

## Frequency, Determinants, and Impact of Overcrowding in Emergency Departments in Canada: A National Survey of Emergency Department Directors

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### Issue and Methods

Emergency department (ED) overcrowding can be defined as a situation where the demand for emergency services exceeds the ability to provide care in a reasonable amount of time. There is a need to identify the frequency, determinants, and impact of ED overcrowding across Canada. Two hundred and forty-three hospital ED directors in Canadian municipalities larger than 10,000 inhabitants were surveyed on ED overcrowding (158 respondents; 65% response rate).

### Implications for Decision Making

- **ED overcrowding can be defined as a situation where the demand for emergency services exceeds the ability to provide care in a reasonable amount of time.** While definitions vary, most Canadian ED directors surveyed (85%) agreed with this definition.
- **Overcrowding is a frequent and significant problem across Canada.** Sixty-two percent of ED directors reported overcrowding as a major or severe problem in 2004-2005. Major or severe overcrowding is much more likely to occur in EDs with >50,000 visits per year, communities with a population of at least 150,000, university-affiliated hospitals, trauma centres, and EDs with 30 or more treatment spaces.
- **A lack of beds is thought to lead to overcrowding.** Most respondents (85%) believed that a lack of admitting beds was a major or serious cause of overcrowding. Less than one quarter thought that wait times or staff shortages were a major cause.
- **Overcrowding can impact patients.** Fifty-two percent of responding directors thought that ED overcrowding increased the risk of poor patient outcomes.
- **Overcrowding has implications for human resources.** Most ED directors (82%) perceived that overcrowding had a serious or major negative impact on the level of stress among nurses, nursing staff recruitment and retention (68%), ED staff satisfaction (66%), and increased stress among physicians (65%).
- **Current policies intended to control overcrowding may need to be revisited.** Although 54% of respondents reported that their hospitals have policies to deal with ED overcrowding, 67% thought that they had little or no effect.

This summary is based on a comprehensive health technology assessment available from CADTH's web site ([www.cadth.ca](http://www.cadth.ca)): Rowe BH, Bond K, Ospina MB, Blitz S, Afilalo M, Campbell SG, Schull M. *Frequency, determinants, and impact of overcrowding in emergency departments in Canada: A national survey of emergency department directors.*