



# TOP 10

THREATS TO  
CHILDHOOD  
IN CANADA

AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19



CALL TO

# ACTION



CHILDREN  
FIRST  
CANADA

LES ENFANTS  
D'ABORD  
CANADA



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY  
O'Brien Institute for Public Health

Alberta  
Children's  
HOSPITAL  
RESEARCH INSTITUTE



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

About Us	2
Executive Summary	3
Call to Action	8

# ABOUT US

## **Children First Canada**

Children First Canada (CFC) is a national non-profit organization with a bold and ambitious vision that together we can make Canada the best place in the world for kids to grow up. CFC is a strong, effective and independent voice for all children in Canada. CFC harnesses the strength of many organizations and individuals that are committed to improving the lives of Canada's children, including children's charities and hospitals, research centres, government, corporations, community leaders, and children themselves. Visit [childrenfirstcanada.org](http://childrenfirstcanada.org) for more information.

## **O'Brien Institute for Public Health**

The O'Brien Institute for Public Health at the University of Calgary enables excellence in population health and health services research in order to inform community, socio-economic, and health care policy and practice. The O'Brien Institute is made up of 480 multidisciplinary researchers, health professionals and policy makers who specialize in two priority areas - improved population health and enhanced health systems performance. The Institute extends the reach and impact of that world-class research by brokering collaboration and relationships with federal policy makers, national and international research agencies, news media, philanthropists and community stakeholders. Visit [obrieniph.ucalgary.ca](http://obrieniph.ucalgary.ca) for more information.

## **Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute**

The Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute (ACHRI) supports excellence in research, education and knowledge translation to improve the lifelong health and well-being of children and families. ACHRI's 321 diverse members share a passion for child health and wellness - making discoveries to design new treatments, advance practices, and shape policies to improve child health outcomes. ACHRI was founded in 2009 as a partnership between the University of Calgary, Alberta Health Services and the Alberta Children's Hospital Foundation. Visit [research4kids.ucalgary.ca](http://research4kids.ucalgary.ca) for more information.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Raising Canada 2020* is the third in an annual series of reports that track the top 10 threats to childhood in Canada. This report is jointly published by Children First Canada, the University of Calgary's O'Brien Institute for Public Health and the Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute. *Raising Canada 2020* is also released with a joint call to action from Children First Canada's Council of Champions.

For more than a decade, the state of childhood in Canada has been on the decline. Canada ranks 30<sup>th</sup> out of 38 affluent nations for protecting the well-being of children, according to UNICEF – a significant drop from 12<sup>th</sup> place in 2007. As a country, we have been going in the wrong direction for far too long.

The statistics are alarming: One-third of children in Canada do not enjoy a safe and healthy childhood, one in three Canadians report experiencing abuse before the age of 15, one in five children live in poverty, and suicide is now the leading cause of death for children aged 10 to 14.

Childhood is threatened for millions of children from all walks of life, but the odds are particularly stark for Black, Indigenous (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) and other

racialized children. Systemic racism impacts children in many ways: they are more likely to experience adverse childhood experiences such as poverty and abuse, are more likely to be overrepresented in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, and are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school.

In recent months, the harsh realities facing young Canadians have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Children and their families are now facing unprecedented challenges during the economic crisis and ongoing restrictions. Health services and surgeries for children have been cancelled or postponed, and access to social services has been limited. Daycare and school closures have impacted the education of children, and have also cut off their access to nutritional

programs and safeguards against abuse. Throughout the pandemic, children have been disproportionately affected by lockdown restrictions. This sheds light on the inequity that exists within Canadian society.

Based on the findings of this report, most of the top 10 threats to childhood identified in *Raising Canada 2019* show signs they may be increasing – or are in danger of increasing – because of the effects of COVID-19. This report also highlights new data related to these threats and points to emerging concerns.

The top 10 threats to children in Canada include:

- 1) Unintentional and preventable injuries
- 2) Poor mental health
- 3) Child abuse
- 4) Poverty
- 5) Infant mortality
- 6) Physical inactivity
- 7) Food insecurity
- 8) Systemic racism and discrimination
- 9) Vaccine-preventable illnesses
- 10) Bullying

## THE TOP 10 THREATS: WHAT'S NEW?

Since the release of *Raising Canada 2019*, a significant amount of new data has been published on the health and well-being of children in Canada. Much of this new data is from Statistics Canada (StatsCan) surveys, including the new 2019 Canadian Health Survey

on Children and Youth, and the 2019 Canadian Community Health Survey.

