PRESS RELEASE

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Winnipeg, MB – The Pediatric Outcome ImProvement through Coordination of Research Networks (POPCORN) has published their latest research findings in *JAMA Network Open* on mental health hospitalizations of children and youth throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings then led the team to evaluate the relationship between hospital admissions for eating disorders and public health restrictions; published in *JAMA Pediatrics*.

When comparing hospital admissions before and during the pandemic for mental health conditions, they found a decrease for mood disorders, substance-related disorders, and other mental health disorders, as well as a decrease in the overall rate of mental health admissions. However, they did find an increase in admissions for anxiety disorders, personality disorders, and suicide attempts in females, and an increase in eating disorders in both sexes. Their research showed that admissions for eating disorders more than doubled in most Canadian regions for female patients between the ages of 12-17 years old during the first year of the pandemic.

During the pandemic, public health restrictions, such as lockdowns and school closures, varied from region to region from 0-80% stringency. They found that in their largest cohort of participants – adolescent females – for every 10% increase in the strictness of public health measures, there was a 5% increase in hospital admissions for eating disorders in Quebec and Ontario; an 8% increase in Prairies; and an 11% increase in British Columbia.

“Strict public health measures were necessary to mitigate death and harm from COVID-19, but it’s important to understand the impact of these measures on youth,” explains Dr. Nadia Roumeliotis.

Throughout the study, parents and youth with lived experiences of eating disorders were involved in the interpretation of the study results. This level of patient engagement has helped the team understand the unanswered question of why eating disorder hospitalizations increased more than other mental health conditions during the pandemic.

"Having the opportunity to share my thoughts in a collaborative environment was incredibly empowering, reinforcing the idea that my perspective has value," says Abby McCluskey, Youth Partner. "This work with POPCORN has demonstrated that lived experience and researcher/clinician perspectives can coexist, and that working together is key to creating meaningful, productive change."
These studies were led by the Indirect Consequences project team, including Dr. Matthew Carwana, pediatrician and early career clinician-investigator at BC Children’s Hospital; Dr. Quynh Doan, clinician-scientist at BC Children’s Hospital; and Dr. Nadia Roumeliotis, clinician-researcher at CHU Sainte-Justine. They collaborated with Sylvana Côté (researcher), Ofélie Trudeau-Ferrin (biostatistician) and Drs. Baudouin Forgeot D’Arc, Soren Gantt and Caroline Quach-Thanh at Centre de recherche Azrieli du CHU Sainte-Justine, and Katia Charland and Kate Zinszer from Université de Montréal in the publication of these study results. This team came together from across many different regions of Canada and from a wide range of disciplines and expertise, bringing a strong variety of experiences and strengths to this team’s dynamic.

This research highlights the importance of how necessary public health measures indirectly affected youth’s health and wellness. Future public health planning will need to consider implications for youth at risk for mental health conditions, and their resources and support needs. While the team still learns more about which public health measure is the most associated with these increases in mental health conditions and hospital admissions, social isolation and a lack of medical services severely affected those with and those at risk of eating disorders. Moving forward, it is vital to provide screening and monitoring for eating disorders, to maintain clinical services, and ensure ongoing support for this vulnerable group.

“To prepare for future pandemics, we need to monitor vulnerable groups, and plan how to support them. Youth with eating disorders is one of these vulnerable groups.”
- Dr. Nadia Roumeliotis

You can find our infographics and study results summaries on these research findings on the Indirect Consequences page on the POPCORN website.

About POPCORN
POPCORN brings together researchers, clinicians, decision-makers, and patient partners to form a pan-Canadian pediatric research platform and answer important questions in child health. While created in response to COVID-19, the platform will provide the infrastructure to prepare for future pandemics.

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