

## How Does Immigration, in Relation to Gender Differences in Canada, Influence the Accessibility of Mental Health Services for Youth?

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### Abstract

This paper discusses immigration, gender differences, and the accessibility of mental health services for youth in Canada. For immigrant youth, compounded barriers based on cultural differences, language challenges, and systemic discrimination act as severe obstacles to their access to mental health care, with females being more affected than males. This approach is so direly needed because mental health services often do not serve their vulnerable population base and are based on being both culturally responsive and gender-sensitive. Socioeconomic factors further complicate the challenge to accessibility to mental health services among immigrant youth; many of these come from low-income families, complicating problems of affordability and access to care. The "healthy immigrant effect" is an issue where health deteriorates after the arrival of immigrants in Canada, prevalent among refugees and family-class immigrants. This deterioration in health is usually connected to several kinds of stress associated with immigration: economic instability, social isolation, and the pressure to fit into a new culture. These stressors are more intense for women and girls due to the gender-specific and cultural barriers that inhibit them from accessing mental health services. This paper is based on a literature review examining the impact of immigration and gender differences on access to mental health services for Canadian youth. The literature review for this article has been undertaken through a systematic academic database. The selection of articles pertaining to barriers to mental health services, gendered differences, and immigrant populations delineated three key themes. According to the findings, a compelling case exists to develop and implement culturally safe, accessible, and inclusive mental health services. Such services should address the unique barriers of cultural differences, language proficiency, and systemic discrimination. It is also quite paramount to provide gender-sensitive services, especially regarding the provision of mental health services for non-binary and LGBTQ+ youth. These disparities need to be rectified so that all Canadian youth, regardless of their immigrant background or gender identity, get equal access to mental health care. By doing so, Canada can come closer to that healthcare system, which serves the betterment of all its youth.

**Keywords:** immigration; youth mental health; gender differences; cultural barriers; culturally responsive care

### Introduction

#### Overview of Mental Health Among Immigrant Canadian Youth

This research draws attention to essential gender differences in the mental health of Canadians and shows that women are more likely to report mood disorders and severe mental health issues, such as moderate to severe anxiety and depression, than men [1]. Women also utilize more frequent mental health services as compared to men, experiencing greater dissatisfaction due to financial barriers and longer waiting times [1]. Non-binary and LGBTQ+ youth also suffer greater incidences of depression and anxiety compared to their male peers, indicating a need for specialized and inclusive mental health services [2]. Immigrant youth, especially girls, have compounded barriers due to differences in culture and language that may

impede their access to mental health services [3]. Structural and cultural barriers, combined with transportation difficulties, lack of culturally appropriate services, and the stigma attached to mental health, significantly influence the use of mental health consultations by immigrants [3]. Such stress related to immigration, when coupled with economic uncertainty and ethnic discrimination, worsens mental health issues, especially for ethnic minority women who experience both gender and racial discrimination [4]. Recent studies have found that gender differences in service use are influenced by transportation, permission to seek treatment, and accessibility to linguistically and culturally appropriate services among immigrants [3]. Assistance to those recent immigrants who are less likely to access mental health services is, therefore, needed to improve support and culturally sensitive services for immigrant

subgroups [3]. Their socioeconomic status also influences the mental health of immigrant youth. According to the literature, lower household incomes are related to worse mental health outcomes among these youth [5]. Gender differences have been revealed in that, generally, female youth fare better than males in several dimensions of mental health, which may draw further implications for sensitive services under consideration of gender and socioeconomic factors [5]. This healthy immigrant effect—suggesting that immigrants enter with better health than the native-born population—decays over time, most notably in refugees and family-class immigrants [6]. The compounded stress of immigration and gender-specific problems could contribute to why refugee women often report poorer self-rated mental health, suggesting a need for culturally sensitive mental health services [6]. Pre-migration stressors for recent immigrants—especially the refugee and female populations—combined with post-migration factors such as social isolation and discrimination increase the risk of stress and emotional problems [7]. Gender-sensitive, culturally appropriate mental health services in Canada are therefore crucial since this group faces a lack of care sensitive to culture, long wait times, and other barriers to their mental health care [7]. The dramatic rise of mood and anxiety disorders in youth, especially young females, underscores the centrality of gender in mental health outcomes [8]. However, access to services remains a challenge, with unmet needs for counselling or psychotherapy being more pronounced among women and younger people [8]. Addressing gender-specific barriers related to culture, language, and systemic discrimination is crucial to ensuring equitable and accessible mental health care for all youth, especially those from immigrant backgrounds.

