

NEWS RELEASE

Medical wait times cost Canadian patients almost \$4.1 billion in lost wages last year

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For Immediate Release

VANCOUVER—Long waits for surgery and medical treatment cost Canadians almost \$4.1 billion in lost wages and productivity last year (2021), finds a new study released today by the Fraser Institute, an independent, non-partisan Canadian public policy think-tank.

Preliminary data suggest that an estimated 1.4 million patients waited for medically necessary treatment last year, and each lost an estimated \$2,848 (on average) due to lost wages and reduced productivity during working hours.

“Health-care workers across Canada should be commended for the superb job they’re doing to get us through this global pandemic. However, while we are constantly reminded of the consequences of COVID-19, less discussed are the [consequences of unreasonable waits](#) for surgery which can range from physical pain and psychological distress for some, to permanent disability and death for others,” said Bacchus Barua, director of health policy studies at the Fraser Institute and co-author of *The Private Cost of Public Queues for Medically Necessary Care, 2022*.

Across Canada, the costs of waiting for medical care were about \$4.1 billion.

The study draws upon data from the Fraser Institute’s *Waiting Your Turn* study, an annual survey of Canadian physicians who, in 2021, reported the national median waiting time from specialist appointment to treatment was 14.5 weeks.

Crucially, the \$4.1 billion in lost wages is likely a conservative estimate because it doesn’t account for the additional 11.1-week wait to see a specialist after receiving a referral from a general practitioner.

Taken together (11.1 weeks and 14.5 weeks), the total median wait time in Canada for medical treatment was 25.6 weeks in 2021—the longest in the survey’s history.

“While some of this backlog is the direct result of COVID-19 related closures, results from the same survey suggest that almost as many (1.1 million) patients were waiting for treatment in 2019 – before the pandemic started,” said Mackenzie Moir, Fraser Institute policy analyst and study co-author.

Because wait times and incomes vary by province, so does the cost of waiting for health care. While the highest cost of waiting per patient is estimated to be borne by patients in Nova Scotia (\$6,343), Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador reported large decreases in the per patient cost of waiting, warranting caution when interpreting results. Outside the maritime provinces, residents of Manitoba (\$3,519) faced the highest per-patient cost of waiting, followed by Alberta (\$3,199), Saskatchewan (\$3,129).

“Long health-care wait times mean lost wages and a reduced quality of life for patients. While combatting COVID-19 certainly requires our immediate attention, we may need to consider policy options that can benefit all patients and alleviate strain on our public health-care system,” Barua said.

Average value of time lost during the work week in 2021 for patients waiting for medically necessary treatment (by province):

British Columbia	\$2,611
Alberta	\$3,199

Saskatchewan	\$3,129
Manitoba	\$3,519
Ontario	\$1,855
Quebec	\$2,811
New Brunswick	\$3,235
Nova Scotia	\$6,343
Prince Edward Island	\$2,826
Newfoundland and Labrador	\$1,985

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