



2024-2025

# Year in Review

Mental Health & Addictions

Health Promotion Team



# Our Vision



We have a vision where every child, youth, and family thrives while experiencing positive mental health and well-being.

We recognize that history, current happenings and conditions where people live, grow, learn, work, and play have a profound influence on health. The reality for Nova Scotia is that oppression, racism, discrimination, and systemic barriers continue to exist and contribute to inequitable conditions that contribute to poor health outcomes.

Our team works to address these inequitable conditions. Through the practice of reviewing the most recent evidence and data, we build relationships with community partners and strive for health and social policies that will improve well-being at the population level.

Our work centres on children's rights and focuses on the three key social determinants of mental health.



# Social Determinants of Mental Health



## Access to Economic Resources

When people can live with dignity and afford basic life necessities such as shelter, food, and recreation while having equitable access to healthcare, education, childcare, and transportation.



## Freedom from Discrimination and Violence

When people feel safe, supported and encouraged to be their authentic selves, they experience the sense of ease and connection to their family, community, and society.



## Social Inclusion and Belonging

When people are supported and feel a strong sense of attachment, representation and respect within their family, community, neighbourhood, school, workplace and greater society.





## The Work We Do

Our team addresses the Social Determinants of Mental Health through various health topics and portfolios. Over the past year our work included:

- Access to affordable and appropriate housing
- Improving food security
- Elevating priority for Children and Youth in Care
- Supporting the rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ children and youth
- Preventing gender-based violence
- Addressing the impact of climate change on youth mental health
- Exploring the impacts of the online environment's on children and youth
- Reducing harm from substance use and gambling among youth
- Consulting on various projects with equity and child right's lenses

# Prioritizing Care Experienced Youth

Children and youth in the care of the province (Care Experienced Youth) deserve to be recognized as a priority group for improved social and economic well-being.

CEY face several compounding issues including housing, financial, caregiver and community instability, as well as education and employment barriers, and potentially criminal justice system involvement. They often experience social isolation, poor mental health, early or unintended pregnancy and parenthood, difficulty accessing health care, and higher death rates (ages 17-25). Each of these possible outcomes often result in discrimination.

Efforts are being made to address these challenges through policy changes, increased support services, trauma informed care training, and community initiatives. Significant work remains to ensure that CEY have the resources and opportunities needed to thrive.

## Highlights on work for Care Experienced Youth

- Continued collaboration with the 4-year SSHRC Partnership project led by Dr. Jacqueline Gahagan from Mount Saint Vincent University, examining the nature of tuition waiver programs for CEY across the Atlantic region.
- Member of the One Small Thing Project led by the Let's Care Collective and CEY lived experience team with support from the Department of Opportunities and Social Development (OSD) and Executive Council Office (ECO).
- Presented "So you're going to be a health care provider, what do you need to know about children and youth in care?" at the IWK Board of Governors Poster Day.
- Established working group to advance increasing access to regular and trusting relationships with care providers for CEY. Changes to billing codes to allow for longer appointments to build and nurture trust between youth and providers is a key priority.





## Elevating supportive Environments for 2SLGBTQIA+ Children and Youth

Children and youth have a right to fully participate as their authentic selves and to live without discrimination or violence. Discrimination and violence based on one's gender and/or sexuality can have a deep impact on their well-being.

Safe, welcoming and supportive gender affirming environments and care are critical. In an increasingly political world with a rise in misinformation, and hate, addressing public misunderstanding, barriers to safety, and access to care is needed.

IWK Health can be leaders in ensuring affirming, supportive, and evidence-informed care is well understood and that those who access or provide the care are respected and supported.



### Highlights on Supportive Environments

- Participated in two IWK Health Gender Inclusive Care Committees.
- Developed and submitted an SBAR to IWK Executive Leadership with intention to draft an IWK Health Gender Affirming Care Position Statement.

# Addressing Gender-Based Violence through Population Health Advocacy Partnerships

GBV is impacting children, youth and families at alarming rates. An estimated one in three Canadians identify as having experienced physical violence, sexual assault, or exposure to domestic abuse in childhood. The Mass Casualty Commission recommendations call for public health approaches.

Our team steps into this work by increasing partnerships, synthesizing evidence, and participating in opportunities to bring a child, youth and family lens to community conversations.

## ➔ Highlights on GBV Work

- Supported MCC recommendation C.17 with participation in a government co-design process for bystander education within the P-12 school curricula.
- Presented the Population Health Approach to Address Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth to:
  - Mount Saint Vincent University's BEd Seminar
  - Integrated Service Delivery Table,
  - Pictou County Interagency on Family Violence
  - Trafficking Exploitation Support System (TESS) Partnership Conference held at Acadia University.
- Facilitated a one-day domestic violence virtual training on behalf of the Department of Justice for public servants.



