

YOUNG CARERS FACE FAMILY BURDEN WITH FEW RESOURCES

BY CRAIG AND MARC KIELBURGER



Young carers assist family and friends with the tasks of daily living, transportation, home maintenance and other caregiving activities. (Photo credit: BSIP, Getty Images)

Kendra* grew up too fast.

At 12, she'd do her homework while caring for her twin with non-verbal autism as he watched the same Disney film over and over. She'd cook dinner while helping her older brother, living with a severe learning disability, make sense of his school work. At fourteen, her father died from cancer suddenly, and she assumed even more responsibility as a caregiver while her mom took on a second job.

Kendra is one of the [1.9 million young carers](#) across the country-- teenagers or young adults who look after loved ones in the face of illness, addiction, disability or injury.

But there is no national conversation about these young people. Where are the headlines raising the issue or the policies to help address it?

In the United Kingdom, the issue is [well known](#). There are over 700,000 young carers in the UK, with [national charities](#), social services to offer support and [major studies](#) commissioned by the government.

Between an aging population and a strained healthcare system, Canada has an epidemic of young people forced to assume tremendous responsibility. But we have [none](#) of the support systems established in places like the UK, Australia and South Africa.

And the result is a mental health tragedy.

Panic attacks. Depression. Exhaustion. Social isolation. Poor academic performance and absenteeism. Behavioural issues.

These are the symptoms that Vivan Stamatopoulus, a former young carer herself and now a faculty member at the University Of Ontario Institute Of Technology, sees in her research.

"These kids undergo trauma," she laments. They miss out on teams and clubs that run after school when they're busy caring for loved ones. They're too tired to learn or too busy to do homework, so are often labelled troublemakers. And they have trouble connecting socially, so are often bullied.

"It's a mine field," Stamatopoulus says, but the biggest problem is that they're invisible.

In the UK, one in 14 young carers receives some form of emotional, educational or financial assistance. In Canada, that number is [one in 1,000](#).

And like so many issues in Canada, Stamatopoulus says the neglect of young carers plays out along racial and economic lines, hitting Indigenous and northern families extra hard. Just under [half](#) of all youth in Nunavut, Northwest Territories and Yukon are young carers.

But the issue is not the care—it's the lack of resources. Young people can actually benefit from this responsibility, if they're supported.

[Studies](#) show that when young carers have access to social services, they blossom, establishing heightened empathy and self-sufficiency while building practical skills and nurturing emotional development.

Young carers need a quiet space away from the stress they face to do homework. They need social activities to bond with others who share their experiences. They need teachers who understand what they're going through and can help support them academically.

They need, above all, to be shown the same compassion they're being asked to show those they care for.

* Name changed to protect privacy.