Canadian Brain Economy Initiative

Unlocking Canada's Brain Capital

Toward Human Flourishing, Economic Prosperity and National Resilience

November 2026

Powered by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction and the Ontario Brain Institute

Canadian Brain Economy Initiative

Executive Summary

Canada is at a pivotal moment. Whether Canadians will truly benefit from ambitious investments in economic security and prosperity depends on their ability to learn, engage with others, solve problems and adapt to change — in other words, their **brain capital**.

Canada gave the concept to the world when the Honourable Michael Wilson, former federal minister of finance and Canadian ambassador to the United States, and Bill Wilkerson, a Canadian business executive and mental health advocate, coined the term “brain capital” to describe the value associated with brain health and brain skills. Put simply, when we are well and have the skills to navigate life’s complexities, we can adapt, flourish and thrive. The concept of a **brain economy** recognizes the essential role of investments, policies and institutions in developing, measuring and scaling up brain capital.

Today, Canada’s brain capital is under pressure. Employment shifts, technological change, affordability pressures and strains on public systems are creating uncertainty and increasing stress. The conditions needed to support brain health and brain skills throughout life are changing and, as a result, many Canadians are struggling to flourish. Several trends highlight the challenges facing Canada’s brain capital:

- Although Canadians are living longer, they are spending fewer years in good health than they did 20 years ago.
- Happiness in Canada has declined over the past 15 years, with a drop that is nearly unmatched globally.
- Performance by Canadian youth on international educational measures has declined over time.

Challenges to brain health and brain skills have an immense human impact. They also affect communities and workplaces and carry significant economic costs.

However, Canada is well positioned to respond and lead. We are not starting from zero.

Brain capital aligns with Canadian values rooted in shared prosperity and supportive communities. It builds on Canada’s strengths, including its highly educated population, strong research institutes, public health and education systems, diverse communities and trusted institutions. Canada’s policy frameworks and strategies reflect a history of solving complex problems collaboratively through whole-of-society action. Through our policies, business practices, investment strategies and community initiatives, we are already building brain capital. Now is the time to build on what we are doing well, explore what more we can do and think ambitiously about the transformative potential of the brain economy.

Canadian Brain Economy Initiative

Investments early in life, in communities and in workplaces demonstrate how benefits can extend to individuals, communities and the economy and accumulate over the lifespan.

> **When people flourish, organizations and communities thrive.**
> **When organizations and communities thrive, Canada prospers.**
> **And when Canada prospers, more people can flourish.**

To date, fragmented efforts, including duplicative processes, siloed interventions and responsibilities spread across organizations and sectors, have constrained progress and contributed to unequal outcomes for individuals. But this can change. A distinctly Canadian approach to building and mobilizing brain capital can bring Canada's strengths together around shared goals and increase their collective impact.

The Canadian Brain Economy Initiative (CBEI) was conceived to enable diverse people, places, sectors and ideas to work together toward shared brain-positive outcomes. Through this collaboration, Canada's diversity can become a defining national advantage, helping establish brain capital as a foundation for individual well-being, economic prosperity and national resilience.

Through the CBEI, partners can work together to inform policy, identify barriers to progress and draw on evidence, knowledge and experience from across sectors to uncover new insights and opportunities for action. The initiative will connect sectors and regions, policy and practice, and capital and opportunity. It will also help develop a common language and shared understanding across systems, sectors and different parts of society to support action, evaluation, investment and efforts to scale up effective approaches. Collectively, this work can help translate knowledge, innovation and promising initiatives into measurable outcomes and greater impact.

Ultimately, the CBEI's vision is to advance three interconnected and reinforcing outcomes: **human flourishing, economic prosperity and national resilience.**

We invite you to join us — there is a role for everyone.

Let's get started.

Canadian Brain Economy Initiative

I. Brain Capital: A Made-in-Canada Concept, a National Opportunity

Canada has no shortage of ambition.

We are investing billions to build the infrastructure of a more productive, secure and prosperous future — from housing and transportation to energy, technology and artificial intelligence (AI). But there is another form of infrastructure that will determine whether Canadians can fully benefit from those investments: the brain health and brain skills that enable people to learn, adapt, think, connect and contribute.

This is brain capital.

Canada helped give the world this idea. In 2011, the Honourable Michael Wilson, former federal minister of finance and Canadian ambassador to the United States, and Bill Wilkerson, a Canadian business executive and mental health advocate, coined the term "brain capital" to describe the value associated with brain health and brain skills (Wilson & Wilkerson, 2011). Over the past 15 years, the idea has gained international momentum. The question for Canada is whether we will remain at the forefront of the movement we helped start or stand by as others build on that momentum and seize the opportunity.

Brain Capital

Brain capital combines our lifelong brain health and brain skills. Brain health encompasses our cognitive, emotional, social and neurological well-being and provides the foundation throughout life, from before birth through healthy aging. Brain skills include our knowledge, creativity, leadership and adaptability. Together, brain health and brain skills form one of our greatest assets, enabling us to learn, innovate, lead, engage with others, solve problems and create.

Brain Economy

The brain economy encompasses the systems, investments, policies and institutions that support the development, measurement and growth of brain capital. It extends beyond health care and education to include workplaces, communities and other sectors of society.

Canada is a nation of builders — not only of infrastructure, industries and natural resources, but also of the institutions, capabilities and human potential that enable people and communities to thrive. Our democratic traditions, respect for the rule of law and commitment to the common good have helped us navigate complex challenges.