## Methods

### Study Design

This paper is a literature review that explores how immigration, in relation to gender differences, influences the accessibility of mental health services for youth in Canada. Data were collected by systematically searching related articles, reports, and other relevant academic sources.

### Data Collection

The search strategy involved using various academic databases. The inclusion criteria for studies consisted of the period from 1990 to 2024, using the keywords "immigration," "youth mental health," "gender differences," "Canada," and "access to mental health services." Selection was made for articles that discussed the different barriers to access to mental health services by immigrant youth using qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles were included if they:

1. Discussed mental health service accessibility among youth in Canada

2. Addressed gender-specific differences in mental health
3. Focused on immigrant populations or cultural barriers
4. Were published in English

Studies were excluded if they did not include youth or lacked discussions on gender or immigration-related barriers.

### Data Analysis

Studies that met the inclusion criteria based on titles and abstracts underwent a full-text review. Data from these selected articles were extracted and synthesized according to recurring themes related to cultural barriers, gender differences, and mental health service access among immigrant youth.

## Discussion

### Gender-Based Mental Health Challenges Among Canadian Youth

The gender disparities in mental health among the youth in Canada are pretty vast. Gender-specific differences characterize trauma exposure among justice-involved youth: males report high rates of cumulative trauma, while females have a history of complex trauma, thus calling for the provision of gender-specific services in this realm [9]. For instance, girls are more likely to report higher levels of depressive symptoms, frequent health complaints, and diagnosed mental illness than boys, which are associated with factors like addictive social media use and perceived lower support from the family [10]. More depressive symptoms are seen in females aged 15 to 19, and this calls explicitly for special targeted mental health services among older adolescent females [11]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, older women were much more likely to report symptoms of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, suggesting a higher need for mental health services among women [12]. Gender disparities in mental health among women only increased during COVID-19, with poor mental health and levels of stress and anxiety increasing due to mounting responsibilities for caregiving and households [13]. People in the gender minority group also reported the lowest levels of life satisfaction and mental health, something that could be associated with the chronic stress from stigma and discrimination in the society they live in [14].

Additionally, female members of the Canadian Armed Forces tended to have significantly higher anxiety, depression, and perceived stress during the pandemic, with family status as a significant factor in the functional impairment of these women [15]. These findings highlight the very urgent necessity for gender-sensitive, culturally grounded mental health interventions that resolve barriers unique to immigrant youth in Canada, ensuring equitable access and outcomes for all.

### Accessibility of Mental Health Services Among Canadian Youth

Systemic barriers to care, such as fragmented services, long waiting lists, and cost, create some of the most challenging issues found in reaching and accessing mental health services for Canadian youth [16, 17]. This comes with a critical transition period from child to adult services when youths often have difficulties accessing appropriate care [16]. A solution that has been proposed to address such problems is the integration of youth services, thereby making these services more accessible and amicable to the youth. However, long wait times and variability in service availability across provinces continue to hinder access [16]. Gender differences are very significant in service accessibility since more girls and young women access mental health services than boys and young men, especially concerning transgender and non-binary youth increasingly reporting service utilization [18]. However, these groups are also characterized by higher rates of unmet mental health needs despite the higher level of utilization, which points out the critical need for such targeted interventions that could be inclusive and sensitive to the unique challenges these populations face [18]. Therefore, immigrant youths face added struggles, including cultural stigma and language barriers, along with a lack of appropriate mental health care offered with cultural sensitivity by these services [19].

