

Mentally ill often go without help, Statscan says

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More than 2.6 million Canadians suffered from mental illness or dependence on drugs or alcohol during the past year, according to Statistics Canada data.

But only about a third of those suffering from the conditions received professional help, the research reveals.

"These numbers are staggering but they're also saddening," said John Service, a spokesman for the Canadian Alliance on Mental Illness and Mental Health. "What they tell us is that people suffering from mental illness are not taken as seriously in our health system as people with physical illness."

Dr. Service said that the research -- the first to probe the extent of mental illness in Canada -- tells us that mental-health problems are far more prevalent and profound than anyone imagined.

"It's this huge elephant in the middle of the room that nobody is talking about." If anything, the new data underestimate the extent of the problem, Dr. Service said.

The alliance estimates that as many as six million Canadians suffer from mental-health disorders and addictions.

The figure is based on World Health Organization data showing that 20 per cent of people suffer from mental illness at some point.

Statscan found a prevalence rate of 10.4 per cent. However, the agency collected data on only five common disorders -- major depression, mania, panic disorder, agoraphobia and social anxiety -- along with data on alcohol and drug dependence. And it looked at the past 12 months, not lifetimes.

Bill Wilkerson, CEO of the Global Business and Economic Roundtable on Addiction and Mental Health, said that regardless of the precise figure, the data should serve as a wake-up call to health-policy planners and business leaders.

"Mental health should be one of the great issues of our time. Business and the economy are being killed by undetected or too-late-detected mental illness. We simply can't afford to ignore this issue any longer."

According to the roundtable, mental-health disorders cost the economy more than \$33-billion annually in lost productivity. Another \$4.7-billion is spent on direct medical-treatment costs for sufferers.

Still, the Statscan data reveal that the vast majority of people with mental-health disorders do not receive adequate help.

"This is a terrible black mark on our health system," Mr. Wilkerson said.

"We have to do a lot more to help people before the problem gets worse."

The Statscan data reveal that the prevalence of mental-health disorders is highest among young people.

Among those 18 to 25, more than 26 per cent had mental-health problems or dependencies during the past year, compared to 15 per cent in the 25-to-44 age group.