Canadian Brain Economy Initiative

In a country as vast and diverse as Canada, our natural, human and engineered infrastructure is among our greatest strengths. Canada's diversity extends beyond its people and communities to its geography, governance, economy, institutions, knowledge systems and approaches to innovation. This diversity provides a defining advantage but also presents a significant challenge: fragmentation. Unequal outcomes for individuals, duplicative processes, siloed interventions and responsibilities spread across organizations and sectors have all constrained our progress. But we can change this. By connecting people, places, sectors and ideas around shared goals, we can harness Canada's diversity to create brain-positive conditions and strengthen brain capital.

Brain capital creates value at every level.

An individual's brain health and brain skills, as well as the environment in which they live and work, shape their ability to learn, work, earn, adapt and participate throughout life. Through neuroplasticity — the brain's ability to change — our experiences and environments can influence our brain health and brain skills, both positively and negatively. In turn, our brain health and brain skills affect quality of life, social cohesion and resilience. These effects extend beyond individuals to communities and the country as a whole, with each level influencing and reinforcing the others:

> When people flourish, organizations and communities thrive.
> When organizations and communities thrive, Canada prospers.
> And when Canada prospers, more people can flourish.

Canada's Foundation for Brain Capital

Canada is not starting from zero.

Brain capital aligns naturally with Canadian values. Canada has long embraced the idea that prosperity is strongest when people have the opportunity to learn, participate and contribute; when they feel safe and can access trusted support when needed; when communities support one another; and when public institutions and civil society work across boundaries to solve complex problems. Canada has responded to moments of profound challenge by building institutions that expand opportunity, strengthen communities and invest in human potential. Universal health care reflects the belief that access to care should be based on need, not ability to pay. Public education has created pathways for generations of Canadians to learn, contribute and prosper.

CANADA'S STRONG FOUNDATION:	
Research	World-class neuroscience, AI and neurotechnology researchers and institutions
Innovation	Investment pipelines that help turn discoveries into real-world benefits
Public infrastructure	Health, education, data and research systems
Community capacity	Organizations that translate evidence into action
Policy foundation	The Quality of Life Framework and pan-Canadian strategies on dementia, substance use, AI and energy
Canadian values	Inclusion, opportunity, collaboration and well-being
Investment	An established financial ecosystem, significant institutional investment capacity and experience with responsible and impact-oriented investment

Canada's foundation is strong. We have a highly educated population, strong research institutes, public health and education systems, diverse communities, trusted institutions and a history of solving complex problems collaboratively. Canada's opportunity is to connect these assets and mobilize them more deliberately. Brain health and brain skills are relevant to many of Canada's current priorities — from healthy development and learning to workforce productivity, innovation, social cohesion and resilience. However, economic models and measures that focus primarily on GDP and productivity do not adequately account for brain capital and well-being. As a result, they provide an incomplete picture of societal progress and the foundations of sustainable prosperity. This limitation is increasingly recognized.

Canada also has a strong investment foundation on which to build, including a sophisticated financial sector, substantial institutional investment capacity, and a growing, innovative ecosystem for social and sustainable finance. Canada's experience integrating gender and sustainability considerations into investment decisions provides a useful foundation for taking broader social and economic outcomes into account.

These capabilities provide a valuable foundation for emerging approaches such as brain-lens investing (Brain Capital Alliance, 2025). Developed with Canadian leadership, this approach seeks to integrate brain capital considerations into investment decisions. However, significant opportunities remain to expand the use of these approaches and mobilize greater investment in brain capital. Building on Canada's strengths can help direct capital toward initiatives that strengthen brain health, develop human potential, accelerate innovation and generate lasting economic and social value.

In health innovation, organizations such as Brain Canada, the Centre for Aging + Brain Health Innovation, Kids Brain Health+o and the Ontario Brain Institute are helping to build the infrastructure needed to support investment in brain capital. They bring together government funding, philanthropy and impact investing to support brain health and brain skills among people living in Canada.

Canadian policy frameworks reinforce this foundation. The chief public health officer's 2025 report (Tam, 2025), Statistics Canada's Quality of Life Framework (Statistics Canada, 2026e) and Canada's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2026) emphasize well-being, collaboration and whole-of-society action. Federal, provincial and territorial strategies on dementia, substance use, housing and AI similarly point to the need to address complex challenges across policy areas.

International organizations such as the Global Brain Economy Initiative and regional initiatives in Houston, Ohio and California are increasingly converging around similar ideas. For example, the World Economic Forum's Brain Economy Action Forum identifies five complementary levers: safeguarding brain health, fostering brain skills, studying brain capital, investing in brain capital and mobilizing coordinated action. Together, these levers provide building blocks for a distinctly Canadian approach.

Canada does not need to import a model. We can build on what already exists here and connect these assets more intentionally.

Canada Is Under Pressure — and Canadians Are Feeling It

Canada's brain capital is under strain. We see the effects in our own lives and communities, as well as in stories from across the country. Many of us have seen loved ones, friends or neighbours struggle with these pressures.

