

University of Toronto

Adverse Events Report

A student-generated report of adverse incidents which occurred as a result of university policies & practices in 2020 and years prior.

prepared by

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Content & Trigger Warning

The following report contains graphic descriptions of suicide, suicide ideation, self-harm, inappropriate comments from staff at university's Health & Wellness centers, mentions of substance abuse and mood disorders, mentions of sexual assault, and descriptions of the University of Toronto's stressful academic environment.

If you feel as if you are in a mental state whereby reading about descriptions of any of the events previously mentioned could trigger a flashback or suicidal episode, we urge you to either refrain from reading the accounts in the present report, or reading the present report with immense caution.

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Adverse Events Report: UT

Report Overview

Introduction

Lack of mental health supports for Canadian university students has become a topic of national concern. At the University of Toronto (UT), a series of high-profile student suicides which occurred on-campus in 2019 triggered a wave of student activism and advocacy for improved support for students experiencing mental illness at UT.

In November, 2020, report author Jan Lim began reaching out to UT students for reports of adverse events which have occurred to students at UT as a result of inadequate institutional policies and practices surrounding student wellness and mental health. Within 48 hours, they received over 60 long-form reports over email and JotForm from UT students and alumni.

Since November 2020, UT has taken strides to improve mental health support systems for undergraduate and graduate students. However, as the present report will illustrate, irreparable harm has already been done to numerous students who currently attend, or have attended, the institution. There is evidence that UT's policies and practices which affect student wellness and mental health are in need of a systematic analysis, revision and re-design. These policies & practices include those which govern students' access to academic accommodations, funding, support for conflicts with teaching assistants & professors, as well as access to counselling, psychology or psychiatry services.

The present report aims to bring light to the severity of psychological distress which has been experienced by UT students, either directly or indirectly as a result of the institution's policies and practices.

Methods

About the Survey

The following data was collected from a survey administered to UT students online using Jotform on November 5th & 6th 2020. Questions included on the Jotform were open-ended and allowed for unstructured responses. Survey questions consisted of the following:

Please describe your personal details here including but not limited to: 1) Gender/gender identity; 2) Socioeconomic status; 3) Ethnicity; 4) Year of study; 5) Program of study.

How has UofT "changed" you? Are you the "same" person you were before? Have you developed any mood disorders or competitive traits that did not exist before?

What is your story? Please describe anything you've experienced at this school in relationship to accessibility services, suicide ideation, witnessing suicide, depression and anxiety, and more.

Throughout your struggles, how did you cope? Were there any positive aspects of your experience? Did you rely more on friends and family, or services from the university?

Are there any other comments or suggestions you would like to make to the university?

Methods

Survey Participants

All survey participants were 1) current UT students or 2) UT alumni. All survey participants had their student identity verified through email (i.e., presenting a UT email or UT alumni email).

Consent

Consent was acquired electronically through Jotform. Survey participants indicated that they were comfortable with their reports being anonymized and shared online as well as in the form of a report.

Data Analysis

Students' survey responses were coded using a combination of inductive and deductive themes on NVivo, Release 1.5. The coding structure used is visible in Appendix I.

Researchers' Qualifications

Please note that the report author, Jan Lim, does not have formal training in qualitative, sociological or anthropological research. The following report is not an academic study and has not been peer reviewed.

Lim is a Physiology, Anthropology & Contemporary Asian Studies graduate from UT. They graduated from UT in 2021. They have since begun to attend the University of British Columbia to study medical anthropology, where they have received preliminary training in qualitative research methods. Lim has published research in the journals *Developmental Medicine & Child Neurology* as well as the *IEEE Engineering in Medicine & Biology Society*.

Participant Demographics

Of 64 student accounts of adverse events due to UT institutional practices or personnel, 62 individuals reported their demographic characteristics.

70.96% (44 accounts) reports of adverse events were from women. 40.3% (25 accounts) were from low-income students, and 59.7% were from non-White students.

These findings indicate that the burden of adverse events at UT may be falling on students who are part of equity-seeking communities, also known as systemically oppressed communities.

These findings are consistent with research which illustrates that structural and systemic factors are critical for maintaining individual mental health. Literature on barriers to mental health supports for individuals experiencing systemic oppression has previously established that there is a dearth of cost-effective mental health solutions for low-income folks in Canada (1). Racialized (i.e., non-White) women also face significant barriers when seeking mental health care in Canada (2).

The report also found instances of specific barriers to mental wellness for international students, students who identify as 2SLGBTQS+, first-year students and students with a pre-existing mental illness diagnosis prior to arriving at UT.

(1) <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0840470420933911>

(2) <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/racialized-women-mental-health-1.6413689>

Adverse Events Report: UT

Institutional Practices

Involuntary Psychiatric Admission

Amongst 64 survey respondents, 3 reported being sent to CAMH in response to a personal mental health crisis while attending UofT. Each of these three students reported that they were not made aware of the potential length of their stay at CAMH, nor the reasons for their involuntary commitment: Of three students, none had been hospitalized for their mental health prior. These three accounts differ from other accounts of commitment to CAMH or another medical institution within this report, as these three students were sent, or directed, towards CAMH involuntarily.