# Temperature Check! Do our Systems Centre Child and Youth Mental Health in the Context of Climate Crisis?



Our health and mental health are determined largely by the personal, social, economic, environmental, and cultural contexts of our lives. Children and youth are more vulnerable than adults to exposures in their environment. The climate crisis threatens children's health, particularly the environments where they live, learn, and play—spaces or systems critical for their mental health and well-being.

How we plan and adapt to climate change is crucial to safeguarding child and youth mental health. Currently, gaps exist in integrating mental health into public sector climate adaptation plans. Contributing a child and youth lens with a focus on protective factors for positive mental health is needed, as are targeted policy reforms that safeguard children's well-being amid an escalating climate crisis.



## Highlights on Child and Youth Mental Health and Climate Change

- Developed a policy brief and a manuscript on Integrating Child and Youth Mental Health in Climate Adaptation Plans: Insights and Recommendations from a Rapid Scoping Review and Knowledge User Engagement.
- Presented on the Multisystem Adaptations for Child and Youth Mental Health in a Climate Crisis project at the annual Recreation Nova Scotia Conference held at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish.
- Case Sponsored and mentored a Climate Project for the 8th Annual Nova Scotia Policy Hack. The project outperformed 18 other projects to win first place.



# Exploring Health Promotion Frameworks for Online Environments

A new portfolio for our team has emerged around children and youth in the online environment. There is tremendous potential to contribute to the growing evidence of benefits and harms that the online environment can pose.

There is a need to influence policies that will reduce the harms in the online environment, including exposure to discrimination, violent pornographic content, sexual exploitation and violent extremism. At the same time, there is a need to understand the benefits of being online, such as increased social connection, representation of identity, educational opportunities and virtual access to programs and services.



## ➔ Highlights on the Online Environment

- Engaged with Health Promoters from Nova Scotia Health, the Department of Health and Wellness, and colleagues from the Canadian Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence to review evidence and frameworks.
- Supported resource development for schools/youth/parents related to the new school cellphone restrictions directive. The resource package included key messages, a slide deck, literature review and mental health support links.
- Interviewed by CBC's Jeff Douglas regarding a new study indicating the use of screens (phones/tablets/TV) as a distraction or way to help children emotionally regulate which is correlated with decreased ability for emotional regulation. Discussed challenges, modelling and reinforcing healthy screen behaviors.
- Hosted IWK/Dalhousie University's Pediatric Grand Rounds featuring US-based Pediatric SANE nurse and educator Heidi Olson who shared the impact of online violent pornography on children and youth. Resources available on SHELF.

# Cannabis and Health Promotion: A Broader Understanding of Cannabis Harms and Supportive Public Policy

Like many substances, cannabis can be regulated for sale to adult consumers while protecting public health. Since the Canadian legalization of cannabis edibles and extracts for recreational/non-medical use in October 2019, reports of unintentional cannabis exposure for children and youth have increased. In the most recent Canada Student Tobacco and Drug Use Survey (CSTADS), 30.6% of youth in grades 7-12 in Nova Scotia report ever having used cannabis - the highest number of all participating provinces and territories.

The greatest harms are caused by cannabis with very high THC concentrations and are often in the form of edibles and extracts. Unregulated products are sometimes available online and are not from regulated retailers.

The places where cannabis is sold, online access, and the marketing of cannabis products impact youth cannabis use. It is so important for our team to collaborate on ways to reduce cannabis harms by sharing evidence to improve public policy that reduces marketing, and unregulated cannabis access in Nova Scotia.



## Highlights for Regulated Substances

- Prepared an SBAR for executive leadership team regarding potential conflict of interest with regulated substance companies and IWK logo use.
- CanFASD conference – Submitted an abstract on the importance of alcohol policy in the prevention of FASD.
- Accepted abstract submission for the Issues of Substance 2025 conference on a Population Health Approach to the Prevention of Cannabis-Related Harms in Children and Youth.
- Youth Gambling Surveillance Research Proposal – With guidance from ST FX University's SHEA Lab prepared a budget and tentative project outline.

# Our team

We have a dynamic team of four:

- Erica Adams, MA (Secondment)
- Sarah Blades, MPH
- Jenna Hopson, MPH
- Sabrianne Penner, MPH (Term)
- Lila Pavey, MPH





IWK Health

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