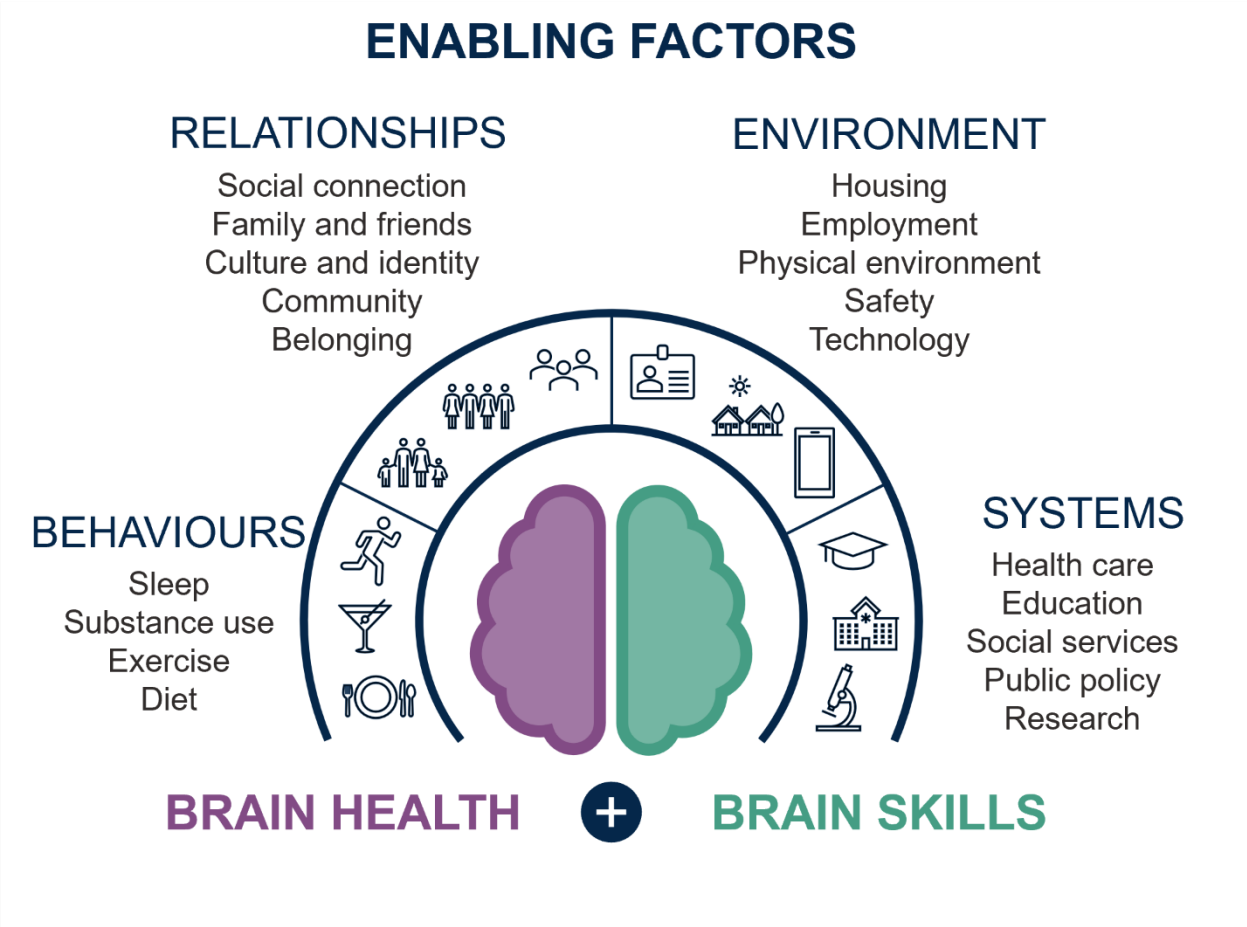
For example, a woman from Yellowknife lost faith in the Northwest Territories' medical community and felt compelled to spend thousands of dollars travelling to obtain an amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) diagnosis, a condition that may require her to move to receive the care she needs (Bhugra, 2025). Her experience shows how barriers to neurological care can compound the effects of disease, threatening a person's health, independence and ability to participate in their community.

In another example, a former manufacturing worker from Brampton is taking courses in the hope of finding work in a new but lower-paying field after being laid off from a long-held job at an automotive assembly plant (Subramaniam, 2025). This illustrates another pressure on Canada's brain capital: valuable knowledge and experience can go underused during economic transitions.

These are just two publicly reported examples of the challenges Canadians face. People's experiences vary across the country, reflecting different circumstances, pressures and impacts. Together, these stories illustrate how challenges involving health, employment and opportunity can affect Canadians' ability to participate and thrive.

A More Uncertain Canada: Security, Stability and Stress

Canada is experiencing heightened uncertainty. Geopolitical tensions, technological change, economic restructuring, affordability pressures and strains on public systems are creating new challenges across the country. For many Canadians, this feels less like a series of separate disruptions and more like a permacrisis: a sustained state in which one challenge overlaps with the next, leaving little time to recover or adapt. The stability and predictability that many Canadians have historically taken for granted can no longer be assumed. These overlapping pressures can undermine the conditions that support brain health and brain skills throughout life — conditions that extend well beyond health care and education. They can also add to our cognitive load, making it harder to think clearly, process information and make sense of a rapidly changing world.



Employment Shifts

Canada's economy is undergoing significant and disruptive changes. The federal government estimates that more than 1.4 million new trades workers will be required by 2033 to build and operate Canada's new infrastructure and housing projects (Department of Finance Canada, 2026). Responses to changing global trade and security relationships are putting pressure on export-oriented sectors such as automotive manufacturing and forcing businesses and workers to adapt. The Bank of Canada has identified the movement of workers and capital from industries affected by tariffs to other sectors as an important part of the economic adjustment and has noted that workers may need time and new skills to make that transition (Bank of Canada, 2026).

The automotive sector illustrates the complexity of this transition. The federal government has announced workforce supports, including reskilling assistance for up to 66,000 workers, alongside measures intended to retain automotive production and attract new investment (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2026, February 18).