The trauma which results from involuntary commitment to a mental hospital, or other medical institution, for psychiatric reasons, is well-known. Involuntary admission and treatment policies are designed to ostensibly deliver safe and effective care against a patient's will, and prevent adverse outcomes in those with mental illness who may be a danger to themselves or others (1). However, these modalities have been repeatedly challenged through medical research, and research into patient outcomes. In a study of involuntary psychiatric admission in Norway, there was a paternalistic perspective which was clearly expressed in clinicians' discussions of involuntary admission for patients (2). Further studies have shown that patients suffering from mental illness have decision-making capacity in most instances, with risk assessments for involuntary admission lacking in efficacy (3).

In each of these three accounts, students were not provided with access to long-term, reliable psychological care, prior to involuntary admission. Although involuntary admission can be appropriate for some individuals' circumstances, all three students who reported involuntary admission report considerable trauma from the incident and the incident's preventability.

(1) <https://www.psychiatrist.com/pcc/delivery/trauma-from-involuntary-hospitalization-impact-mental-illness-management/>

(2) <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25344295/>

(3) <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23969482/>; <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17906238/>; <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24590974/>

Involuntary Psychiatric Admission

“Without my permission, I was sent to a hospital & a psych ward, where I was tied to my bed and couldn’t even use the washroom without asking for permission. I come from a very different background & it was a frightening experience - one that made [my mental illness] worse for the months after.”

Dasha* is a non-White cis-gendered woman who is an international student and recently graduated from UofT in 2020. She studied commerce.

“After that they sent me to CAMH where I was locked in a waiting room for 6 hours while I slowly lost my mind with anxiety and crippling depression which made it hard not to stop crying the whole time, waiting to talk to a psychiatrist who I saw for 10 mins.”

Maria* identifies as a cis-gendered woman, White and was a 5th Year Student in 2020. She studied environmental science & forestry.

Involuntary Psychiatric Admission

"In my first year, after my friend and roommate had committed suicide on Trinity College residence, my own mental health for the next 3 weeks worsened greatly due to the event and my own personal circumstances. One night, I nearly committed suicide myself: So, I was taken out of residence to CAMH. I was encouraged to go by Trinity admin, but what they didn't tell me that the stay would be indefinite; I thought it would be for a couple hours or one night. When I finally managed to convince the doctors to allow me to come back to residence after one whole week, the knob from my dorm room was removed so I couldn't get back in. To get back in, I was forced to sign a contract that said if I were a danger to myself, they are well within their rights to revoke my residency without a refund and that I would be removed from the premises under the pretense of getting help."

Dan* identifies as a cis-gendered woman, low-income, non-White and was a 3rd year student in 2020. She studied applied sciences (i.e., physics and chemistry).

Involuntary Psychiatric Admission

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Dan* identifies as a cis-gendered woman, low-income, non-White and was a 3rd year student in 2020. She studied applied sciences (i.e., physics and chemistry).

Involuntary Psychiatric Admission

UMLAP

There were three reports of students' experiences with UT's forced leave policies for students with suicide ideation. Mental health advocates and activists at UT have conducted extensive work to contest the UMLAP policy, which students has argued gives the institution "undeserved power" (1). The UMLAP was created in 2015, when "the 2014-2015 Report of the University Ombudsperson expressed concern that student misconduct as a result of mental health fell under the jurisdiction of the Code of Student Conduct, and that a leave of absence policy be created" (2). The Varsity, UT's student newspaper, has done extensive investigative journalism work into the UMLAP's negative effects, revealing numerous accounts of students being removed from the institution against their will (3). The reports in the present report corroborate student journalist and advocate's work and findings that the UMLAP, as it currently stands, inflicts psychological violence upon UT students.

((1)<https://thevarsity.ca/2022/01/09/opinion-umlap-gives-u-of-t-undeserved-power/>

(2)<https://www.utsu.ca/umlap-a-brief-history/>

(3) <https://thevarsity.ca/tag/umlap/>

Involuntary Psychiatric Admission

UMLAP

"I wanted to get help last year at school because I was really struggling with my mental health, and I talked to my one TA about it. She told me, do not go for counselling at UT because if they find out you're suicidal, they will make you take a mandatory semester break ... one of her friends who was in grad school working on her research went for help and she said she was feeling suicidal and they literally kicked her out for a semester, she was halfway through her thesis (or something, I'm not really sure) and lost all of her progress and marks and everything and had to start over."

The above student has chosen to remain anonymous.

"I was forced to sign a contract that said if I were a danger to myself, they are well within their rights to revoke my residency without a refund and that I would be removed from the premises under the pretense of getting help. My scholarship cheque from an outside organization covers my residency and so without a refund, I would have nothing because I come from a very low socioeconomic background. I signed it, but I didn't know that I could legally contest the contract and didn't have to sign it. I'm a first-generation university student, so I'm not at all informed on the legality of these things -- a friend later had a similar experience but her lawyer had gotten involved and so she didn't have to. I don't have a lawyer."

Skye* identifies as a cis-gendered woman and was in her fourth year of studies in 2020. She studied applied sciences (i.e., physics & chemistry) and mathematics.

Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness: Anxiety

There were 21 accounts of increased anxiety and/or the development of panic disorders. Importantly, students who reported increased anxiety or panic attacks came from a variety of academic disciplines, from engineering to cinema studies, and a variety of academic backgrounds (i.e., numerous students had a cGPA of 3.5 or above). As a result, the academic environment is shown to have had adverse effects on students irrespective of program of study (POST) or academic achievement levels.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic synergized with academic stress to exacerbate anxiety levels in university students globally. A systematic review of the prevalence of anxiety amongst university students in 2020 found that there was an increased mental health burden during the pandemic (1). Disturbingly, another longitudinal cohort study based in Ontario revealed that upon entry to university, students commonly develop severe levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, which persist over the first year (2). As of 2022, anxiety problems have increased by a third among postsecondary students in Canada, since 2018 (3). Overall, anxiety levels in university students, both internationally and domestically, are cause for public health concern.

Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness: Anxiety

In the present context, however, evidence suggests that there are institution-specific barriers to reducing anxiety in students who attend UofT. Within this report, 14 students report a negative experience with a professor, where they were either spoken down to, denied accommodations or awarded an unfair grade. 15 students reported adverse incidents at the university's Health and Wellness centers, with 26 reporting being inadequately accommodated by mental health support services at the university. Anecdotal evidence from UofT students as well suggests that among Ontario universities, the institution struggles with fostering a well-connection and inclusive student community. While anxiety amongst university students is a global concern, evidence suggests that there are institutionally specific actions which can be taken to mitigate anxiety levels and panic disorders amongst UofT students.

(1) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8750929/>

(2) <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/11/12/e047393>

(3) <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/news/news-article/anxiety-problems-are-up-by-nearly-a-third-among-postsecondary-students-since-2018/>

Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness: Anxiety

“I entered UofT with mental health disorders (anxiety and depression). However, my anxiety has worsened due to having to get assignments done on time and obviously the strenuous amount of stress from online learning and exams. I do not have a stable internet connection and that obviously plays a huge role in my stress.”

Emily* identifies as a cis-gendered woman who was in her first year at UofT in 2020. She studied social sciences (i.e., sociology, anthropology).

“My anxiety is at an all-time high. Towards the end of high school, I struggled with depression. After working extremely hard to overcome it, I started university, and my anxiety kicked in again. I often find myself having severe panic attacks in the middle of labs and midterms.”

Terry* identifies as non-White, low-income and was in their third year of studies in 2020. She studied life sciences.

Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness: Anxiety

"I was miserable and there is no other to put it. I lost so much weight because I stopped eating. Worked out a lot because I thought successful people should do so as proof that you could really handle your time well. I knew it was bad because after my first Christmas break, I thought I was re-energized but once I came back to school for the next semester, the smell of campus alone evoked these horrid feelings from my gut and even then, I knew that's not supposed to happen."

Taylor* is a low-income student who identifies as non-White and was in their second year of studies in 2020. She studied life sciences. She reported having a high cGPA (i.e., 3.5 or above).

"I'd say UofT has made me a more pessimistic and anxious person. I did have a mood disorder starting in grade 12 but things escalated in university. I started getting anxiety and panic attacks."

Toni* identifies as White and is a 2020 graduate. She studied engineering.

Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness: Depression & Suicide Ideation

There were 18 reports of increased depression or the development of a depressive disorder, and 18 reports of developing suicide ideation while attending UofT. These student accounts bolster existing journalistic publications on the mental health crisis at Canadian universities (1). In 2019, numerous students who attended UofT died from suicide, prompting media attention and various mental health initiative responses from the university (2). In 2020, it was found that suicide ideation was at record levels amongst Ontario university students: One in five students (21 per cent) reported serious psychological distress, almost double the rate it was just six years prior (3).

The high levels of depressive symptoms, suicide ideation and suicide at Canadian universities reveals that students are often thrust into psychologically violent circumstances post-secondary. Numerous accounts from UofT students that the academic environment has “ruined” or “destroyed” them, to the point where they feel “unrecognizable” to themselves. Further, as later reports will also substantiate, depressive episodes and suicide attempts have had irreversible effects on students’ mental and physical health.

Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness: Depression & Suicide Ideation

Significantly, the burden of suicide ideation and depression appears to be falling on low-income, non-White, genderqueer students and women at UofT, as according to survey responses in the following report. These findings correlate with existing levels of gender-based oppression, systemic racism, and neoliberal austerity cuts towards OSAP and other forms of funding for Ontario postsecondary students, each of which present structural factors which harm equity-seeking individuals' mental health.

(1) <https://www.macleans.ca/education/inside-the-mental-health-crisis-at-canadian-universities/>; <https://thewalrus.ca/inside-the-mental-health-crisis-facing-college-and-university-students/>

(2) <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/student-suicides-mental-health-support-1.5363242>

(3) <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/suicidal-ideation-at-record-levels-among-ontario-students-807798237.html>

Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness: Depression & Suicide Ideation

“I was suffering from depression before I joined UofT. I was recovering from it. In my 2.5 months at UofT my mental health problems have accumulated even more. My psychiatrist has increased my dosage of medications. The stress is extremely hard to cope with.”

Jin* identifies as non-White and is an international student who was in their first year of studies in 2020. She studied life sciences.

“During my time at UTSC I have developed depression and anxiety. My fellow friends have also had depression and were so chronically sick that they missed out on semesters at a time – they were then unable to pay tuition because OSAP cut their loans due to low grades from staying home because of the physical pain. They were then put on abdominal pain medication that was a result from their psychological mental illness.”