An important new finding is that young people aged 12 to 17 often rate their own mental health less positively than their parents do. When comparing responses, youth showed a different perspective than their parents about half of the time. When a difference occurred, 65% of youth rated their own mental health less positively than their parents did. These results suggest that some parents may not be aware of the mental health struggles experienced by their children.



Suicide remains the second leading cause of death for youth aged 15 to 24 – and has now become the leading cause of death among children aged 10 to 14. These rates continue to be significantly higher among First Nations, Métis and Inuit children and youth.

Poverty poses a persistent threat to the well-being of children in Canada. The findings of this report show that poverty continues to vary

across the country and is unequally distributed throughout the Canadian population. The highest prevalence of child poverty is among families that are Indigenous, racialized and recent immigrants.

This year, climate change has been added to the list of threats analyzed in this report. Throughout consultations, children and youth voiced concerns that climate change threatens their current health, as well as their future. It is also one of their top priorities for action.

A key addition to this year's report is the application of a child rights framework. Almost 30 years have passed since Canada ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The top 10 threats serve as a clarion call for the rights of children that are most gravely in danger and in need of urgent action.

## THE TOP 10 THREATS: COVID-19 IMPACTS

The major focus of this report is on “what’s new” for the top 10 threats to childhood in the past year (prior to the pandemic) and puts a spotlight on the impact of COVID-19 on these threats based on data collected in the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Key findings:

- Crowdsourced data suggest that the perceived mental health of Canadian youth has declined during the pandemic, with 57% of participants aged 15 to 17 reporting that their mental health was “somewhat worse” or “much worse” than it was prior to physical distancing measures.
- The World Health Organization (WHO) calls violence against children the hidden crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to school and daycare closures, many children living with family violence no longer have a safe refuge. In Canada, Kids Help Phone has reported an increase in specific conversations about physical, sexual and emotional abuse. As kids go back to school, reports of suspected child abuse may increase, since children will be interacting with trusted adults in their schools.
- Nearly one-third (29%) of Canadians report that the COVID-19 situation is having a moderate or major impact on their ability to meet financial obligations or essential needs.
- Research conducted by ParticipACTION during COVID-19 restrictions found that only 4.8% of children (aged 5-11) and 0.8% of youth (aged 12-17) were meeting 24-hour movement guidelines, raising significant concerns about children’s lack of physical activity and its impact on both their physical and mental health.
- Almost one in seven Canadians said they were living in a household where they experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days.
- A recent Angus Reid survey of Canadian adults of Chinese ethnicity highlighted concerns of discrimination because of the pandemic. Half of the respondents report being called names or insulted as a direct result of the COVID-19 outbreak, and 61% say they have adjusted their routines to avoid run-ins or unpleasant encounters. Additionally, more than half of the adults surveyed are worried that Asian children are going to be

bullied when they return to school due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

- Pediatric infectious disease specialists say that vaccination rates among children have dropped as much as 20% in parts of Canada, which is ramping up anxieties that we could face a series of infectious outbreaks while still battling COVID-19.
- Much of what we learned about COVID-19, its potential impact on these top 10 threats, and its overall impact on child health and well-being is still just emerging. Ongoing data collection and research, and then acting on what we are learning, will be critically important as the pandemic continues to evolve.

### **COVID-19 poses a direct threat to child health and well-being**

COVID-19 in and of itself is a threat to child health and well-being. While children are less likely to have been symptomatic or fall seriously ill due to the virus, some children do get ill. To date, over 10,000 children and youth (aged 0-19) are known to have been infected by COVID-19 (8.4% of the total cases in Canada), and a total of 138 had been hospitalized and 27 admitted to intensive care units. One child is known to have died.

The impact that COVID-19 has had on our society, including the lockdowns, are significantly affecting children. This report identifies three overlapping themes with respect to how the societal impact of COVID-19 affects children: inequity; a lack of access to child care and education; and a lack of access to health care and other human services. These three themes are not new, but

the pandemic has amplified the impacts on children and their families.