These shifts affect more than employment numbers. For workers, a changing job market can bring uncertainty about their livelihoods while requiring them to learn and adapt. Effective reskilling requires more than access to training. People also need the time and support to make the transition. Those conditions matter for brain health and brain skills. They also influence Canada's ability to make the most of economic change by helping workers learn new tools, adapt to changing roles and navigate increasingly complex work environments.

Technological Change

Rapid advances in technology, particularly AI, are creating both opportunities and uncertainty. In Canada, AI adoption has been relatively slow, shaped in part by mistrust and low levels of AI literacy. A KPMG survey of 48,000 people across 47 countries placed Canada among the bottom five countries for AI training, literacy and trust and found significant concern about AI's effects on society and employment (Gillespie et al., 2025). Forty-seven per cent of Canadians worry that AI automation could cause them to lose their job or change careers, with younger people particularly concerned (Sheppard & Coletto, 2025).

At the same time, emerging evidence suggests that overreliance on AI may weaken brain skills such as critical thinking, despite their increasing importance in workplaces and society. Half of Canadian students report experiencing cognitive offloading — relying on AI to perform tasks they would otherwise do themselves — when using AI (KPMG, 2025). As AI changes how people work and learn, we must also consider whether it strengthens human connection or displaces opportunities for conversation, collaboration and belonging.

There is also uncertainty about the benefits AI may deliver. AI has the potential to increase productivity, augment human capabilities and accelerate innovation, but we do not yet know how widely these benefits will be realized or what the costs may be.

Affordability Pressures

Affordability pressures are another source of uncertainty and stress for Canadians. Consumer prices in Canada have risen by about 20 per cent over the past five years, with an especially sharp increase following the COVID-19 pandemic (Statistics Canada, 2026a). Concerns about affordability, particularity the cost of groceries and nutritious food, are now major sources of stress. Forty-two per cent of Canadians say their personal finances are their top source of stress, and half report losing sleep because of financial worries (FP Canada, 2026). Financial strain can leave people with less mental energy to plan, learn and adapt. Affordability is therefore more than economic issue — it is also a brain health issue.

Public System Strain

Adding to these sources of uncertainty is growing pressure on Canada's public systems. The proportion of Canadians aged 65 and older is increasing as the population ages and fertility rates remain low. This trend creates a dual challenge: demand for age-related services is increasing while the proportion of people of working age is declining. These demographic shifts will create funding and staffing challenges for public services such as health care and education by increasing demand relative to the size of the working-age population. They could also increase costs for governments and reduce the quality and timeliness of services.

For example, 10 per cent of Canadians report unmet healthcare needs (Statistics Canada, 2026f), while people with symptoms of dementia can wait 21 to 28 months for a formal diagnosis (Liu et al., 2019). These pressures are not felt equally across the country. Rural and remote communities and equity-deserving groups are facing particular challenges in accessing services. Labour shortages also affect the delivery of essential services such as early learning and child care (Shariati, 2026), demonstrating that these challenges extend beyond health systems.

Canadians Are Struggling to Thrive

People do not experience uncertainty only as an economic, social or political condition. We experience it through our brains and bodies. Prolonged uncertainty and stress increase cognitive and emotional demands, contribute to neurobiological changes and can impair functions such as attention, learning and decision making (McEwen, 2017; Kienzler, 2024). These effects can compound over time and ripple through our daily lives, including where we live and work. As pressures mount, many Canadians of all ages are struggling to thrive. Trends in mental health, well-being and brain skills point to growing challenges.

Brain health can be affected by a range of conditions, including neurological, neurodevelopmental, mental health and substance use disorders. Overall, about one in three Canadians will experience a neurological condition at some point in their lives (Brain Injury Canada, n.d.), and one in five Canadians lives with a mental health or substance use disorder (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013). While some indicators of brain health, such as the incidence of dementia, are improving (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2025), others are worsening. Between 2015 and 2024, the proportion of Canadian adults with a mood disorder rose from 8.1 per cent to 13.1 per cent, while the proportion with an anxiety disorder more than doubled from 7.8 per cent to 16.1 per cent (Statistics Canada, 2026c). These changes are particularly striking among younger Canadians. In 2022, 18.4 per cent of girls and women aged 15 to 24 met the criteria for a major depressive episode and 11.9 per cent met the criteria for generalized anxiety disorder, compared with nine per cent and 3.8 per cent, respectively, in 2012 (Stephenson, 2023).

In 2026, Canada had the second-highest rate of opioid toxicity death in the world, at 20 deaths annually per 100,000 people — double the rate in 2016 (Lowe et al., 2024). While Canadians continue to live relatively long lives, life expectancy has stagnated since 2010, at about 82 years (Statistics Canada, 2026d). Health-adjusted life expectancy — the number of years a person can expect to live in good health — dropped by almost four years over the same period, to just 67 years (Statistics Canada, 2026b).

Although the rise in mental health disorders is not unique to Canada — the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that youth mental health has been deteriorating across most OECD countries for more than a decade (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2026) — the decline in well-being has been especially pronounced in Canada. In the 2026 *World Happiness Report* (Helliwell et al., 2026), Canada ranked 25th in happiness, down from sixth place in 2013. Canada also recorded the ninth-largest decline in happiness among 136 countries.

As discussed earlier, Canadians face a range of stressors and disruptions that can affect their well-being. The proportion of working Canadians reporting burnout rose from 35 per cent in 2023 to 39 per cent in 2025 (Martin et al., 2025). Social connection and feelings of belonging are also under strain, with only 33 per cent of youth reporting that their personal relationships are “always good” (Yakhnis 2024). Overall, 54 per cent of Canadians rated their mental health as very good or excellent in 2024, compared with 72 per cent in 2015 (Statistics Canada, 2026c).