Lily* identifies as a non-White, cis-gendered woman who answered the survey as an alumnus. She studied mental health studies.

Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness: Depression & Suicide Ideation

“Coming out of high school I did have depression but not to an extent where I couldn’t manage it. At UTSC my depression got progressively worse with every year I spent at this institution.”

Jake* identifies as a non-White cis-gendered man. He graduated from UofT in 2020. He studied life sciences.

“U of T has completely destroyed me, to be forward. I entered university at a bit of a transitional time because I had just started a medication in my senior year of high school, which is known to occasionally change personalities, not necessarily for the worst though.

However, because of my experience at U of T since my first year, I'm totally unrecognizable to myself. I'm irritable, anxious, withdrawn, my eating disorder which I recovered from around age 16 came back in full force and is something I'm still battling, and for my entire second year I entered a yearlong depressive episode so severe that I barely remember anything from it and I'm still dealing with the effects of it now.”

Sarah is a low-income student who identifies as a Black (biracial) cis-gendered woman and was in her 3rd year of studies in 2020. She studied life sciences and social sciences.

Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness: Depression & Suicide Ideation

“UofT ruined me. I am grateful that I was able to study at a world-renowned university and have come out of it with knowledge and skills that I didn’t have before. However, at what price? I have triggered the onset of my Multiple Sclerosis diagnosis, have severe anxiety, severe depression, have communication problems and developed imposter syndrome and never feel as if I deserve to be at this institution, that I’m not smart enough, I’m not capable enough. I am not a student that UofT can gloat about and say, despite her disease/disability she is high performing at our institution. I despise it.”

Sandy* is a low-income student who identifies as a non-White, cis-gendered woman, and was in her 5th year of studies in 2020. She also identifies as high-performing and reports a high cGPA (i.e., 3.5 and above). She studied life sciences and social sciences.

“Prior to coming to UofT I have never had suicidal thoughts or depressive episodes, only ever anxiety. I have found that over my three years here this is something that happens regularly. I am lucky enough to have a fantastic support system, but this is not the case for everyone.”

Michelle* is a low-income student who identifies as White and was in their third year of studies in 2020. She studied life sciences.

Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness: Depression & Suicide Ideation

“I had suicide on my mind every single day of first year. Every. Single. Day. I would wake up with a pit in my stomach and feel worthless. Going down to the residence cafeteria you would immediately be faced with students who already started working for the day before they even had breakfast. This only added to everyone’s stress. ”

Rebecca* identifies as a non-white, cis-gendered woman who was in her 4th year of studies in 2020. She studied engineering.

““I’ve had friends who have dropped out of programs, anxiety increased, even my suicide ideation got worse ... I began to believe I wasn’t good enough, and that I’d never be successful.”

Alex* is a low-income student who identifies as a cis-gendered woman and was in her 4th year of studies in 2020. She studied languages and education studies.

“I attempted suicide three weeks into the semester and the school refused to redistribute the lost tuition to the next semester. This is also during COVID where finances are tricky. The school was barely any help, and their response was to cancel me from the next semester because I didn’t make full tuition.”

Brett* identifies as genderqueer, non-White and was in their 4th year of studies in 2020. He studied social sciences and humanities.

Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness: Substance Abuse

Research illustrates that students who have ADHD are increasingly prone to substance abuse disorders, highlighting the need for educational institutions to develop mental health interventions specifically for neurodivergent students. Currently, there are an increasing number of university students who present with ADHD, and “there is a need to move away from prevailing notions within higher education about ADHD being a specific learning difference (or difficulty) and attend to the urgent need for university students with ADHD to have timely access to treatment and support” (1).

University students with ADHD symptoms reported “difficulties coping with repeated cycles of negative thoughts and worries, irregular lifestyles due to poor time management, dissatisfaction with academic performance and interpersonal relationships, self-dissatisfaction, and decreased self-esteem” (2). As well, a study from the University of Toronto itself found that half of adults aged 20-39 with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have had a substance use disorder (SUD) in their lifetime, in comparison to 23.6% of young adults without ADHD who have had a substance use disorder in their lifetime (3). University students with ADHD are more likely as well to have experienced childhood trauma, with more than a third of young adults (35%) reporting that they had been physically abused and one in nine reporting that they were a victim of sexual abuse (11%) before the age of 16 (4).

Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness: Substance Abuse

According to the evidence and accounts in the present report, students at UofT with ADHD and other forms of neurodivergence are prone to being under-supported and under-resourced at the university. Lack of supports for neurodivergent students at UofT, specifically those with ADHD, can lead to devastating physical and psychological consequences.

(1) <https://bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-022-03898-z>

(2) <https://capmh.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13034-018-0218-3>

(3) <https://socialwork.utoronto.ca/news/new-research-by-esme-fuller-thomson-finds-that-half-of-adults-with-adhd-have-had-a-substance-use-disorder/>

(4) <https://socialwork.utoronto.ca/news/new-research-by-esme-fuller-thomson-finds-that-half-of-adults-with-adhd-have-had-a-substance-use-disorder/>

Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness: Substance Abuse

"I did the Munk school's first year research seminar and was thrown into a classroom full of mostly privately educated, upper class peers, while I was on OSAP and received my high school diploma from an underfunded public school in the American south. So right off the bat I felt very inadequate, but I managed decently enough. But I was getting by via dangerously abusing my Vyvanse prescription, because I didn't know how else to cope as I'd only recently been diagnosed with ADHD a year before and had never experienced this kind of stress. At that time, I hadn't been connected to accessibility services. I remember taking almost 180mg in one night to write a final paper, and I honestly look back and am just so thankful I didn't overdose."