Moreover, the discrimination and systemic racism that pervade their healthcare systems makes it even more cumbersome for immigrants to navigate and access mental health services [19]. There have also been suggestions for family navigation services, which could be a potential bridge over such barriers, although they are not universally available [19]. Although the use of social media to improve mental health literacy and promote help-seeking behaviour is starting to present promising results, its overall effectiveness in changing behaviour is still limited by several significant obstacles, such as ongoing stigma and low awareness of available services [20]. The urgency of the need to transform mental health services for youth lies in the fact that the prevalence of most mental disorders is in the range of 12–25 years, and many delays usually happen before one receives treatment [21]. Immigrant and refugee children further complicate the care because it comes with added issues: cultural differences, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with the healthcare system [21]. Meeting these challenges and keeping stride with the need for integrated, culturally sensitive, and youth-friendly mental health services touches on a critical call to be met by all, even more so for individuals working with marginalized and immigrant youths [21]. Together, these findings underline the necessity of developing inclusive, accessible, and culturally sensitive mental health services in Canada, targeting issues for youth that are compounded by gender, cultural background, and other systemic barriers [16-21]. The urgent actions in tandem can enhance the fairness and

efficiency of the mental health care system, with the best outcomes for all youth—including immigrant and marginalized communities—for which these efforts are targeted [16-21]

### Immigration and Youth Mental Health in Canada

In studies carried out in Canada, greater emotional and psychological problems in immigrant youth are associated with cultural distance, perceived discrimination, and resettlement stress, although this effect is especially characteristic of youth whose origins are highly characterized as culturally different [22]. The immigrant population refers to first-generation immigrants, youth who have personally immigrated to Canada, and second-generation immigrants born in Canada to immigrant parents. Acculturation and adapting to a new environment are some challenges faced by first-generation immigrants. Parallely, cultural and systemic racism barriers may still be experienced by second-generation immigrants, despite being born in Canada, due to their parents' cultural background and immigration status [22]. The often harsher parenting practices related to resettlement stress are tied to higher levels of emotional problems that, in turn, negatively affect the mental health of youth in these families [22]. Resilience factors, such as acculturation strategies and social competence, might moderate some negative impacts; therefore, it is seen that youth with an integrative strategy cope more successfully with some of the adverse effects than their non-immigrant counterparts [22]. Moreover, many access barriers to mental health services continue to exist for these youth, particularly those with concurrent disorders or those requiring culturally responsive care, due to structural issues around the affordability and appropriateness of services, policies, and procedures at a systemic level [22]. Educational and employment challenges, compounded by language barriers and a lack of cultural sensitivity, put immigrant youth at higher risk of underemployment and discrimination in the labour market [23]. These problems are worsened by social and cultural barriers, such as difficulty maintaining one's cultural identity [23]. At the same time, they are expected to fit in within the larger Canadian society, which isolates and marginalizes them. This isolation and marginalization, in many instances, can lead to identity conflict [23]. Mental health problems are prevalent and are due to the stressors of immigration, pre-migration trauma, and adaptational difficulties, necessitating an immediate provision of culturally sensitive mental health services for the specific needs of immigrant youth [23]. Canada is no different in this kind of acculturation, full of psychological stress because immigrant youth have to cope with language barriers, feelings of marginalization, and the pressure to blend in with a new culture while still holding their cultural values [24]. Peer relationships can influence the process when teenagers struggle to be accepted and not rejected, leading to unwanted results like delinquency and drug

abuse, especially in unstructured environments [24]. The more the educational barriers, their integration and academic achievement are compounded, especially for those from war-affected backgrounds or with interrupted schooling; this becomes the more substantial reason they potentially become subject to hopelessness and increased vulnerability [24]. These concerns are related to mental health struggles and thus can become significant barriers to access to mental health services: identity conflict, language, and the scarcity of available culturally sensitive mental health resources in Canada [24]. Also, a large part of educational and employment barriers in immigrant youth could be attributed to low settlement service funding, lack of English-language programming, and racially biased streaming into lower educational tracks, which often leads them to the low-skill and low-wage end, again perpetuating a cycle of socioeconomic disadvantage [25]. This exacerbates these challenges through discrimination in the labour market—rejection of foreign educational credentials and work experience, along with exploitation in precarious jobs [25]. Trying to balance cultural heritage with the demands of Canadian society results in feelings of isolation, conflict of identity, and difficulty in building social networks—direct impacts on the mental health and well-being of immigrant youth, creating considerable barriers to accessing mental health services in a system that might not be appropriately set up to meet the needs of its users [25]. The vital need for targeted interventions that consider and address cultural and structural barriers to mental health care for immigrant youth in Canada has been underscored in these findings: inclusion, cultural sensitivity, and the responsiveness of mental health services to the diverse issues faced by immigrant youth are some ways in which their mental well-being and successful integration into society can be supported [22-25]