At the same time, Canada’s brain skills are under pressure, with challenges evident at different stages of life. Students’ performance on international literacy measures has weakened, with the proportion of students below baseline reading proficiency increasing from about 11 per cent in 2012 to 22 per cent in 2025 (Elez et al., 2026). Literacy is a foundation for learning across all disciplines, helps build critical thinking skills and is associated with positive lifelong health, well-being and economic outcomes (Kawamura et al., 2024). Meanwhile, employers report difficulty finding candidates with the skills they need (Fissuh et al., 2022).

The importance of brain skills, however, is not limited to success in the workplace. These skills, especially critical thinking and decision making, also help people distinguish misinformation and disinformation from reliable, evidence-based information online. In 2019, more than half of Canadians reported having fallen for “fake news,” slightly higher than the international average (Simpson & Wilson-Smith, 2019). More recently, amid the growing use of AI, 80 per cent of Canadians reported seeing suspected misinformation online at least once a month, while 47 per cent said it had become harder to distinguish true from false information compared with three years earlier (Foran & Bilodeau, 2026). Without

the skills and knowledge to recognize misleading information and manipulation, people may be more vulnerable to financial scams and fraudulent health advice.

The burden does not affect everyone equally. Indigenous Peoples, racialized people, 2SLGBTQI+ people (people with Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other sexual orientations and gender identities), newcomers and women face inequities in the conditions that support brain health and the development of brain skills. The impacts of colonization, racism, poverty, ableism and barriers to services can disproportionately affect these populations.

Women	7% More provide intensive, unpaid care	3% more experience work-related burnout
2SLGBTQ+ People	31 – 55% experience stigma in their daily lives	11% more report a low sense of community belonging
Newcomers	6% more experience a mismatch between their skills and job requirements	8% more are vulnerable to displacement by AI
Racialized People	5% fewer have a primary healthcare provide	2x as likely to have dementia
Indigenous Peoples	2 – 20% more live in low-income situations	12% More report fair or poor mental health

Notes: More and fewer refer to percentage-point differences between people who identify with equity-deserving groups and those who do not. The 31 to 55% range reflects uncertainty in the survey sample. Two to 20% range reflects difference between First Nation, Metis, and Inuit populations. Statistics for racialized people are specific for Black Canadians.

The challenge goes beyond the numbers, as the effects ripple outward and affect families, caregivers, employers and communities. Taken together, these trends show that the brain health and brain skills on which Canada's prosperity and resilience depend are under pressure. This is particularly concerning at a time when growing uncertainty makes it more important than ever for Canada to build and sustain its brain capital.

Communities Are Feeling the Strain

Across the country, communities are grappling with intersecting pressures, including rising housing and food costs, the impacts of the opioid epidemic, economic disruption and declining community well-being. These challenges can be particularly acute outside major urban centres where access to health care, education, employment and other supports may be limited. As a result, many communities are struggling to provide the conditions people need to thrive.

These challenges can add to the pressures facing communities, particularly when residents feel less safe (Advanis, 2025). Although social and economic hardship does not in itself lead to criminal involvement, financial insecurity, unstable housing, social isolation and limited opportunities can increase people's vulnerability to recruitment and exploitation by those involved in criminal activity, particularly among youth (Baird & Connolly, 2023).

The consequences of criminal recruitment and exploitation extend to families and the wider community, where fear and concerns about safety can add to the pressures people face (Aerts, 2024). Together, these pressures can undermine brain health and limit opportunities to develop and use skills, reducing community-level brain capital and resilience.

The Toll on Our Workplaces

For employers, challenges to brain capital have direct implications for employee well-being, performance and productivity. Ten per cent of employed Canadians reported missing at least one day of work in the previous week because of mental health challenges, with 64 per cent of those who missed work reporting multiple days of absence. Another 33 per cent reported reduced productivity at work (Martin et al., 2025). Among working caregivers, 36 per cent reported a negative impact on their work, including reduced productivity, lost earnings or difficulty balancing competing demands (Klingbaum et al., 2026).

These effects have financial implications for employers and the broader economy. Workplace conditions can also compound brain health challenges. Heavy workloads, job insecurity, limited control, inadequate support and a lack of meaningful connection can add to stress and cognitive strain. Substance use, including alcohol use, can also affect employee well-being and productivity and compromise workplace safety (McIlwaine et al., 2025).

Conversely, well-designed work, supportive leadership and flexibility for caregivers can help protect brain health. Employers can assess and improve psychosocial working conditions, including workload, role clarity, autonomy, relationships and support during change. Addressing these risks can help protect employees' capacity to think, learn and perform sustainably while supporting their brain health.

II. Building Brain Capital: The Opportunity Canada Cannot Afford to Miss

Challenges to brain health and brain skills have an immense human cost. Together, they also carry a significant economic cost. While no single figure captures the full burden of neurological, mental health, neurodevelopmental and substance use disorders, dementia alone cost the Canadian economy more than $40 billion in 2020 (Canadian Centre for Economic Analysis, 2023) and a 2026 estimate placed the economic burden of mental health conditions at $180 billion (Morawczynski et al., 2026). These estimates include healthcare spending, household costs, employer expenses and lost productivity among people living with these conditions and their caregivers. Employer costs are particularly significant, accounting for the largest share of costs in both estimates. These costs span multiple sectors and arise over both the short and long term, underscoring the substantial economic burden of brain disorders.

