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Canadians report lower self-perceived mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic

by Leanne Findlay and Rubab Arim

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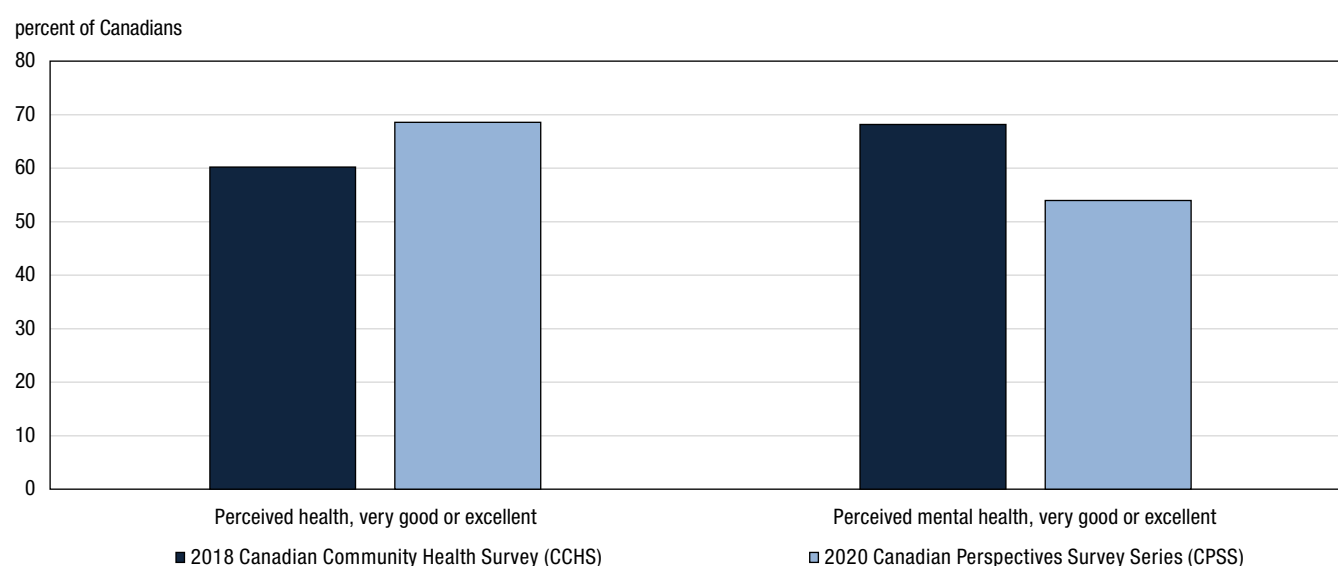
Fewer Canadians report that they have excellent or very good mental health, particularly women, but overall Canadians report better physical health

According to the recent Canadian Perspectives Survey Series (CPSS), 54% of Canadians aged 15 and older reported excellent or very good mental health during the COVID-19 period. This compares to the findings from the 2018 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) when 68% of Canadians aged 15 and older said that their mental health was excellent or very good (Chart 1)¹.

Women in particular were more likely to report poorer mental health as compared to men. About half of women said that their mental health was excellent or very good (49% compared to 60% of men). In 2018, women were also less likely than men to report excellent or very good mental health although the difference was not as large (66% compared to 71% for men).

More Canadians reported that their physical health was excellent or very good – 69% of Canadians compared to 60% in 2018. It is possible that during a pandemic, people who are not ill are more apt to report relatively better health, that is, have a positive perception of their own health.

Chart 1
Self-perceived excellent or very good mental or physical health



Source: Statistics Canada, 2018 Canadian Community Health Survey and 2020 Canadian Perspectives Survey Series.

1. The CPSS and the CCHS include the same questions about self-perceived health and mental health. However, it should be noted that they are distinct surveys with different sampling frames.