Sarah is a low-income student who identifies as a Black (biracial) cis-gendered woman and was in her 3rd year of studies in 2020. She studied life sciences and social sciences.

Inadequate Accommodations

There were 26 reports of inadequate accommodations from either UT academic advisory and registrar services, or health and wellness services.

Accommodations were inadequate for the following reasons:

- Bureaucratic Barriers or Delays
- Inaccessible Services
- Lack of Services
- Lack of Support for Peers
- Lack of Support for Survivors
- No Coverage for International Students
- Physical Condition Disregarded

Illustrative accounts of mental health, and resultant academic accommodation, services' inadequacy are provided below.

Inadequate Accommodations: Bureaucratic Barriers or Delays

“My friend is a fourth-year student at UTSG. She recently came back to China due to COVID concerns. She had a video appointment scheduled with Health and Wellness (H&W): But she got contacted by phone. Because she was in China, she didn’t receive the call, but was still charged for being a no-show. She contacted H&W again to reschedule the appointment, but the same thing happened, and she was charged again. A financial hold was placed on her account, and it took months to sort out the issue. The financial hold prevented her from ordering her university transcripts for graduate school, and she almost missed the deadline for applying. This incident made me understand why H&W at UTSG has such a bad reputation.

Zhan* identifies as a cis-gendered non-White woman and is an international student who is a member of UTSC alumni.

“I booked an appointment with a doctor and came into the St. George Health and Wellness Centre only to find out that I had in fact booked the “wrong” appointment and that no one could help me today. I made it very clear that I was extremely depressed, and the only advice I was given was to make the “correct” appointment and wait 6-8 months for help. No other information was given to me, and I walked out of the office, stunned at what had just happened.”

Irene* identifies as a cis-gendered woman and was in her fifth year of studies in 2020. She studied life sciences and social sciences.

Inadequate Accommodations: Bureaucratic Barriers or Delays

"In 2018, after using up the maximum amount of counselling sessions I was allotted by my college (I don't remember exactly how many but maybe around 5-7?) I was recommended by my college to find a private practitioner and to pay through StudentCare. I found a practitioner but for 6 months U of T StudentCare rejected my claims without explaining to me why. I called both the Insurance company directly (Desjardins) as well as the UTSU and neither would help me. I ended up paying over \$2000 out of pocket. I eventually managed to get my claims processed through the Insurance Company directly and it turns out that all the representatives I had spoken to (both on Desjardins end and the UTSUs end) misunderstood their own policy and incorrectly ~led my claims (i.e., I was getting therapy through someone with a Master's of Social Work (MSW), which is covered, but they "mistakenly" labelled it as "social work", which isn't covered). I think a lot about how, if I hadn't been lucky enough to have a job/savings, I straight up wouldn't have been able to pay for it.

Benjamin* identifies as a gay man and is non-White. POST details and year of study were not provided.

Inadequate Accommodations: Inaccessible Services

“One day, my therapist sent the police to my house to do a wellness check. one of the officers found that UT did in fact offer drop in CBT therapy. I did not even know this resource existed until then. What boggled my mind was the fact UT spends so much money, time, and effort on events like frosh week, yet students do not know about the services until they’re in a crisis. We need these services like therapy, accessibility services, etc., to be readily available and for all students to know at the very least some support exists!”

Grace* identifies as a cis-gendered woman and was in her fourth year of studies in 2020. She studied social sciences.

“All I wish is that I had KNOWN where to go for help.”

Jenna* is a low-income student who identifies as a cis-gendered woman. She was in her first year of studies in 2020. She studied life sciences.

Inadequate Accommodations: Lack of Services

“In November (2019) they put me on a waitlist for therapy and 11 months later I have heard nothing at all. For the first 6 months or so I would ask about my progress on the waitlist but every time they would just say they don't have access to it and if I feel I'm not able to cope with just medications that I should commit myself to CAMH.”

Emily* identifies as a cis-gendered woman and was in her third year of studies in 2020. She studied social sciences.

“I was called by Health & Wellness and was set up with a psychologist. During the appointment, I also had my meds adjusted and changed by a psychiatrist whom I met with for 5 minutes and never again. I was only given a few appointments with the psychologist at health and wellness, and I was told their clinic was a short-term clinic that meets with you briefly to get over the current breakdown and after that you are basically on your own again. since they don't have the resources to do anything more! And that's even after you get removed from the waitlist.”

Rebecca* identifies as a cis-gendered woman and was in her fifth year of studies in 2020. She studied environmental sciences.

Inadequate Accommodations: Lack of Services

"I don't think UTM has enough resources related to mental health or suicide prevention. In my first year of training - I learned about all these different resources that students could use - such as suicide hotline, therapist on campus, there's also a doctor on campus, free counselling, etc. Throughout my first year of being a student leader - I heard stories from students and peers about how sh*tty those services were, i.e., scheduling a meeting with the therapist can take as long as 3 months; the health centre is not open 24 hours; I heard someone rang the suicide hotline and no one picked up and they hung up the phone on someone else. When the 2nd year of training came year - I brought up these issues and UTM admin's response was: "well, we're sorry about that".

