



Annual Report

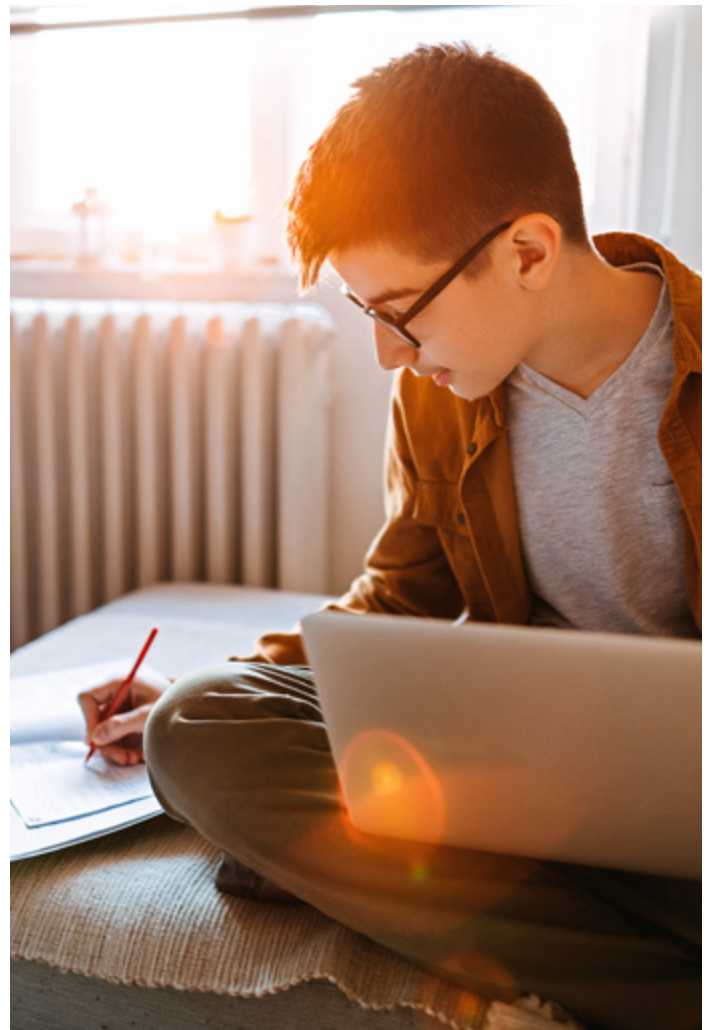
2021 - 2022



project step

project step is a community-wide initiative that ensures young people and their families have access to **support, treatment, education, and prevention** of harms related to substance and technology use. *Project step* partners deliver addictions counselling, prevention education, and family support in every publicly funded high school and in five community-based schools in Ottawa. The partnership also provides live-in treatment at two centres – one in each official language.

Addressing substance and technology use challenges early is key. If we stop the cycle of addiction before it begins, we set kids on track for a healthy life with stable employment, housing, and social connections.



BECAUSE OF PROJECT STEP...

- Youth have ready access to substance use counselling in any of the publicly funded high schools in Ottawa, and in several community agencies focused on helping young people.
- Young people receive education on substance use health and mental health. They also receive information on how to support their peers and where they can turn to for help for their mental health, or if they are questioning their relationship with substances or technology.
- Parents with children experiencing challenges with substance or technology use can access counselors to help them support their kids on the path to their success or recovery.
- Teachers and school staff receive presentations and workshops to help them identify youth experiencing challenges with substance use health or addictions, and connect those students with *project step*.

| | | |
|---------------------|-----------|--|
| SINCE 2007 | 15,530 + | students access school-based counselling |
| project step | 198,000 + | students receive education sessions |
| HAS HELPED: | 14,700 + | parents receive the support they need |



THE ISSUE

The effects of the pandemic continue to strain services

Experts working with youth have seen alarming trends among young people during the COVID-19 pandemic: declining mental health, students struggling in school, and increased substance use among the most vulnerable youth.

While lockdown measures subsided significantly during the 2021-2022 school year compared to the year prior, many youth and their families experienced prolonged periods of isolation or restrictions to attending in-person community programs. *Project step* partners adapted to offering hybrid or online services where possible to continue

touchpoints with clients, but recognizing that this model is not ideal for all clients.

As the pandemic wears on, mental health and addictions services have seen increased levels of demand for service, increased complexity and severity of needs among clients, and heightened pressures on staff and volunteers. Staff burnout coupled with [recruitment and retention challenges faced by the sector](#) have impacted the ability of frontline services to run consistent programming.

