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Addressing Dementia in Canada: Current Trends, Challenges and Opportunities in Improving Public Awareness, Reducing the Risk and Challenging Stigma Related to Dementia

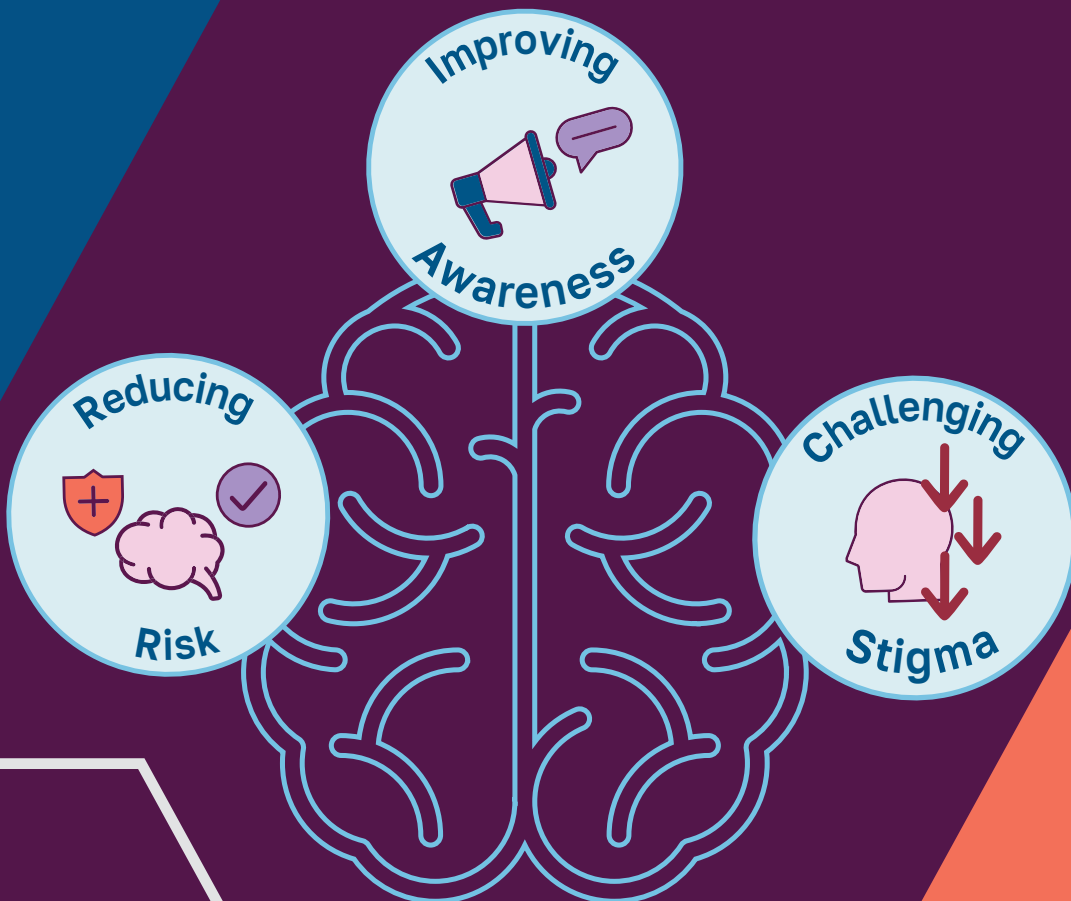


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Executive Summary

Dementia is significantly impacting the lives of many Canadians, most of whom were diagnosed with it after the age of 65.¹ Approximately half a million older adults in Canada were living with a diagnosis of dementia in 2023/24 according to the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC);² however, the Alzheimer Society of Canada (ASC) has estimated the number of people of all ages living with dementia in Canada could possibly be approaching 772,000 as of 2025.^{3,4a} Canada's rapidly ageing population is anticipated to contribute to much larger numbers of people living with dementia into the future.⁵

The ASC has further estimated that it is possible that nearly 1.7 million Canadians would be living with dementia by 2050, and nearly 1 million care partners may be needed to support them.^{4a}

While those living with dementia are often older adults, most Canadians have experience with dementia. Indeed, in a 2024 PHAC survey, 74% of Canadian adults 18 years of age and older reported that they knew someone who had or currently has dementia.⁶

There is no better time to ensure that health care and social systems are ready to help Canadians address dementia. This can range from ensuring Canadians are well-informed about dementia, to taking actions to prevent the condition, to ensuring that communities are inclusive and equitable for those living with

dementia. Many governments, organizations, advocates and researchers across Canada have been undertaking critical work to tackle these complex issues. The NIA aims to build on this momentum through a three-part annual research report series, each part examining a key topic related to advancing dementia practice, policy and research across Canada.

