

Backgrounder: INSPIRE Research Findings (Feb 2023)

New research conducted by INSPIRE¹ 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.

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 were likely chose to retire early due to the pandemic.

Family doctors may also leave comprehensive care before retirement age to move to other work areas that are perceived to be less stressful or more flexible. Fewer family doctors are staying solely in family medicine. Overall, the [proportion of family physicians in comprehensive care](#) went from 77.17 per cent in 2008 to 70.67 per cent in 2019, with an increasing proportion of physicians in every age group shifting away from comprehensive 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 comprehensive 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 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 13% 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%, are adolescents or teens.

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.

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

Currently, family doctors do not have the time they want and need to spend with patients because of backlogs in care, increased demand, more patients with complex illness and an overwhelming administrative burden that can take up to 19 hours a week of a family physician's time.

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 COVID-19 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 per cent 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 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.