

Background: INSPIRE-PHC Research Findings for Ontario

New research conducted by INSPIRE-PHC¹ shows that as of March 2022, 2.2 million Ontarians were without a regular family doctor, an increase from the 1.8 million in March 2020.

In Toronto, at least 415,000 are without a family doctor, and those with the lowest income are especially impacted. The latest number of Toronto patients without a family doctor is an underestimate as data is unavailable for patients who were born in or who moved to Toronto after 2019.

On average, a family doctor [takes on 1200 patients](#) (many take on far more). In this case, Toronto would need at least 385 new family doctors who solely focus on family medicine to meet the current demand. It isn't possible to reach this target due to the current shortage, as well as the limited number of family doctors coming in and the large number who are nearing retirement.

Based on [2019 data](#) that showed 1.7 million Ontarians have a family doctor poised to retire, along with the current data, over 3 million Ontarians may be without a family doctor by 2025.

Many family doctors are ageing and [set to retire](#): As of 2019, 4.9 million Ontarians had a family physician over the age of 55. Additionally, more family physicians stopped work during the first six months of the pandemic than in previous years. [Findings suggest](#) many of these doctors likely chose to retire early due to the pandemic.

Family doctors may also leave family practice before retirement age to practice other, more specialized types of medicine that are perceived to be less stressful or more flexible. Overall, the [proportion of family physicians in family practice](#) went from 77.2 per cent in 2008 to 70.7 per cent in 2019, with an increasing proportion of physicians in every age group shifting away from family practice.

Forecasting over 3 million without a family doctor by 2025 does not account for the number of new graduates from family medicine. However, [research shows that fewer students are choosing careers as family doctors](#). It is expected that there will not be enough new doctors to cover all patients who lose their doctor to retirement.

While the family doctor shortage is impacting all Ontarians, the data shows those most vulnerable, including newcomers and those in poorer communities, have higher rates of being without a family doctor. [The data shows](#) that across Ontario 32.6 per cent of newcomers do not have a regular family doctor, compared to 22.5 per cent in 2020 while 19.4 per cent of the lowest income Ontarians do not have access to a regular family doctor, up from 16.1 per cent in 2020.

Unfortunately, children are also impacted by the family doctor shortage. More than 360,000 children across the province do not have a family doctor, including 48,628 are under age 5. That is equivalent to

¹ [Due to a lag in the update date on OHT attribution](#) there are 3 caveats for all users of the OHT-specific data:

1. The N for under 5 years of age is low – this does not reflect children born or moving to the region after the last attribution date. Estimate is 30-40% of the actual numbers are missing. This estimate is based on the size of the 5 year paediatric age cohorts (<5, 5-9, and 10-14) being approximately equal.
2. All OHTs should see their total attributed numbers fall due to removal of people who have died or no longer have OHIP numbers/no longer meet inclusion criteria ie. based on max age, years since last OHIP billed service etc.
3. All users of this data should look closely and the % attached/unattached rather than just the N.

This does not apply to all Ontario numbers as we include everyone even those not attributed to a specific OHT.

13 per cent of Ontario children under the age of 5, or more than 1 in every 10, without a family doctor. The situation is even more dire for youth - among pediatric patients without a family doctor or primary care pediatrician, 189,978, or 52.8 per cent, are adolescents or teens.

Regional data examining pediatric populations and newcomer is forthcoming.

However, data from Toronto shows that there has been an increase in the number of the lowest income residents without a family doctor from 101,903 in 2020 to 120,700 in 2022. The latest (2022) number is an underestimate as data is unavailable for patients who are new to this region since 2019.

As of 2022, compared to those in the highest income group, a higher proportion of residents in the lowest income group are without a family doctor (14.9 per cent in the lowest income group, compared with 11.7 per cent in the highest income group). This pattern regarding income-based disparities is seen in all 8 OHTs within Toronto and may be an underestimate as data is unavailable for patients who are new to each OHT since 2019. The disparities are most pronounced in the West Toronto OHT (20.9 per cent in the lowest income group without a family doctor, compared with 14.8 per cent in the highest income group), Northwest Toronto OHT (16.5 per cent vs 11.3 per cent), North Toronto OHT (13.7 per cent vs 9.1 per cent), and Scarborough OHT (13.2 per cent vs 8.8 per cent).

The population in Ontario is expected to exceed 15 million by 2025. As Ontario's population ages and as advances in medicine are made, patients need more complex health supports.

A [new report from CFIB](#) found that physicians in Ontario spent approximately 18 million hours on administrative work per year in 2021, with unnecessary administrative work making up 38 per cent, or approximately 6.9 million hours, of the annual total. That is equivalent to over 20 million patient visits per year spent by physicians on unnecessary administrative work that can be done by someone else or eliminated altogether.

The pandemic and the administrative burden increase have left Ontario in a position where there will not be enough new doctors to cover all patients who lose their doctor to retirement. The CFPC found that the [burnout rate among family physicians tripled in 2021](#) compared to the previous year, with 51 percent of family physicians indicated they were working beyond capacity. A [National Physician Health Survey conducted in 2021](#) by the Canadian Medical Association found that workload is the top factor affecting family physician mental health. Research shows 2-in-3 family doctors are experiencing moderate to severe burnout, and 1-in-4 family doctors are experiencing high or severe burnout.

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References:

1. Primary care attachment data for 2020: INSPIRE PHC Primary Care Data Reports. Publicly available at <https://www.ontariohealthprofiles.ca/ontarioHealthTeam.php>
2. Trends in patient attachment to an aging primary care workforce: a population-based serial cross-sectional study in Ontario, Canada. Kamila Premji, Michael E Green, Richard H Glazier, Shahriar Khan, Susan E Schultz, Maria Mathews, Steve Nastos, Eliot Frymire, Bridget L Ryan. medRxiv 2023.01.19.23284729; <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2023.01.19.23284729v1>

3. Data sources: The research cited above uses centralized health services databases and includes all Ontario residents who have OHIP coverage and all registered Ontario primary care physicians from 2008 to 2022.

* Previously, the OCFP reported a Stats Can survey estimating that 1.3M were without a regular doctor in 2019. Stats Can and INSPIRE data have been collected differently.