Michael* identifies as a non-White and was trained as a student leader in 2020.

Inadequate Accommodations: Lack of Services

“I waited a month for a consultation with a psychology grad student. In that meeting I told them I thought about killing myself almost every single day. It then took 4 months to get an appointment with a psychologist, and not a single check in was made over those 4 months. Luckily I had an incredibly supportive family doctor outside the university, and without them I’m not sure I would have made it to my appointment with a U of T psychologist.”

Daniel* is a low-income student who identifies as a gay, cis-gendered man. He graduated from UT in 2020. He studied life sciences.

“I am a third year PharmD student who is currently seeking counselling from the school, and I’m finding their services lacking. We have, I believe, one professional program counsellor that handles counselling for pharm and nursing, but they are only offering a handful of sessions, only to hand us off to community-based programs later if we need long term counselling.”

Gea* is a low-income student who identifies as a cis-gendered woman and non-White. She was in her third year of the PharmD program in 2020.

Inadequate Accommodations: Lack of Support for Peers

Six students provided reports of instances where they felt as if their peers faced a lack of support. As is evident, lack of mental health support for students at UT has an effect not only on the individual suffering from mental illness or distress, but students around them. In several instances, students have reported having to adopt professional roles (i.e., psychotherapist, academic advisor, social worker) to support their friends, whose lives were endangered due to suicide ideation, active self-harming, mood disorders, and more. In all six reports, students stated that there were no adequate supports from the university at the time to support them nor their friend through periods of crisis.

Inadequate Accommodations: Lack of Support for Peers

“Throughout the years, I would witness my best friends go through the same thing. One took a gap year, and two ended up taking six years to finish because one of them was diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder.”

Layla* identifies as a non-White, cis-gendered bisexual woman who graduated from UofT in 2019. She studied mental health studies and social sciences.

“In second year, someone close to me was going through a severe mental health crisis and self-harmed quite severely. I dropped everything to go to help them and bandaged them up as they begged not to go to the hospital. I stayed with them that night, trying to care for them but not being fully present. I had a group project the next day that wasn’t finished yet. When the person finally fell asleep at around 12am, I sat down at their kitchen table, blood on my hands and clothes, to finish the presentation. I didn’t talk to the course coordinator to be excused because I knew I wouldn’t be taken seriously without divulging more information than I was okay with.”

Marina* identifies a non-White, cis-gendered woman who was in her fourth year of studies in 2020. She studied life sciences.

Inadequate Accommodations: Lack of Support for Peers

“My best friend was the one who killed himself.”

Ben* is a student who identifies as male and was in his first year in 2020. He studied mathematics.

Inadequate Accommodations: Lack of Support for Survivors

Four reports of sexual assault, or sexual-assault related lack of accommodations, were found during the survey data analysis. These students' accounts illustrate that survivors of sexual assault at UT were being severely under-supported and ill-considered in the university's mental health policies and institutional practices.

Sexual assault policies are lacking at most Canadian universities, according to a recent analysis by CBC news (1). A survey conducted of 160, 000 Ontario university students found that twenty-three per cent of university students responding to the survey report a non-consensual sexual experience: Additionally, 63.2 per cent of university student respondents report experiencing sexual harassment one or more times, while 23.7 per cent of survey respondents reported experiencing stalking one or more times (2). The psychological effects of sexual harassment and assault are well documented, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety (3).

Inadequate Accommodations: Lack of Support for Survivors

Presently, UT is taking steps to ameliorate its inadequate responses to students who have experienced sexual violence (4). Given the lack of support cited by students in the present report, these are necessary and welcome actions, albeit delayed. Students at UT who have experience sexual violence, as these reports illustrate, have not been adequately supported nor accommodated with the appropriate mental health services when seeking assistance or treatment.

(1)<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/canadian-universities-sex-assault-policies-1.3479314>

(2)<https://ontariosuniversities.ca/student-voices-on-sexual-violence-survey>

(3)<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2323517/>; <https://www.rainn.org/effects-sexual-violence>

(4) <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/u-t-accepts-all-recommendations-sexual-violence-and-sexual-harassment-policy-review>

Inadequate Accommodations: Lack of Support for Survivors

“UT had me assessed 3 times for my mental health (i.e., at Health & Wellness), and once it was by a man, and they didn’t tell me it was going to be a man beforehand, and whether I’d be comfortable with this. I’ve been sexually assaulted before and am afraid of men, so that was an uncomfortable experience, and a waste of time, because I didn’t end up opening-up to him at all.”

Hannah* identifies as a cis-gendered woman and was in her third year of studies in 2020. She studied international relations.

“I have been turned away from the university’s psychology services before at Health and Wellness because I had already seen a counsellor for engineering students the year prior. My friend, who was sexually assaulted in second year, was turned away as well, and given the same work around until she pushed back several times.”

Kira* is non-white and identifies as a cis-gendered woman, who is a 2020 UT graduate. She studied engineering.

