

Caring Across Generations: The Urgent Need to Support Young Carers in Canada's Aging Population*



Lucas Xavier Perri¹, Afolasade Fakolade, PhD², Karen Okrainec, MD, MSc, FRCPC³, Warren Lewin, MD, CCFP (PC)⁴

¹Bachelor of Health Sciences program, second year, Queen's University, Kingston; ²School of Rehabilitation Therapy, Queen's Health Sciences, Queen's University, Kingston; ³General Internal Medicine, University Health Network and University of Toronto, Toronto Western Hospital, University of Toronto, Toronto; ⁴Division of Palliative Care, Department of Family and Community Medicine, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON

<https://doi.org/10.5770/cgj.29.921>

ABSTRACT

Young carers—youth aged 15 to 24 years who provide unpaid care to older adults—represent an essential yet often invisible component of Canada's caregiving landscape. Over one million young Canadians provide unpaid care to family members, with approximately 40% caring for older adults such as grandparents. As Canada's population ages and chronic illness prevalence rises, the number of young people assuming caregiving responsibilities continues to grow. Despite their significant contributions, young carers face unique challenges including impacts on mental health, educational attainment, and social development, often without formal recognition or support. This Perspectives article reviews the current evidence on young carers of older adults in Canada, examines their lived experiences, and identifies systemic gaps in health, education, and social systems. Unlike the United Kingdom, which has enacted legislation formally recognizing and supporting young carers, Canada lacks comprehensive policies and support structures for this population. Innovative programs are emerging, including foundational training for health professionals, online peer support communities, and cross-sector collaborations between health-care providers, educators, and community organizations. The article recommends actionable steps including legislative recognition of young carers, improved data collection and monitoring, expanded professional training, investment in peer support programs, and implementation of family-centered care models. Primary care teams are uniquely positioned to identify young carers, recognize their contributions, and connect

families with available supports. Without adequate recognition and intervention, young carers remain at risk of long-term social, academic, and mental health difficulties affecting both themselves and those for whom they care.

Key words: young carers, caregiving, older adults, aging population, caregiver support, Canada, health policy, family-centered care

INTRODUCTION

Young carers—youth aged 15 to 24 years who provide unpaid care to older adults—are an essential, but often invisible, part of Canada's caregiving ecosystem. As the population ages and the prevalence of chronic illness rises, the number of young people supporting an aging population is growing. Despite their significant contributions, these young carers remain underrecognized within health, education, and social systems, facing unique challenges that can impact their mental health, education, and social development. This article reviews the current state of the evidence relative to young carers of older adults in Canada, highlights innovative resources, programs, and emerging trends, discusses ongoing challenges, and recommends actionable steps for the future.

The Hidden Workforce: Background and Scope

More than one million young people in Canada aged 15 to 24 provide unpaid care for family members with long-term illness, disability, or health problems related to aging.⁽¹⁾ Of these young carers, about 40% are caring for older adults, such as grandparents who are sick, living with disability or addiction.⁽²⁾ Young carers are distinct from other youth when they assume a primary caregiving role.⁽³⁾ This responsibility can involve either regular lower-level support or more intensive care, with some young carers dedicating more than 20 hours per week to this role.^(4,5) Caregiving tasks themselves can range widely and

*The authors wish to disclose that a related case report authored by some members of this author team was recently published in *Canadian Family Physician* (May 2025, Vol. 71:314-316, DOI: 10.46747/cfp.7105314), titled "Supporting young carers in Canada" by Perri LX, Fakolade A, and Lewin W.

may include household chores such as cooking and cleaning; personal care including feeding, bathing, and mobility assistance; emotional support and companionship; and health system navigation such as booking appointments and advocating for relatives, as outlined by a recent meta-ethnography.⁽⁶⁾ Unpaid caregiving potentially delays or avoids the need for admission to long-term care facilities, yet navigating such caring roles by the young carer often comes without any formal assistance or training.⁽⁵⁾ The number of youth providing unpaid care increased by 13.5% between 1996 and 2006, a trend expected to continue as the population ages and as chronic illness such as dementia, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, and multimorbidity also rises.⁽⁷⁾ Despite their growing numbers, young carers remain largely invisible, particularly within educational institutions and health-care systems.