Youth are struggling with their mental health

Ottawa Public Health analyzed the [2021 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey \(OSDUHS\)](#) for local trends. The findings show a statistically significant increase in local students self-reporting their mental health as fair or poor: 44 per cent in 2021, compared to 21 per cent in 2019.

Particularly, students living in lower socio-economic status (SES) households had worse rates of mental health (66 per cent rating their mental health as fair or poor) compared to higher SES households (35 per cent rating their mental health as fair or poor). 73 per cent of 2SLGBTQQIA students rated their mental health as fair or poor, compared to 37 per cent of heterosexual students, demonstrating significant needs within this population.

In most indicators captured by OSDUHS, 2SLGBTQQIA and gender diverse youth fared significantly worse off than heterosexual or cisgender youth. Particularly, 94 per cent of those not identifying as man/boy or woman/girl rated their mental health as fair or poor.

42 per cent of students in grades seven to 12 in Ottawa reported wanting to talk to someone about a mental or emotional problem but not knowing where to turn. This is up from 34 per cent in 2019.



Youth are using substances to cope with poor mental health

Alcohol and cannabis continue to be the most frequently used substances among students in Ottawa, with 32 and 15 per cent using each of those substances, respectively.

Of particular concern is the 10 per cent of Ottawa students in grades seven through 12 that use opioids for non-medical purposes. Additionally, one in 10 students in grades nine to 12 reported using cannabis in the past year to cope with a mental health issue. In Canada, apparent opioid toxicity deaths [increased by 96 per cent in the first year of the pandemic](#) (April 2020 to March 2021) compared with the same period the preceding year. [Opioid overdose](#)

[emergency department visits remained consistently high throughout 2021 and 2022.](#)

In 2021, one in 10 students bet money online on a game in the past year, and nearly three quarters of students reported more than two hours of daily recreational screen time.

Ottawa Public Health did caution the limitations of the OSDUHS data for 2021, given that the response rate was much lower than 2019, and that students would have filled out the survey from home instead of in a classroom setting.

“When we see percentages, it doesn’t always impact us in the same way as when we see numbers. When we think about what these percentages represent, we’re talking about thousands and thousands of young people.”

- Benjamin Leikin, Program Manager, Mental Health, Addictions and Substance Use Health, Ottawa Public Health

HISTORY



In 2007, United Way East Ontario, together with the Champlain Local Health Integration Network (now Ontario Health East), Ottawa Network for Education, Ottawa Public Health, four Ottawa school boards and six community agencies launched *project step* to address the need for support, treatment, education, and prevention of substance use issues among youth in Ottawa.

Before *project step*, young people in need of substance use treatment had nowhere to go. They were often forced to leave home, incur costs, and they did not have access to follow-up support. With the leadership of *project step*, Ottawa now has two live-in substance use treatment programs for youth – one in each official language.

Project step also delivers addictions counselling, prevention education, and family support in every publicly funded high school and in five community-based schools in Ottawa. This programming is delivered in partnership with the four school boards and five service delivery partners (Le CAP, Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services, Operation Come Home, Youville Centre, and Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health), and is funded by Ottawa Public Health, the four Ottawa school boards and United Way East Ontario. *Project step* is coordinated by the Ottawa Network for Education and United Way East Ontario.

PROGRAMMING

Project step's **support, education, and prevention** activities take place within the high school environment. For most youth, this means they have access to confidential mental health and substance use counsellors through their school. For others, it means they can access *project step's* programming through community-based organizations that offer high school programming as a part of their support to vulnerable youth. During COVID-19 school closures, *project step* partners continued offering service virtually.

Project step's school-based programming is delivered by Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services, Le CAP and Ottawa Catholic School Board counsellors.

Students at every public high school in Ottawa, including alternative schools, have access to substance use prevention and education programming, and counselling. Many intermediate and elementary schools (grades five through eight) also have access to education and prevention programming through *project step*.

School-based substance use counsellors also provide educational sessions, including teacher training and parent-focused events, related to mental health and substance use.

Project step also ensures substance use counselling services are available to youth who may not be engaged in the public school system, through three community agencies:

- **Youville Centre** provides young single mothers and expectant mothers with a full range of counselling and life skills supports.
- **Operation Come Home** provides mental health and substance use counselling to street-involved and at-risk youth.
- **Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health** provides culturally appropriate mental health and addictions programming for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children, youth, and families.

IMPACT

Data is collected during each school year, between September to June. Some community programming carries over into the summer months.