Investing in brain capital also presents a significant opportunity to lay the foundation for economic prosperity. Strengthening brain health and brain skills can deliver substantial benefits for individuals, communities and the economy. For example, supporting children's healthy development can yield lifelong benefits for children, as well as more immediate benefits for families and the broader economy.

There is also an opportunity to invest in brain skills that will be essential in the workforce of the future. As AI reshapes the world of work, employers increasingly value a combination of technological literacy and distinctly human capabilities. The World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs Report 2025* identified analytical thinking as the leading core skill, cited by 69 per cent of surveyed employers, followed by resilience, flexibility and agility (67 per cent), leadership and social influence (61 per cent) and creative thinking (57 per cent) (World Economic Forum, 2025). Canadian employer research also highlights gaps in these types of skills. Among businesses reporting workforce skill gaps, 46.2 per cent identified problem-solving as a skill needing improvement, followed by critical thinking (33.4 per cent), teamwork (27.8 per cent) and oral and written communication (24.2 per cent) (Fissuh et al., 2022). These findings underscore the importance of investing in brain skills to help Canadians adapt and thrive in a changing workforce.

Cost		Opportunity	
500K	Canadians miss work each week due to mental illness	**9x ROI**	on investments in children's first 1,000 days of life
472M	hours of informal caregiving provided to people living with dementia in Canada	**45%**	of dementia risk could be prevented or delayed
3M	disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) lost due to brain-related conditions in Canada	**6 of 10**	desired workforce skills of the future are brain skills
All cases	identify that employers shoulder the largest economic cost	**$10.7B**	reduction in Canada's economic burden of dementia if onset is delayed by one year
$28B vs. $23B	spent on responses to mental illness versus mental health care	**$10**	saved for every $1 invested in community-based youth mental health services in Canada

Note: Responses to mental illness refer to homelessness services, incarceration, and repeated ambulance and police interventions as opposed to direct medical expenses like physician services, medications, and other public system costs.

The opportunity is to reduce these costs and generate greater benefits by taking deliberate action to build brain capital, an asset that supports three interconnected outcomes:

Human flourishing — where people have the health, well-being, connection, agency and capabilities to learn, thrive and realize their full potential throughout life.

Economic prosperity — where organizations and communities have the brain capital to be productive, innovative and competitive, expanding social and economic opportunities for all.

National resilience — where Canada has the human capacity to absorb shocks, adapt to disruption, maintain social cohesion and protect its ability to determine its own future.

These outcomes are interrelated and reinforce one another. Brain capital is both an input to prosperity and an outcome of the conditions that enable people to flourish.

Demographic changes reinforce the need to invest in brain capital throughout life. Canada needs to build strong foundations in childhood, support brain development through adolescence and sustain brain health and skills throughout working life and into older age. These efforts can help more people remain healthy, independent and engaged for longer.

What Brain Capital Looks Like in Practice

Canada already has examples of investments that build brain capital across the lifespan and demonstrate how benefits can ripple outward and compound across people, communities and the economy. While not exhaustive, the examples that follow illustrate three promising opportunities for action — early in life, in communities and at work — and show how investments in each can advance human flourishing while delivering economic benefits and strengthening resilience.

Invest Early: Build the Foundations of Brain Capital

More than 400,000 Canadian children aged four to 14 live with a neurodevelopmental disability, with some estimates as high as 700,000. The Kids Brain Health Network (KBHN) has invested in initiatives to support children, including Social ABCs, a program developed by researchers at the University of Toronto and Dalhousie University. The program helps toddlers with early social communication delays develop their communication and social skills during a critical period of brain development. Research has shown improvements in functional communication and social skills among children participating in the program (Brian et al., 2022).

The Social ABCs program is now being expanded to older children and scaled up across Ontario, Alberta, Nova Scotia and internationally. The expansion is expected to reach 130 new families. The program shows how early investments in brain health can support developmental gains that lay the foundation for longer-term capabilities.

The program also shows how researchers can identify gaps, develop promising interventions and work with organizations such as KBH+ to make them available to families who need them. It also offers a concrete example of how public investment can attract additional resources to build brain capital.

Building strong foundations for brain capital early in life is also important at the population level. The Breakfast Club of Canada (n.d.) recognized that one in three children did not eat breakfast regularly, despite the association between eating breakfast and better health and learning outcomes. To address this, the organization worked with partners to establish and expand school breakfast programs across the country, providing complete, balanced and

nutritious breakfasts to school-aged children. These programs now serve almost one million children in 5,600 schools. The investment has helped support children's learning, nutrition and overall well-being.

The lesson is larger than any one program: early investments in brain development for all children are key. Timely support for children, along with efforts to strengthen the capabilities of caregivers and create supportive environments, can improve outcomes for children and families. This means promoting children's mental health and well-being, supporting their social and cognitive development and ensuring access to nutritious food, supportive relationships and timely services. While intervention is possible throughout life, early childhood and adolescence offer particularly important opportunities to build foundational skills. Together, these investments in children and youth can strengthen Canada's economic capacity, with benefits that begin in families and compound over time.

Build Brain-Positive Communities

Brain capital is also built in the places where people live and connect. The Small Cities Initiative, led by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA), illustrates how evidence can be translated into locally relevant action. More than 30 mayors and community leaders contributed to the development of the *Playbook for Action*, which offers more than 50 evidence-based interventions that communities can use to address substance use challenges. The interventions span prevention, treatment, harm reduction, recovery, community support, housing, employment and public safety. This approach has gained buy-in across multiple sectors and focuses on whole-of-health and community well-being. The initiative has been well received and has generated interest among communities across Canada.

