

# Connecting the Dots

How Ontario Public Health Units are Addressing  
Child and Youth Mental Health

## SUMMARY





## ABOUT CONNECTING THE DOTS: HOW ONTARIO PUBLIC HEALTH UNITS ARE ADDRESSING CHILD AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

*Connecting the Dots* is the first report in Ontario to survey all 36 health units in order to describe the range of child and youth mental health activities, initiatives, services and programming occurring in Ontario public health units. The study also invited the participants' thoughts on barriers, enablers and opportunities for support and improvement.

A joint project of the CAMH Health Promotion Resource Centre, Public Health Ontario and Toronto Public Health, this study reflects a commitment to understand how public health units in Ontario are addressing the promotion of mental health and the prevention of mental illness for children and youth in their community.

Full Report

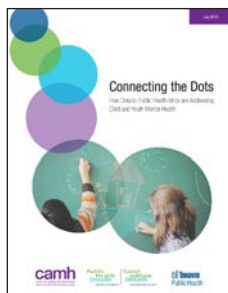
### CONNECTING THE DOTS

How Ontario Public Health Units are Addressing Child and Youth Mental Health

You are invited to view the full report which is available for download at:

[http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/about\\_camh/provincial\\_systems\\_support\\_program/Documents/Connecting%20the%20Dots%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.camh.ca/en/hospital/about_camh/provincial_systems_support_program/Documents/Connecting%20the%20Dots%20FINAL.pdf)

<http://www.publichealthontario.ca>



Project leads

**CAMH Health Promotion Resource Centre**  
[www.camh.ca](http://www.camh.ca)

**Public Health Ontario**  
[www.publichealthontario.ca](http://www.publichealthontario.ca)

**Toronto Public Health**  
[www.toronto.ca/health](http://www.toronto.ca/health)

## Background

Mental health is increasingly considered a key component of overall health and wellbeing. The role of public health in the mental health of Ontarians, however, has not been well-described. For instance, the *Ontario Public Health Standards* (which guides the work of public health units) lacks an explicit mandate to address mental health. But health units are still required to respond to local health needs, which include mental health concerns. After all, the core business of public health in Ontario encompasses illness prevention and health promotion. Where, then, does mental health fit?

## Methods

This study had two components: an online survey and a series of key informant interviews covering all 36 Ontario public health units. Participants in both components were employees from Ontario health units with experience working in or overseeing mental health-related activities or initiatives.

## Findings

All 36 Ontario health units completed the online survey. A total of 325 activities were reported, ranging from 1 to 32 per health unit. The survey data shows that a substantial amount of work is underway, involving diverse approaches to promote and address mental health in children and youth. The key characteristics of these activities are highlighted below:

- ▶ The most common activities were programs delivered by public health units, followed by knowledge exchange and capacity-building activities.
- ▶ The most common target age-group was 14 to 18 years, followed 7 to 13 and 0 to 6.
- ▶ The Ontario government is the most common activity funder, followed by local municipalities.
- ▶ The most common motivation for undertaking an activity is local need.
- ▶ The *Ontario Public Health Standards and Guidance Documents* are being used to guide activities.
- ▶ Partnerships (both formal and informal) are present in most activities.
- ▶ Nearly half of all activities were reported as being evaluated.

Key informant interviews were obtained from 31 of 36 health units. Many factors influence the role and actions of public health units in mental health promotion for children and youth. The most frequently identified enablers and barriers are presented below:

Enablers	Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ partnerships</li> <li>▶ embedded approaches to addressing child and youth mental health</li> <li>▶ strong leadership and commitment within health units</li> <li>▶ fundamental public health approaches, principles and frameworks</li> <li>▶ health unit structure and size</li> <li>▶ staff expertise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ lack of a provincial mandate contributing to unclear roles</li> <li>▶ lack of dedicated resources</li> <li>▶ coordination challenges among community partners</li> <li>▶ lack of focus on mental health promotion and mental illness prevention</li> <li>▶ public perceptions: stigma and conceptualizations of mental health</li> <li>▶ gaps in mental health service system/unmet needs</li> </ul>



## Conclusions and Future Opportunities

A substantial amount of work is already underway by Ontario public health units to address mental health in children and youth. Health units are responding to local needs, working with a variety of partners, and showing resourcefulness by integrating mental health into existing programming. This research study also reveals the enablers and barriers that have had an impact on the current state of public health's collective efforts in child and youth mental health. The overall question of the role of public health in mental health is not a new one, yet it remains largely unresolved in Ontario. The present research helps lay the foundation for providing an answer.

Looking to the future, participants provided direction on the support they would like to receive, including:

- ▮ provincial guidance for public health's role in mental health (such as a clear mandate)
- ▮ identifying evidence on best practices
- ▮ establishing mental health indicators
- ▮ training public health staff
- ▮ knowledge exchange among public health units and community partners
- ▮ addressing larger mental health system service gaps

Future research may explore the interaction between health units and mental health stakeholders including service providers, community partners and government. Data on activities and initiatives targeting adults (for example, young adults, middle-age, seniors) or priority populations would be helpful. Lastly, as innovative public health approaches to mental health are developed and disseminated, there will be many opportunities for the evaluation and replication of these approaches.

## About Camh Health Promotion Resource Centre

The CAMH Health Promotion Resource Centre provides system support, capacity building and access to evidence-based resources to inform programming and policy for Ontario health promotion and public health audiences related to: substance misuse, mental health promotion and tobacco. The CAMH Health Promotion Resource

Centre is situated in the Health Promotion and Prevention Team, Provincial System Support Program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). CAMH is Canada's largest mental health and addiction teaching hospital, as well as one of the world's leading research centres in the areas of addiction and mental health. CAMH combines clinical care, research, education, policy development and health promotion to help transform the lives of people affected by mental health and addiction issues. For more information about CAMH, visit [www.camh.ca](http://www.camh.ca).

## About Public Health Ontario

Public Health Ontario (PHO) is a Crown corporation dedicated to protecting and promoting the health of all Ontarians and reducing inequities in health. Public Health Ontario links public health practitioners, front-line health workers and researchers to the best scientific intelligence and knowledge from around the world.

Public Health Ontario provides expert scientific and technical support to government, local public health units and health care providers relating to the following:

- ▮ communicable and infectious diseases
- ▮ infection prevention and control
- ▮ environmental and occupational health
- ▮ emergency preparedness
- ▮ health promotion, chronic disease and injury prevention
- ▮ public health laboratory services

Public Health Ontario's work also includes surveillance, epidemiology, research, professional development and knowledge services. For more information about PHO, visit [www.publichealthontario.ca](http://www.publichealthontario.ca).

## About Toronto Public Health

Toronto Public Health reduces health inequalities and improves the health of the whole population. Its services are funded by the City of Toronto, the Province of Ontario and are governed by the Toronto Board of Health. Toronto Public Health strives to make its services accessible and equitable for all residents of Toronto. For more information about TPH, visit [www.toronto.ca/health/](http://www.toronto.ca/health/). ●