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Title: Winning over tomorrow's psychologists: what Canada and public health employers need to know

Summary: Canadian public healthcare systems face unprecedented challenges recruiting and retaining psychologists and are experiencing high competition with private workplace options. Those entering the public sector often leave quickly for better pay and more manageable workloads, leaving public systems short-staffed and resulting in high quality mental health care being less accessible for most Canadians.

The current study investigated the recruitment pipeline, exploring what the next generation of psychologists are seeking in future employers and their perceptions of public healthcare careers. We surveyed 167 clinical and counselling psychology graduate students across Canada. The sample had an average age of 29, with nearly three-quarters completing a doctoral degree and the rest currently completing a master's degree. Geographically, participants primarily resided in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec. The sample identified predominantly as women (76.2%), with smaller proportions of men and gender-diverse individuals, consistent with other data on the composition of graduate psychology training programs (American Psychological Association, 2018). Regarding racial and ethnic identity, the majority identified as White or European, with smaller proportions of Asian, multi-racial, and Indigenous respondents. Over half of the sample already had direct public healthcare experience via internships, residencies, or pre-residency clinical practicum placements.

At the time of graduation, student's top preferred workplace location was within a public health care setting (45.9 %), followed by a private practice setting (29.6 %). When considering workplace desires immediately post-graduation, students prioritized location and compensation. Securing a job in their desired city or province was the highest rated factor for just over half of the students, while financial compensation ranked a close second at nearly 38%. Job security and a strong desire to serve specific populations also scored highly. For longer-term retention past the first three years, remuneration was rated as even more paramount, with virtually half of all respondents naming financial compensation as their absolute top priority. Students who were attracted to public health workplaces valued teamwork and stability. The top motivators for working in public health were having a supportive community of peer psychologists, collaborating within multidisciplinary teams, being paid for non-client-facing time such as clinical documentation, and avoiding the marketing and referral fluctuations inherent to private practice. However, public systems face fierce private sector competition. The primary deterrents driving students away included uncompetitive public salaries, high fears of burnout, and overwhelming workloads. Students also expressed concerns about system inflexibility, citing concerns about limits that some public healthcare systems may put on the length of treatment and a lack of control over client selection.

Distinct priorities were found to divide students based on their preferred career settings. Students leaning toward public health placed a significantly higher value on comprehensive health

benefits, family planning perks like paid parental leave, work with complex or high acuity clinical patient populations, and predictable daytime schedules. Conversely, students leaning toward private practice prioritized workplace flexibility such as hybrid or work-from-home online options, flexible days off, and clinical autonomy without the need to report to a manager or physician.

To successfully recruit and retain tomorrow's psychologists, Canada's public healthcare sector must adapt. While the public system naturally appeals to students seeking stability, collaboration, and complex caseloads, it actively loses them to the private sector due to uncompetitive compensation, rigid bureaucracy, and demanding workloads that induce burnout.