Community collaboration is also central to efforts to create dementia-friendly communities. In this context, a community can be a town, city, organization, business or group. These local initiatives aim to increase understanding of the experiences of people with dementia and for people to use that knowledge to improve support, inclusion and accessibility for people living with dementia and their caregivers. Dementia-friendly community initiatives have been implemented across Canada through partnerships with regional Alzheimer Societies (Alzheimer Society of Canada, n.d.). Research suggests that these initiatives can increase social interaction, reduce isolation and improve quality of life for people living with dementia and their caregivers (Craig et al., 2024).

These examples illustrate a broader lesson: strengthening brain health requires more than treatments delivered through clinical systems. Communities are a critical part of the infrastructure that supports mental health and well-being, encourages social connection and provides the conditions needed for healthy development. In doing so, they help build and protect brain capital while enhancing human flourishing and national resilience.

Strengthen Human Capability at Work

Workplaces are another significant setting in which brain capital can be protected and strengthened. Canadian evidence shows that employer investments in mental health — an important component of brain capital — can generate measurable business returns (Chapman et al., 2019). Deloitte Canada's analysis of seven large Canadian companies found a median annual return of $1.62 for every dollar invested in workplace mental health programs, rising to $2.18 for programs in place for three or more years. Investing in workplace mental health can also help employers retain employees and attract qualified applicants.

Strengthening brain skills is also a way for employers to invest in their employees while building brain capital in their organizations and communities. A project led by Eeyou Istchee College of Science and Technology, a Cree-governed, community-led postsecondary institution in northern Quebec, illustrates this approach. With financial support from the Future Skills Centre (Asolo, 2026), the college partnered with regional employers to design and deliver a certificate program for working adults focused on developing essential workplace skills. Participating employees reported improvements in their workplace skills, while employers reported improvements in job performance (Future Skills Centre, 2026).

The significance of these examples extends beyond mental health and skills development programs. They demonstrate the value of investing in employees' mental health and skills, as well as working conditions that help people think, adapt, participate and perform well. Such investments can benefit both employees and businesses, contributing to human flourishing and economic prosperity.

Together, the examples from these three areas show that Canada does not need to build brain capital from scratch. The building blocks already exist in research, communities and workplaces. The opportunity is to learn from what works, connect these efforts, strengthen the evidence, mobilize investment, support innovation and help promising approaches reach more people.

Canada can build on its strengths — strong public institutions, world-class research, diverse communities, universal health and education systems, and experience working across jurisdictions — to develop a distinctly Canadian approach to building and mobilizing brain capital.

III. From Conversation to Common Agenda

Brain capital is not simply a health issue. It's also an economic and workforce challenge. The case for a more integrated approach to brain capital is emerging from conversations taking place across sectors. Held in Calgary during Canada's 2025 G7 presidency, the G7

Canada Brain Economy Summit was convened by a partnership of major Canadian organizations working in brain health, research and innovation. It brought together more than 100 senior leaders from Canada and around the world, representing business, labour, science, academia, civil society and people with lived and living experience. The insights from the summit continue to be echoed and reinforced in discussions about the brain economy.

These discussions have revealed broad agreement on the importance of brain health for productivity, employee retention, safety, adaptability and organizational performance, as well as competitiveness and demographic resilience. Prevention and promotion have also emerged as central priorities, reflecting the fact that brain health is shaped throughout life, long before a diagnosis occurs. Schools, workplaces and public spaces are seen as important environments for promoting brain health — not simply places where problems are addressed after they emerge. Finally, participants recognized both the opportunities AI presents for improving productivity and driving innovation and its potential risks. These risks include impacts on cognitive capacity, the spread of misinformation, changes in how people learn and recall information and widening gaps between those equipped to use these technologies critically and those who are not.

Alignment is key. Participants at the G7 Canada Brain Economy Summit and other forums have highlighted a persistent gap between knowledge and impact. Scientific advances in neuroscience, prevention and data science are not consistently translated into policy, services or practice. Short-term funding, siloed evaluation and a lack of reliable tools to compare interventions and assess returns can make it difficult to sustain, scale up and invest in what works. A lack of a common language and shared understanding across systems, sectors and different parts of society adds to these challenges. People in a wide range of roles — from community members and practitioners to organizational leaders and policy makers — need a shared understanding of brain capital, why it matters and what it means in practice. Without this foundation, efforts to build brain capital will remain fragmented.

Measurement, investment and coordination are seen as critical to advancing brain capital. Participants called for shared indicators, stronger evidence of return on investment, analyses of the costs of inaction, better data infrastructure and practical mechanisms to identify and scale up what works. They also emphasized that no single sector should be responsible for advancing brain capital on its own.

Since the summit, the conversations have continued and gained momentum. New partners from government, civil society and business have become involved. The perspectives shared by these leaders and experts echo those of the G7 summit participants, highlighting common barriers, needs and opportunities.

These discussions suggest that organizations, governments, researchers, clinicians and businesses are keen to build on existing efforts. They want to develop the partnerships, investment mechanisms and practical tools needed to mobilize evidence, strengthen prevention, improve health and skills and turn promising approaches into measurable results.

Investing in brain capital is ultimately an investment in the people who power our economy and strengthen our communities. Healthier, more skilled and more adaptable Canadians are better positioned to participate fully in society, contribute to productivity and innovation and navigate a rapidly changing economy. Investing in brain capital is an investment in Canada.