The Lived Experience of Young Carers

Young carers often experience a complex mix of fulfillment and burden. Many report a sense of pride in caring for the elderly and developing valuable life skills such as patience, empathy, and resilience.⁽⁸⁾ However, the consequences of being a young carer can be serious and long-lasting. For instance, many young carers report feeling stressed, isolated, anxious about the future, and emotionally strained by their responsibilities.⁽⁹⁾ Caregiving can interfere with schoolwork, extracurricular activities, and social life, leading to academic decline and social isolation.⁽¹⁰⁾ Moreso, young carers are often not identified by health-care providers or educators, and may not self-identify as carers until overwhelmed or later in life. These challenges are widely reported, underscoring the need for greater awareness and systemic support.

Current Issues and Systemic Gaps

Canada lacks formal policies and comprehensive support structures for young carers, particularly those supporting older adults, which stands in stark contrast to countries like the United Kingdom where legislation, such as the Care Act⁽¹¹⁾ and Children and Families Act⁽¹²⁾, formally recognize and support young carers. Most clinicians providing care to the elderly and educators in Canada receive little training on identifying or supporting young carers,⁽¹³⁾ and existing programs are limited in both reach and accessibility. As a result, many young carers remain unrecognized, often not self-identifying as caregivers but rather seeing their roles as family obligations until the responsibilities become overwhelming.

Community-based programs tailored to caring for the diverse and unique needs of the ageing population can be inaccessible or insufficient. This may be due to geographic concentration in urban centers, long waitlists, age or diagnosis restrictions, and limited cultural or linguistic tailoring. Young carers report that more accessible supports—such as school-based counseling, flexible respite options, and low-barrier online peer groups—are urgently needed.⁽¹⁴⁾ Balancing caregiving with other activities can pose challenges. The impact on education is significant: young carers frequently miss school days and face limitations on their educational aspirations, with

these challenges becoming more pronounced for those providing greater amounts of care.⁽¹⁵⁾ The emotional and physical toll is also considerable, as about one-third of young carers report being worried, anxious, and tired, with these symptoms more pronounced among those providing more intensive care.⁽⁹⁾

Innovative Programs and Emerging Approaches

In 2025, Canada advanced the National Caregiving Strategy launched by the Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence, formally acknowledging caregivers and announcing new resources and support streams for carers.⁽¹⁶⁾ While caregiving contexts differ, young carers share common gaps in recognition and support, though the solutions may need to be adapted to specific needs of young carers. The siloed nature of disease-specific organizations and fragmented resources highlight the need for cross-cutting supports that serve all young carers regardless of the illness of their care recipient. In fact, general knowledge to increase confidence in caring tasks and skill building in how to cope with the multiple demands that young carers face, have been shown to improve the well-being of both the carer and care recipient.⁽¹⁷⁾ A promising trend in Canada is the integration of carer-centered care into clinical practice. Foundational training programs, such as those developed at the University of Alberta, equip health professionals to identify and support caregivers, including youth caring for older adults. Better identification of young carers is associated with higher likelihood of support, and these programs emphasize relational and communication skills, enabling providers to create safe spaces for young caregivers to discuss their experiences and needs.⁽¹⁸⁾

Peer Support and Online Communities

There are limited programs that provide targeted support for Canadian young carers, and even fewer focused on care of the elderly. With local resources often limited, online platforms and virtual communities have emerged as vital sources of peer support, skill-building, and resilience training for young carers caring for the elderly. These resources are especially important for those in rural or remote areas, where local services may be limited. Virtual communities and workshops offer accessible, stigma-free environments where youth can share experiences and learn coping strategies. For example, iSupport for Young Carers (iSupport for YC), was co-designed with young carers and professionals to address the unique needs of young carers caring for family members with dementia. By centering their experiences, iSupport for YC aims to make young carers more visible, normalize their role, and offer practical and emotional support for their well-being and development.⁽¹⁹⁾

Cross-Sector Collaboration

Collaboration between health-care providers, educators, and community organizations is essential. Individualized support plans, regular check-ins, and coordinated referrals to community programs or support can mitigate the negative impacts of caregiving on youth.⁽⁶⁾ The collaborative approach between school guidance counselors and primary care teams represents

an excellent example of cross-sector partnership that should be acknowledged and replicated to better support young carers.