#### Targeted Mental Health Interventions: Addressing Gender and Cultural Barriers

Research on sex differences in the use of mental health services shows that girls and young women have a higher rate of using the services than boys and young men. About 50% of boys and young men with self-reported early needs accessed services, compared to over 60% of girls and young women and around 80% of transgender and non-binary youth [17]. Many young people, mainly from racialized and LGBTQ+ communities, expressed not knowing where to go for mental health support, combined with long waiting times, financial barriers, and a lack of culturally sensitive service availability. These obstacles can be even more significant for immigrant youth, both in the sense of a language barrier and cultural differences [17]. This is further supported by the literature on gender differences in mental health service use, which shows that men are less likely to seek services unless they have a definite need for care and poor self-rated mental health, whereas women are more consistent in their use of mental health services, particularly

if they have a history of service use [26]. This variance in employment status further influences service utilization. Men not in the labour force were almost three times more likely to use mental health services than their female counterparts in the same situation [26]. For immigrant youth, gender-specific factors and other challenges, including language differences and socioeconomic disparities, further contribute to more complex access to care, highlighting the importance of considering gender differences and employment status in mental health services design and provision [26]. Women are 27% more likely than men to seek professional help for mental or emotional problems, with family physicians being the most frequently consulted professionals. Women, however, consult significantly more professionals of various backgrounds than men, including psychologists and social workers, making service availability cut across numerous sectors of the same service providers [27]. Hence, the possibility of such gender differences among immigrant youth has important implications, especially for immigrant women and girls who may face unique challenges due to cultural norms and expectations [27]. These results underscore the need for responsive, culturally sensitive mental health services, which must also be formulated with gender-relevant considerations and individualized for immigrant youth populations [27]. Gender differences also have a bearing on the barriers to seeking mental health care, as women report facing more barriers related to family responsibilities, lack of childcare, and transportation, while men face many barriers dealing with whether care is acceptable, such as preferring to self-manage mental health issues or not knowing how to seek help [28]. The differences between men and women are even more pronounced in immigrant youth, who already have cultural and linguistic challenges associated with barriers to mental health services [28]. Specifically, the research shows that gender-specific approaches are necessary for mental health care, particularly those that enhance the access of women to mental health services, increase service availability, such as providing childcare and transport support, and improve the acceptability of care through reduced stigma and culturally sensitive services [28]. Mental health care that is available to sexual and gender minorities (SGM), especially transgender and non-binary people, is limited and often involves barriers like being unable to afford services, not having appropriate insurance coverage, and being unable to access or having little experience with friendly service providers. This is further complicated for immigrant youth who identify as SGM, are relatively new to the host country, have cultural differences, and also face a non-conducive mental health service delivery environment [29]. This study underpins the importance of interventions targeted at meeting the gender and cultural needs of this population to access mental health care services better [29]. Reducing disparities in access to mental health services for immigrant youth will require both new and existing services to focus on addressing the specific

needs of diverse groups by taking into account factors related to cultural sensitivity. Culturally appropriate programs, with multilingual support and cross-cultural training, are essential, as shown by successful interventions in various immigrant communities [3]. Gender-sensitive services targeting immigrant girls, non-binary, and LGBTQ+ youth have shown efficacy in reducing stigma and improving access [29]. Government subsidies can also be used to address financial barriers [28]. In terms of limitation, there is a wide variation in cultural backgrounds; thus, it is challenging to generalize cultural differences, and specific examples from studies, such as those focused on African, Caribbean, and Southeast Asian youth, demonstrate the need for more targeted approaches [19, 22]. Future research should address culturally specific interventions that can meet the needs of immigrant youth [25].

### Conclusion

All these findings collectively underline the need for the development of inclusive, accessible, and culturally sensitive mental health services that address the specific needs of diverse gender groups, mainly immigrant youth in Canada [29]. Addressing these gender-specific barriers and challenges will guide the development of more equitable and effective mental health services for all youth, improving outcomes, especially for minority and immigrant youth [29]. To improve outcomes, mental health interventions must be gender-sensitive and culturally responsive, ensuring equitable care for all youth, especially those from marginalized backgrounds.

### List of Abbreviations

COVID-19: coronavirus disease of 2019  
LGBTQ+: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer +  
SGM: sexual and gender minorities

### Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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