

# Exploring experiences of service providers transitioning to virtual delivery of group-based services in the child and family mental health and addictions sector



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## Background

Social distancing measures designed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges to meeting the mental health and addictions needs of youth and families. Virtual delivery of group-based services offered a promising means of addressing these needs during a time characterized by elevated anxiety and restricted access to social support. Preliminary findings indicate that virtual groups:

- Are feasible, acceptable, and effective for treating such mental health issues as PTSD, anger management, and substance abuse (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2015).
- Facilitate supportive peer relationships within a medium that minimizes logistical and stigma-related barriers to treatment (Douma et al., 2019).

However, such research is limited. Particularly lacking is research examining virtual groups for youth and families and the experiences of service providers facilitating virtual groups.

## Current Study

### Objective:

To capture the processes, perceptions, and learnings of service providers working in the child and family mental health and addictions sector as they rapidly adapted their group services to a virtual environment.

### Research question:

*What were the experiences of group facilitators working in the youth and family sector as they transitioned to virtual delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

### Contribution:

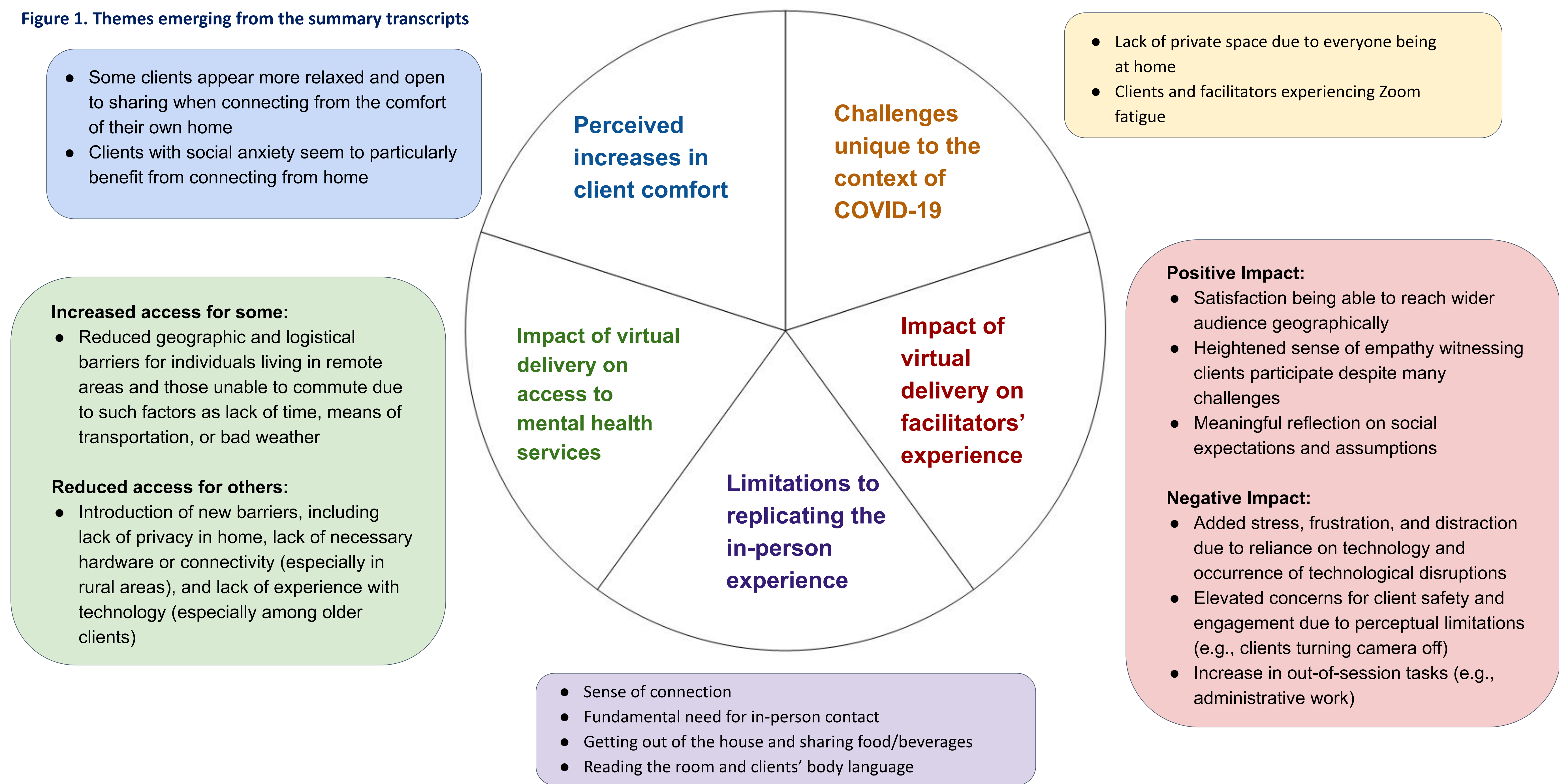
To inform the development of service delivery approaches by drawing upon the emerging, situated perspectives of service providers navigating the uniquely rapid shift to virtual services prompted by COVID-19.

## Methodology

- 18 mental health and addiction professionals from 8 Kids Come First agencies in Eastern Ontario were interviewed concerning their experiences facilitating virtual groups.
- Interviews were semi-structured following an interview guide developed from a review of the literature.
- The interviews captured:
  - Contextual Information on Services Provided
  - Administrative and Logistical Processes Involved in Service Provision
  - Barriers and Gaps to Service Implementation
  - Key Learnings
  - Perceived Impact of Online Service Implementation and Delivery
- Interviews were audio recorded and summary transcripts were generated.
- Summary transcripts were analyzed thematically.

## Results

Figure 1. Themes emerging from the summary transcripts



## Conclusion

- Emerging themes highlight the unique demands of virtual environments, the impact of virtual delivery on accessibility to mental health and addictions services, and the adaptation required of service providers' skills, materials, and approaches to online settings.
- Facilitators expressed that virtual delivery of mental health and addictions groups for youth and families offer several **unique benefits**, including reduction of some geographic and logistical barriers and an enhanced comfort for clients connecting from their home environment.
- However, this method of delivery also involves multiple **unique challenges**, including heightened privacy concerns, technological disruptions, and a lower sense of interpersonal connection.

### Implications

- Our study findings can inform development of a hybrid service delivery model.
- Going forward, post-pandemic, agencies offering both virtual and in-person groups can maximize the benefits of virtual delivery while mitigating against the limitations. As one participant shared,

*"I see [virtual groups] as not better or worse, but meeting different types of needs to in-person."*

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## References

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