Recommendations for Future Action

To address the pressing needs of young carers of older adults in Canada, a comprehensive and coordinated approach is required at both the policy and practice levels. First, Canada should move toward formal recognition of young carers through legislative frameworks that guarantee access to support services. Drawing on international models such as the United Kingdom's Care Act⁽¹¹⁾ and Children and Families Act,⁽¹²⁾ such legislation would not only acknowledge the contributions of young carers, but also entitle them to a range of essential services, including financial assistance, respite care, and tailored support programs. This formal recognition is a critical step in ensuring that young carers are no longer invisible within the health and social care systems.

Second, there is a need for robust data collection and monitoring within health and education systems to better understand the well-being and lived experiences of young carers. Improved data will inform the development of targeted policies and programs, ensuring that interventions are evidence-based and responsive to the actual needs of this population. Educational institutions should also play a proactive role by implementing individualized accommodations for young carers. Academic flexibility and access to counseling services can help these youth balance their caregiving responsibilities with educational goals, reducing the risk of academic decline and social isolation.

Third, expanding foundational training for health and education professionals is essential. By equipping professionals with the skills to identify and support young carers who care for the elderly, the likelihood of early intervention and effective support increases. For example, research has shown that asking specific questions about caregiving tasks is more effective in identifying young carers than general inquiries, highlighting the importance of targeted training and awareness among professionals.⁽²⁰⁾ Furthermore, investment in both in-person and virtual peer support programs specific to the care of the elderly is needed to address the unique mental health and social needs of young carers. These programs can foster resilience, provide coping strategies, and create a sense of community, particularly for those in rural or remote areas where local resources may be scarce.

Finally, fostering family-centered care models that include young carers in care planning is essential. Recognizing that not everyone has access to a family doctor and that even those cared for by family medicine teams may also receive care through geriatrics and internal medicine clinics, all these providers are well-positioned to identify young carers early and connect families to supports by incorporating caregiving assessments into routine practice. By strengthening communication between primary and specialty teams and fostering collaboration across health, education, and community systems, Canada can create a more integrated, carer-centered model that supports both young carers and the older adults they assist.

CONCLUSIONS

Young carers of older adults are an essential yet often invisible part of Canada's caregiving system. Without adequate recognition and support, they are at risk of social, academic, and mental health difficulties, with consequences for both themselves and those for whom they care. There is much to learn about young carers caring for the elderly. Innovative programs, cross-sector collaboration, and policy reform are urgently needed to ensure that young carers are recognized, supported, and empowered to thrive. Primary care teams in particular are uniquely positioned to identify young carers who care for the elderly, recognize their contributions, and work collaboratively to offer direct support and connection with available support services. Such carer-centered care can optimize outcomes for both young caregivers and those they support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank all young caregivers and their families who have shared their experiences, as well as colleagues in health care and education who are working to advance young carer-centered care.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

We have read and understood the *Canadian Geriatrics Journal's* policy on conflicts of interest disclosure and declare we have none.

FUNDING

No external funding was received for this work.