Inadequate Accommodations: Lack of Support for Survivors

"I entered UT as a 'high-performing' student. I wanted to go into pharmacy or medical school. I moved from Vancouver and stayed in the UC dorms. Within the first semester, I had to move out as people were filming girls in the showers. As a sexual assault victim, I needed to leave immediately. I was terrified and didn't know what to do. I told the UC registrar, and they didn't provide any resources or alternative housing and asked me only when I was planning to move out."

Julia* is a low-income student who identifies as a cis-gendered woman and non-White. She was in her 5th year of studies in 2020. She studied social sciences.

Inadequate Accommodations: No Coverage for International Students

“I don’t know who to approach if I need help. I approached the mental health facilities at UT and I was told that they only offer services to students who are currently in Toronto.”

Anjali* is an international student who identifies as a cis-gendered woman and non-White, and was in her first year of studies in 2020. She studied life sciences.

“It’s way easier to seek therapy outside of campus when you are a domestic student but it’s very hard for us, international students.”

ADev* is a low-income international student who identifies as a cis-gendered woman and White and was in her first year of studies in 2020.

Inadequate Accommodations: Physical Condition Disregarded

“I was so stressed that I went blind in my left eye during my chemistry exam but was more scared of not showing up. Turns out that this was my first relapse in my MS diagnosis journey.”

Sandy* is a low-income student who identifies as a non-White, cis-gendered woman, and was in her 5th year of studies in 2020. She also identifies as high-performing and reports a high cGPA. She studied social sciences.

“I was forced to take a midterm three days after a major operation, while under the influence of morphine, as if I didn’t my only alternative was to accept a 0 on an exam worth 25% of my grade. I wasn’t granted any extensions or leniency; I remember attempting to do schoolwork in my hospital bed as I vomited and cried.”

Bella* identifies as a cis-gendered woman and White. She was a first-year student in 2020.

Adverse Events Report: UT

Institutional Personnel

Health & Wellness & Counselling Staff

There were 15 accounts of misconduct from health & wellness staff, as well as college counsellors, at UT which negatively affected students' mental or physical health. 2 reports were about inadequate accommodations from college counsellors, and 13 were about inappropriate comments from health & wellness staff.

Health & Wellness & Counselling Staff

Inappropriate Comments

“When I finally saw a nurse, she was also a bit confused about what I was asking. She left the room, came back in, and said, “no doctor can see you today, are you going to kill yourself by Monday?” I said I was fine and left and immediately started sobbing because I was first, shocked that she said that to me and second horrified at the lack of support. I remember thinking that “if I didn't feel like killing myself before, I certainly did now.””

Danielle* identifies as a cis-gendered woman who is non-White. In 2020, she was in her first year in a graduate program at UT.

“When I called in after having the worst panic attack, the receptionist at UTM Health & Wellness told me the earliest appointment was a month away. When she heard me sobbing on the phone, she asked me if I was in danger of killing myself, when I replied no, she said 'okay, see you soon.' The therapist was good, and helped, but there were not enough appointments available and were at least a month apart.”

Aria* identifies as a cis-gendered woman and non-White. She graduated from UT in 2020. She studied social sciences.

Health & Wellness & Counselling Staff

Inappropriate Comments

“My friend was also going to see the psychologists and psychiatrist at Health & Wellness who were paying close attention to her, as she was high risk and was doing a lot of self-harm. They weren't helpful, however, because she felt like she couldn't really tell them what she was feeling or thinking. They were judgmental and one of the psychologists even said to her after discovering she was burning herself “why are you burning yourself? you're a pretty girl why are you doing this to your body”.”

June* identifies as a cis-gendered woman and was in her fifth year in 2020. She studied environmental sciences.

“Whenever I saw the therapist at St. Michael’s College I would talk and she would basically just say stuff like, “wow you’re really self-aware of your mental health issues” and “wow you go through all of that? that’s tough...”

Desiree* is a low-income student who identifies as a non-White, cis-gendered woman. She attended UT between the years 2018-2020 and then left for a different institution. She studied life sciences.

Health & Wellness & Counselling Staff

Inappropriate Comments

"I booked an appointment with Health & Wellness and got an appointment with my GP (general practitioner) for two months later. It sucked, but I was happy that I was still able to see someone.

I remember filling out a form from a nurse before seeing the GP, where I wrote down all my concerns for my mental health (like suicide ideation and my family history of mental illness) and my hopes that I would get help.

The GP proceeded to read off generic questions on a screen to me, dismissively told me that things I was experiencing were just "normal adult things" and didn't even read the form I had previously filled out. I remember taking that form, where I had written everything that I thought was wrong and wanted to get help for, home with me and feeling like I hadn't taken a step towards getting better at all."

Cindy* identifies as a non-White, cis-gendered woman who was in her fourth year of studies in 2020. She studied social sciences.

Health & Wellness & Counselling Staff

Inappropriate Comments

"However, when I met with the (Health & Wellness) psychiatrist for the first time, she simply told me that I "don't have anxiety, as my panic attacks aren't daily, and therefore don't have any mental illness at all." I was shocked by this, and felt so desperately ashamed, feeling like I'd wasted her time. It began to make me wonder whether I did have an anxiety disorder, or whether I was just not being 'good enough' at handling my stress from school. Eventually, at my behest, she prescribes me medication - sleeping pills, not anxiety medication. It did nothing."

Bianca* identifies as a cis-gendered woman and graduated from UT in 2020. She studied humanities.