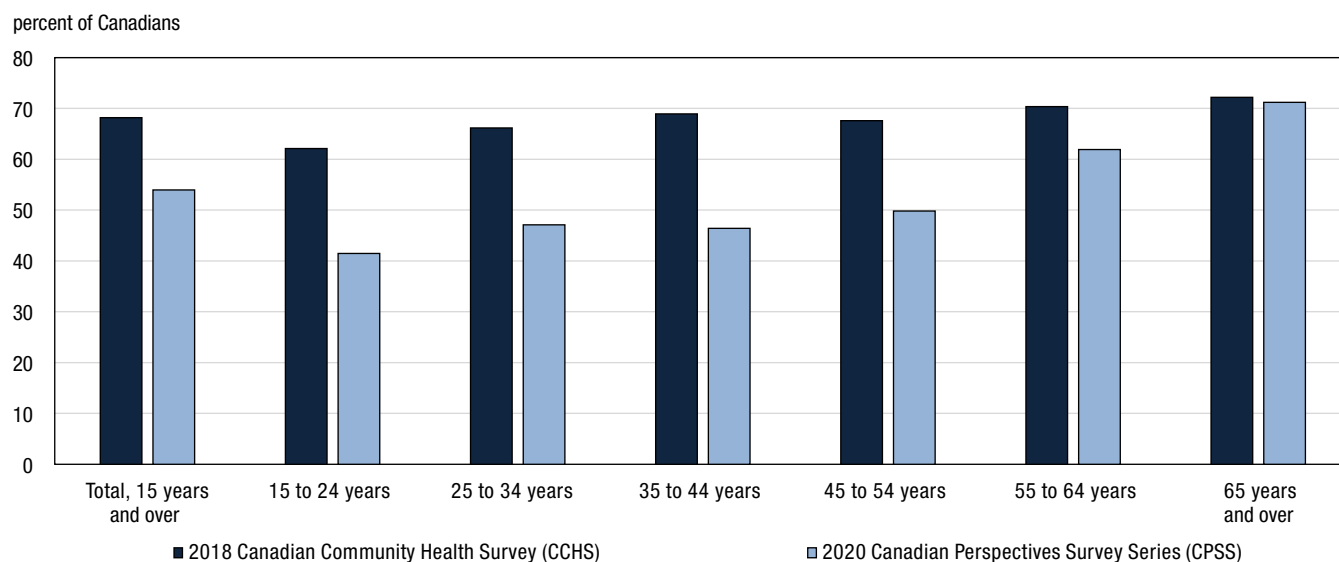


Youth are less likely to report excellent or very good mental health

All age groups except individuals aged 65 and older were less likely to report excellent or very good mental health during the COVID-19 period. However, the difference between 2018 and 2020 was particularly evident for younger adults (Chart 2). For example, among those aged 15 to 24, 42% reported excellent or very good mental health during the pandemic compared to 62% in 2018.

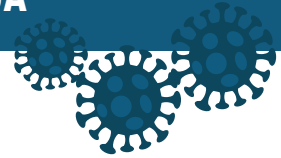
In contrast, those aged 65 and older, who are at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19, had similar rates of excellent/very good mental health in the CPSS as compared to 2018 CCHS (71% vs. 72%, respectively). It is important to note that the CPSS was not conducted in long-term care residences or in remote areas with low population density; therefore, the findings should be interpreted accordingly.

Chart 2
Self-perceived mental health, by age group



Source: Statistics Canada, 2018 Canadian Community Health Survey and 2020 Canadian Perspectives Survey Series.

These results suggest that Canadians' overall mental health has decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women and young Canadians' self-perceived mental health was particularly impacted based on comparisons between the 2020 CPSS and the 2018 CCHS. Researchers have suggested that a variety of mental health interventions, including digital and tele-mental health resources while physically distancing, may be an option for meeting some of the mental health needs of the population in response to COVID-19 (Holmes et al., 2020). Results suggesting that Canadians rated their physical health more positively during the pandemic warrant further exploration.



Methodology

There is a large body of evidence to suggest that mental health can be negatively affected by adverse events such as natural disasters (North et al., 2013) and health epidemics (Lau et al., 2010), although the impact on self-perceived physical health is less clear. Early results from other countries have shown a psychological impact related to COVID-19 (Wang et al., 2020). Subgroups of the population have been shown to be particularly at risk for poorer mental health, including women (Furr et al., 2010) and youth (Kar & Bastia, 2006). This article examined self-perceived mental and physical health of Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic and reports differences between women and men and for different age groups.

This article is based on two data sources. First, to get timely information about how Canadians are coping with COVID-19, Statistics Canada developed a web panel survey, the Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 1: Impacts of COVID 19 (CPSS). More than 4,600 people in the 10 provinces responded to this survey between March 29th and April 3rd, 2020. Second, the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) 2018 was used to compare Canadians' self-perceived health prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. The CCHS covers the population aged 12 and older in the 10 provinces and 3 territories, with approximately 65,000 respondents annually. In order to align with the sample of the CPSS, only those aged 15 and older and living in the 10 provinces were included in the analyses for this article.

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