minimizing the mental health impact of the pandemic.³ Based on limited data (acknowledged in the attachment but

¹ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75f0002m/75f0002m2021003-eng.pdf>

² <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2021/05/03/for-the-sake-of-the-kids-dont-write-off-the-school-year-just-yet.html>

³ <http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2021/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-166147.pdf>

not the main report), it suggests that "**COVID-19 has had both positive and negative impact on children** and families." While it notes a number of important limitations (e.g. it does not capture the impacts of the provincial shutdown in December 2020, or the extended stay-at-home order in January 2021), it misses others (e.g. the barriers that vulnerable children and youth must overcome to access mental health supports; the reality that mental health concerns often manifest as physical health issues and are not adequately captured).

It is important that committee recognise the damaging impact of the pandemic on the physical and mental health of children and youth and the lasting impacts that this 'shadow pandemic' will have. The City should redouble efforts to support children and youth now and in the years ahead. While there are many actions the City can take, one novel approach as part of City's efforts to Build Back Better, would be to adopt an **Intergenerational Equity** lens to its work so that the interests of children and youth are appropriately balanced with other populations in City actions and advocacy to other governments.

Sincerely

Dean Herd,
Resident Ward 16.

PS: Importantly, report HL28.1 does state that well-being is strongly associated with circumstances that include "**the ability to spend time outdoors, engage in play, and connect with peers.**" Recognising this, while many public health restrictions make sense, denying children and youth the chance to play sports outside does not. All major sports organizations have safety protocols in place -- protocols that were established last year and have proven effective. Following these protocols means that children and youth could be on a field distanced but connected to their friends, coaches and mentors. One action the City could quickly take to support youth is to advocate to the province to open outdoor sports and recreational facilities that represent a very low risk for transmission.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a new level of urgent need for mental health services for children and youth.



*compared to the previous year

Addressing these serious challenges requires new funding, innovations and partnerships with hospitals, the community and government.