Health & Wellness & Counselling Staff

Inappropriate Comments

"However, when I met with the (Health & Wellness) psychiatrist for the first time, she simply told me that I "don't have anxiety, as my panic attacks aren't daily, and therefore don't have any mental illness at all." I was shocked by this, and felt so desperately ashamed, feeling like I'd wasted her time. It began to make me wonder whether I did have an anxiety disorder, or whether I was just not being 'good enough' at handling my stress from school. Eventually, at my behest, she prescribes me medication - sleeping pills, not anxiety medication. It did nothing."

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Health & Wellness & Counselling Staff

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Bianca* identifies as a cis-gendered woman and graduated from UT in 2020. She studied humanities.

Professors & Teaching Assistants

There were 14 accounts of misconduct from professors & teaching assistants at UT which negatively affected students' mental or physical health. 6 students reported having their accommodations denied, 6 reported misconduct from teaching assistants, and 2 reported unfair grades being awarded.

Professors & Teaching Assistants

Unfair Grade Awarded

“My professor was confused by my gratitude, and he told me that he gave me a 50 on the paper because he didn’t think it was possible that I could produce quality work. This initially resulted in me failing the class, a class I needed for my program requisites.”

Alexa* is a low-income student who identifies as a cis-gendered woman. She was in her fourth year of studies in 2020. She studied languages & education studies. She had previously received a top mark on an assignment, which was later revoked by her professor.

“In First Year, the TAs don’t care. The professors don’t care. The third week of school was the worst week of my life: I had awful eczema on the left side of my face, rats were swarming in my house, and I had untreated C-PTSD from my abusive mom. But I still wanted to do well in school, so I got a medical note from the Health and Wellness centre and handed it to my TA. I had a lab I couldn’t hand in that day. The conversation went something like this:

Mark* identifies as non-binary and non-White. They were in their first year in 2020 and studied life sciences.

Professors & Teaching Assistants

Denied Accommodations

“I am registered with accessibility and even with that, professors are not accommodating. I have severe mental health issues and some professors have refused to provide extension and even taken off late marks despite me having a certificate of disability and letters from doctors stating what I have difficulty doing. I have major anxiety and depression and I feel like it worsened at UT.”

Irene* identifies as a cis-gendered woman who is non-White. She graduated in 2020. She studied life sciences.

“In my first year at UT I was having a HORRIBLE time. I was extremely depressed, very anxious and as a result I struggled to hand assignments in and attend class. My grades were significantly impacted by this, and I tried to sign up with accessibility services but was required to go to the school doctor to get an assessment or something. Honestly, I was so depressed and suicidal at this time in my life I wasn't exactly sure why I was sent to the school doctor when I had sufficient documentation from a psychologist, I had been seeing for 5 years.

Erica* identifies as a cis-gendered woman who is non-White. In 2020, she was in her first year in the graduate program of social work at UT.

Adverse Events Report: UT

Conclusion

Conclusion

The report author expresses their deepest gratitude to the 64 UT students and alumni who shared their accounts of adverse events which occurred during their time at UT.

It is their hopes that the following report can serve as a tool for student activists and advocates fighting for improved mental health supports at UT and at other Canadian post-secondary institutions for years to come.

They hope, as well, that the firsthand accounts provided in the present report will highlight the reality of student experiences of psychological violence at their education institutions. If inadequate mental health support structures for students persist, individuals will continue to experience undeserved and preventable harm.

About the Author

Jan Lim is a 2021 graduate of UT. During their time at UT, they majored in Physiology and minored in Contemporary Asian Studies & Anthropology.

Lim extends their deepest gratitude to the numerous kindhearted and brilliant UT staff who provided a meaningful and safe learning environment to them during their time at UT.

They made the decision to compile the following report after witnessing their peers face tremendous barriers when accessing Health & Wellness services, as well as experience psychological harm from various UT teaching staff.

They recognize that lacking mental health supports for post-secondary students is currently a nation-wide issue, one they hope UT will begin to address as a leading academic institution.

Adverse Events Report: UT

Appendix A

Appendix A

Name	Files	References
Adverse Events - Institutional Personnel	0	0
Health & Wellness and Counselling Services	15	15
Counsellors	2	2
Inappropriate Comments	13	8
Other Personnel	0	0
Academic Advisors	4	5
Accessibility Services	1	1
Police	2	2
RA (Don)	1	1
UofT Crisis Team	1	1
Professors & Teaching Assistants	14	15
Denied Accommodations	6	6
Teaching Assistants	6	7
Unfair Grade Awarded	2	2
Adverse Events - Institutional Practices	0	0
Committed to External Institution or UMLAP	3	3
UMLAP	2	2
Exacerbated or Developed Mental Illness	0	0
Anxiety	21	22
Depression	18	18
Substance Abuse	1	1
Suicide Ideation	18	18
Inadequate Accommodations	26	31
Bureaucratic Issue	5	5
Inaccessible Services	3	4
Lack of Services	13	15
Lack of Support for Peers	6	7
Lack of Support for Survivors	4	4
No Coverage for International Students	2	2
Physical Condition Disregarded	3	3
Equity-Seeking Identity	0	0
First Year	9	9
International	5	5
LGBTQ+	5	5
Low Income	25	25
Mental Illness	7	7
POC	37	37
Woman	44	44