REFERENCES

1. Stamatopoulos V. One million and counting: the hidden army of young carers in Canada. *J Youth Stud*. 2015 Jul 3;18(6):809–22.
2. Statistics Canada. "Young Canadians providing care, 2012." *The Daily*, September 24, 2014. Catalogue no. 89-652-X.
3. Charles G, Stainton T, Marshall S. Young carers in Canada: the hidden costs and benefits of young caregiving [Internet]. Ottawa (ON): The Vanier Institute of the Family; 2012 [cited 2025 Jul 12]. Available from: <https://youthrex.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Vanier-Report-Young-Carers.pdf>
4. Pilato J, Lamore K, Vioulac C, Jarrige E, Dorard G, Untas A. What characterizes adolescent young carers? A multigroup comparative study. *Child Care Health Dev*. 2024 Mar;50(2):e13244.
5. AARP and National Alliance for Caregiving. *Caregiving in the United States 2020*. Washington, DC: AARP; 2020.
6. Saragosa M, Frew M, Hahn-Goldberg S, Orchanian-Cheff A, Abrams H, Okrainec K. The young carers' journey: a systematic review and meta ethnography. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2022 May 10;19(10):5826. doi:10.3390/ijerph19105826
7. Canadian Institute for Health Information. Survey shows how health care experiences of older adults in Canada compare internationally. CIHI. 2025 Jun 25. Available from: <https://www.cihi.ca/en/survey-shows-how-health-care-experiences-of-older-adults-in-canada-compare-internationally>

8. Szafran O, Torti J, Waugh E, Duerksen K. Former young carers reflect on their caregiving experience. *Can J Fam Youth*. 2016 Jan 27;8(1):129–51.
9. Lacey RE, Xue B, McMunn A. The mental and physical health of young carers: a systematic review. *Lancet Public Health*. 2022 Sep;7(9):e787–e796. doi:10.1016/S2468-2667(22)00161-X
10. Clay D, Connors C, Day N, Gkiza M, Aldridge J. The lives of young carers in England. Qualitative report to DfE. London, UK: Department for Education; 2016. Available from: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a80eaec40f0b62305b8de15/DFE-RR499_The_lives_of_young_carers_in_England.pdf
11. Government of UK. Care Act 2014 (UK) 2014 c. 23. Available from: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/data.xhtml?wrap=true>
12. Government of UK. Children and Families Act 2014 (UK) 2014 c. 6. Available from: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/contents>
13. Parmar JK, L'Heureux T, Anderson S, Duggleby W, Pollard C, Poole L, *et al*. Optimizing the integration of family caregivers in the delivery of person-centered care: evaluation of an educational program for the healthcare workforce. *BMC Health Serv Res*. 2022 Mar 18;22(1):364.
14. Young Caregivers Association. Resources for Caregivers | Ontario Health atHome. 2024 Mar 14. Available from: <https://ontariohealthathome.ca/above-and-beyond-caregiver-recognition-program/resources-for-caregivers/>
15. Lakman Y, Chalmers H, Sexton C. Young carers' educational experiences and support: a roadmap for the development of school policies to foster their academic success. *Alberta J Edu Res*. 2017 Aug 10;63(1):63–74. <https://doi.org/10.55016/ojs/ajer.v63i1.56226>
16. Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence. National Caregiving Strategy. Published October 17, 2024. Accessed September 13, 2025. Available from: <https://canadiancaregiving.org/national-caregiving-strategy>
17. Brimblecombe N, Stevens M, Gowen S, Skyer R, Moriarty J. Understanding the unmet support needs of young and young adult carers and their families. *PLoS One*. 2024 Sep 29;19(9):e0310766.
18. Caregiver-Centered Care. Level 1. Foundational. Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta; 2023 (accessed 2025 Sep 2). Available from: <https://www.caregivercare.ca/foundational-course>
19. Masterson-Algar P, Egan K, Flynn G, Hughes G, Spector A, Stott J, *et al*. iSupport for young carers: an adaptation of an e-health intervention for young dementia carers. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2022 Dec 22;20(1):127. doi:10.3390/ijerph20010127
20. Barber M, Siskowski C. Youth caregivers: unrecognized providers of care. *Pediatrics*. 2008 Apr;121(4):873–74. doi:10.1542/peds.2008-0093

Correspondence to: Lucas Xavier Perri, BSc (second year), Queen's University, 99 University Ave., Kingston, ON K7L 3N6
E-mail: 23gtj1@queensu.ca