School-Based Programming – Outputs

In 2020-21 prevention and education awareness sessions were provided to students in grades four to 12, however in 2021-2022 the student prevention and education sessions were delivered to students in grades seven to 12, like program delivery in previous years. Due to staff shortages and turnovers, the partners had difficulties collecting data on the number of participants for school prevention and education as well as information and training sessions.

| SCHOOL YEAR | 2007-12 | 2012-13 | 2013-14 | 2014-15 | 2015-16 | 2016-17 | 2017-18 ¹ | 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 | 2021-22 | TOTAL |
|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------|---------|
| Youth engaged in counselling | 3,400 | 1,600 | 1,770 | 1,330 | 1,420 | 1,460 | 1,188 | 1,114 | 758 | 720 | 771 | 15,531 |
| Youth participating in prevention & education | 13,700 | 6,300 | 17,100 | 15,500 | 12,310 | 14,100 | 22,900 ² | 34,597 ² | 19,477 ³ | 27,350 ⁴ | 15,300 | 198,634 |
| Parents engaged in counselling | 1,630 | 270 | 320 | 260 | 200 | 220 | 250 | 172 | 233 | 183 | 51 | 3,789 |
| Parent information sessions | N/A | 110 | 140 | 200 | 3,020 | 2,420 | 1,044 | 2,171 | 1,364 | 452 | 282 | 11,203 |
| School personnel attending training sessions | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 88 | 234 | 1,398 | 561 | 2,281 |

NOTE: there is a slight decline in counselling and information sessions from 2019/20, and again in 2020/21 because of school closures during the pandemic.

MOST COMMON PRESENTING ISSUES FOR REGISTERED CLIENTS — LE CAP (N=203)

| | |
|-----|-----------------------------------|
| 60% | ADDICTION / SUBSTANCE USE |
| 45% | MENTAL HEALTH |
| 17% | EDUCATION/EMPLOYMENT |
| 15% | FAMILIAL ISSUES |
| 25% | ADDICTION/SUBSTANCE USE BY OTHERS |
| 13% | ANGER/AGGRESSIVENESS/VIOLENCE |

MOST COMMON PRESENTING ISSUES FOR REGISTERED CLIENTS — RIDEAUWOOD (N=305)

| | |
|-----|------------------------------|
| 58% | SUBSTANCE USE BY SELF |
| 42% | MENTAL HEALTH |
| 17% | SUBSTANCE USE BY OTHERS |
| 10% | PROBLEMS WITH TECHNOLOGY USE |
| 9% | TRAUMA |

¹ The data provided for 2017/18 is incomplete due to reporting issues.

² Includes youth in grades 5-12

³ Includes youth in grades 7-12

⁴ Includes youth in grades 4-12



School-Based Programming - Outcomes

| IMPACT OF INTERVENTION ON STUDENT WELLBEING (N=52) | IMPROVED | SAME |
|--|----------|------|
| Relationship with family | 54% | 46% |
| Relationship with peers | 54% | 46% |
| School | 58% | 42% |
| General mental health | 58% | 42% |
| Moving towards goals | 90% | 10% |
| Learning about themselves | 92% | 8% |

Community-Based Programming – Outputs

| SERVICE DELIVERY PARTNER | INDIVIDUALS SERVED |
|--|--------------------|
| Le CAP (Centre d'appui et de prévention) | 1,850 |
| Youville Centre | 109 |
| Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services | 103 |
| Operation Come Home | 66 |
| Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health | 53 |
| Total | 2,181 |

Community-Based Programming – Outcomes

| OUTCOMES | TOTAL |
|--|--------------|
| Clients reduce substance use | 48% |
| Clients reduce harm or enter a treatment program | 63% |
| Youth with improved mental health outcomes | 76% |
| Youth with reduced suicide ideation | 81% |
| Youth with improved connections to family, friends and community | 68% |
| Academic or employment success | 86% |
| Total # of youth who completed counselling | 2,050 |
| Total # of parents who completed counselling | 153 |

WHAT'S NEXT FOR PROJECT STEP

In 2022-2023, Vivic Research, an Ottawa-based economic consulting firm that specializes in data-driven research through a social justice lens, has been conducting an environmental scan for *project step* to scope the context across East Ontario pertaining to substance use and mental health supports for youth. The results of this environmental scan will be used to identify gaps in service provision, areas for improvement in collaboration, policy barriers, and attitudes that may influence the work of *project step* in the coming years. This data-backed report will help strengthen *project step's* impact and ability to be responsive to the needs in our region.

Additionally, a cohort of students in Carleton University's Public Policy and Program Evaluation diploma are compiling an evaluation framework and theory of change for *project step*. These measurement tools will help *project step* understand the impact of our convening efforts, which bring together multiple partners from diverse sectors and organizations in pursuit of our common mission.

project step is made possible through the partnership of these caring and committed organizations:

PROGRAM PARTNERS:



SERVICE DELIVERY PARTNERS:



Together, we can change the trajectory of a young person's life – for the better.

PROJECT-STEP.CA