In this inaugural report of a three-part annual series, the NIA explores the current state of public awareness of dementia, factors that can help reduce the risk of developing dementia, and the need to challenge the associated stigma (e.g., stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination).

These topics share a common theme: Canadians of all ages need to be knowledgeable about dementia, need to have access to information and supports to lower their risk and need to acknowledge their role in combating stigma. While PHAC surveys from 2020 to 2024 indicate that many Canadians are knowledgeable about dementia and recognize that their risk of dementia can be reduced,⁶ many people are unaware of the wide range of potentially modifiable risk factors that are associated with delaying or preventing dementia. Further, stigmatizing and negative perceptions about dementia remain persistent and problematic.^{7,8}

^a The ASC estimation is based on their Landmark Study, a microsimulation model that developed projections from the data available at the time (e.g., the 2016 Canadian census).⁵ Accordingly, these numbers should be interpreted with caution.

Governments around the world, including those in Canada, have recognized their key role in addressing dementia more effectively through the development of national dementia strategies.^{9,10} Government dementia strategies often describe a plan, framework, or policy that identifies critical strategic areas and goals and outlines how the government will be responsible for achieving these objectives.⁹ Indeed, a pivotal moment in dementia policymaking in Canada occurred in 2017, when the federal government passed legislation requiring it to support the development, implementation and annual reporting on a national dementia strategy.¹¹ While Canada's inaugural 2019 national dementia strategy marked a key step in addressing dementia, provincial and territorial governments also play a crucial role in appropriately addressing it. To understand the contributing roles governments at the federal, provincial and territorial levels have played towards addressing dementia, this report presents the findings of a document policy analysis of government strategic plans and priorities related to addressing dementia across Canada. For this report, the NIA focused specifically on identifying strategic priorities aimed at improving public awareness, reducing the risk of dementia and challenging the stigma surrounding it.

The NIA found that over the last 15 years, the federal government and nearly all provincial and territorial governments have identified dementia as a key issue impacting their communities. However, the focus, extent and impact of their plans and priorities to address dementia have varied across the country.

While the federal government launched its inaugural national dementia strategy in 2019,¹¹ less than half (six) of all Canada's provinces and territories have developed a dedicated dementia strategy over the past fifteen years.¹²⁻¹⁸

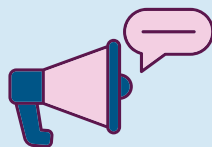
Notably, all of the dementia strategies had objectives related to improving public awareness, reducing the risk of dementia and challenging the stigma associated with dementia.¹²⁻¹⁸ Canada's three territories and eight of its ten provinces had released seniors strategies, with every plan having at least one strategic objective related to addressing dementia, although not all of these were specific to improving public awareness, reducing the risk of dementia, or challenging the stigma associated with dementia.¹⁹⁻³² Only Saskatchewan had not released a dementia strategy or a seniors strategy during this time. In total, ten provinces or territories had either a dementia strategy or a seniors strategy that contained objectives related to improving public awareness, eight had objectives related to reducing the risk of dementia and eight had objectives aimed at challenging the stigma associated with dementia.^{12-24,26-28,31}

The NIA's analysis has found that governments across Canada can do more to identify yearly metrics of success related to their strategic goals and to ensure that this data is made publicly available and easily accessible. Furthermore, while governments have undertaken numerous initiatives aimed at increasing public awareness of dementia, additional efforts could be made to develop comprehensive and integrated approaches towards dementia prevention, as well as to consider a diversity of approaches to challenging the stigma associated with dementia.

In response to these gaps, this report concludes by presenting three evidence-informed policy recommendations:



1. All Canadian jurisdictions need to develop and implement a dementia strategy, action plan or framework to guide planning and ensure that the overall approach to addressing dementia is both comprehensive and integrated.



2. All Canadian jurisdictions need to continue and expand their current public awareness initiatives to improve the overall awareness of dementia, reduce the risk of developing dementia and also challenge the stigma associated with dementia among all Canadians.



3. Governments of all levels should determine and implement standard metrics to measure and monitor their progress against their stated objectives and publicly report on their progress.