IV. The Canadian Brain Economy Initiative

The Canadian Brain Economy Initiative (CBEI) was conceived to bring together diverse people, places, sectors and ideas to advance shared brain-positive outcomes. It builds on feedback from the G7 Canadian Brain Economy Summit in Calgary, subsequent events and convenings as well as hundreds of engagements.

Extensive work is already underway across Canada to build brain capital. The opportunity now is to connect these efforts to bring about systems change and achieve greater collective impact. By bringing together and building on these strengths, Canada can turn its diversity into a defining national advantage and recognize brain capital as a foundation for individual well-being, community resilience and economic growth.

The CBEI's **vision** is to advance three mutually reinforcing outcomes: human flourishing, economic prosperity and national resilience.

Its **mission** is to lead a national, multisectoral effort to make brain capital a priority for governments, investors, civil society, communities and industries. The CBEI connects sectors — including health, education, skills development, workplaces, research, innovation and public policy — to strengthen brain health and brain skills across the lifespan.

The CBEI will collaborate with partners to identify barriers to progress and draw on evidence, knowledge and experience from across sectors to inform policy and identify new opportunities for action. It will connect sectors and regions, policy and practice, and investment with opportunities for action. It will build a common language and shared understanding across systems, sectors and levels of society to support coordinated action, evaluation, investment and help successful approaches reach more people.

From Vision to Action

We are accelerating action by building on the strengths of our systems, establishing the evidence base, identifying what works, exploring new solutions, connecting promising

initiatives, mobilizing resources and scaling up successful approaches. We are learning from work underway across the country and around the world to turn knowledge and experience into action.

The CBEI is taking an inclusive, comprehensive approach to advancing this work:

- **Developing a Canadian Brain Capital Index** — finalizing development of the Index to establish a common language and evidence base, identify strengths and gaps, track progress, and inform policy, planning and investment decisions.
- **Developing a national action plan to strengthen brain capital** — convening national and regional roundtables to develop and implement a national action plan.
- **Establish governance** — drawing on expert advice to guide the first-year plan and translate priorities into action.
- **Scaling up and replicating what works** — identifying and helping to scale up and replicate successful approaches across jurisdictions and sectors, highlighting examples that demonstrate impact.

The work will be advanced through six priority areas supported by action teams and guided by expert advisors:

- **Health promotion and prevention** — strengthen population brain health across the lifespan.
- **Skills, productivity and workplace well-being** — build a future-ready workforce by developing brain skills, mitigating psychosocial risks and designing accessible work as AI and other changes are introduced.
- **Research, technology and innovation** — advance evidence-based solutions, including AI-enabled approaches, that strengthen Canada's innovation pathway from neuroscience discovery and clinical research to practical application and measurable impact.
- **Investment and funding** — develop a common investment thesis and mobilize capital to support opportunities to build brain capital.
- **Place-based initiatives** — help communities put brain capital into practice and demonstrate its local economic and social benefits.
- **Social cohesion and human flourishing** — strengthen the conditions for connected, inclusive and thriving communities.

An Ambitious Canadian Opportunity

Canada has an opportunity to move from leadership in the brain capital conversation to leadership in putting brain capital into practice.

The CBEI will provide a platform to turn this ambition into collective action. By building on Canada's strengths and mobilizing partners around a shared direction, the CBEI can help put knowledge and innovation into action, build on promising initiatives and achieve measurable results.

Join the Movement

The CBEI is being built with and for partners across Canada. Its impact will depend on the people who help shape the CBEI's work. Governments, investors, businesses, researchers, health and social organizations, educators, communities, people with lived and living experience and others all have a role to play.

We invite you to join us.

Share your perspective, contribute your expertise and ideas and connect with the Canadian Brain Economy Initiative.

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Canadian Brain Economy Initiative

Meet the Authors



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Elizabeth is Executive Advisor, Strategic Policy and Programs, at CCSA, where she brings sectors together across Canada to accelerate efforts to build a thriving Canadian brain economy. Before taking on this role, Elizabeth led national initiatives as a federal government executive specializing in policy, program delivery and communications. With more than 20 years in government, she has developed extensive knowledge and expertise in health, the environment and social development. During the pandemic, Elizabeth made significant contributions to the development of social policies supporting families and caregivers, including playing a leadership role in designing and implementing Canada's $10-a-day Early Learning and Child Care system.



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Acknowledgements

We recognize the contributions of the following individuals and organizations who provided feedback and contributed their perspectives in the development of this paper:

Marie Gill and Gina Jeneroux (Aetheon); Jeane Day (Alzheimer's Society of Montreal); Tim Deloughery, Heather Burke and Chandni Sondagar (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction); Maya Volpato (CGI); Sarah Kennell and Leyna Lowe (Canadian Mental Health Association); Stephen Tapp and Ali Shariati (Centre for the Study of Living Standards); Jen Fraser, PhD; Dr. Harris Eyre (Global Brain Economy Initiative); Rahul Chandran (Grand Challenges Canada); Sanna Westermann (Health Cities); Jennifer Dotchin (Hotchkiss Brain Institute); Geoff Moore (Impact^{AND} Inc.); Annie Kidder; Corey Fortier and Jennifer Zwicker (Kid's Brain Health +); Ari Lester and Tatyana Norman-Webler (Ohio Brain Capital Alliance); Victoria Meah (Palix Foundation); Inez Jabalpurwala, Jay Khosla and Eddy Nason (Public Policy Forum); and S. Monty Ghosh, MD (University of Alberta).

We remain grateful to those who have provided advice and participated in conversations throughout the past year that also helped inform this work, and for the support of the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction as well as the Ontario Brain Institute.

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