### **Inequity**

COVID-19 appears to be both magnifying inequities in vulnerable populations and increasing the number of children who are vulnerable. Due to job losses resulting from COVID-19, for example, more families will struggle to provide the necessities of life, including food and shelter. Black people and other racialized communities have also been disproportionately affected by COVID-19, both in terms of infection rates and the adverse effects of the pandemic.

### **Access to child care and education**

Prior to COVID-19, many families struggled to access affordable, quality daycare – especially those living on a low income or caring for children with disabilities. The pandemic has exacerbated this situation. Many families will not be sending their children back to daycare, and families that have a child with a disability may be less likely to do so.

School closures took a heavy toll on children, with major inconsistencies around the quality of education provided and access to other supports typically available in school (nutrition programs, mental health services, physical education, protection from violence, among others). Many children, and more so in children in low-income families, did not have access to computers or wireless internet to participate in online schooling. The ability of parents to support their children's education also varied. There are also significant concerns around the planning and resources available to ensure a safe return to school this fall, and the ability

of schools to support continued access to education throughout subsequent waves of the pandemic.

### **Access to health care and other human services**

Throughout the first few months of this pandemic, many health care services across Canada came to a halt. This included hospital-based surgical procedures, routine care in the community like well-baby visits and immunizations, as well as many other services delivered in the home. Children who are living with complex medical needs or disabilities are experiencing the overall lack of access to health and human services more acutely.

Children have experienced delays for assessments, therapies and procedures. Health care professionals are warning that children will be forced to wait months or even years to access care, which will affect their growth and development.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

Children deserve the best we have to offer during times of peace and prosperity, and even more so during times of crisis. The lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic highlight one key factor: children's most basic rights to life, survival and development are in

jeopardy and their best interests must be given paramount consideration in Canada's recovery efforts. Children need and have a right to a safe and stable home and family, the support of trusted adults outside of their homes, access to health and social services, quality daycare and education, and healthy interactions with others to survive and thrive.

Providing systems and societal support for children and addressing their needs is a human rights issue, which Canada agreed to when it ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991. These legal rights of children are protected under international and domestic law. One of the core principles of a rights framework is that children are not passively waiting for aid and assistance; rather they have ideas and opinions and a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. The development of true child-centred policies can only happen when we act *with* children, rather than acting for them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has massively disrupted the lives of children. As Canadians work to contain the spread of COVID-19 and recover from the crisis, we must do so without placing a disproportionate burden on children. What the government does now – or fails to do – will forever shape the trajectory for a generation of young Canadians. The stakes are higher than they have ever been.

# CALL TO ACTION

## A CALL TO ACTION FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

### 1) Appoint a federal Commissioner for Children and Youth

There are 8 million children in Canada and they all have something in common – their rights. By ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the Government of Canada has a duty to ensure children can reach their full potential.

A federal Commissioner for Children and Youth would have a mandate to ensure the full implementation of the UNCRC and ensure that children’s best interests are given paramount consideration. This independent office of government plays a crucial role in advocating for children and youth, ensuring that they are prioritized in the development of federal legislation, directly consulting and engaging with children, and raising the profile of children in Canada. Now more than ever, a Commissioner for Children and Youth is needed to promote the rights of young people and hold government accountable.

We call for the federal government to ensure that Bill S-217 – An Act to Establish the Office of the Commissioner for Children and Youth in Canada (introduced by Independent Senator Rosemary Moodie) – be reinstated and quickly approved once Parliament resumes following prorogation. Approving this bill would provide a non-partisan and evidence-based approach to improving children’s well-being and protecting their rights. When considering this proposal, we also encourage the federal government to respect the self-governance rights of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples.

### 2) Create a national strategy to tackle the top 10 threats to children in Canada and ensure the full protection of children’s rights

*Every child has the right to survive and thrive.*

We call on the federal government to work in partnership with the provinces and territories to create and implement a national strategy to address the top 10 threats to Canada’s children and ensure the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The national strategy should ensure young people have access to equitable services from coast to coast to coast. It should also outline priorities, targets and timelines, with a clear delineation of the responsibilities of the various levels of government that are needed to make measurable progress for children in Canada.

Children and youth have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. To fulfil this right, we encourage the government to consult with children and youth to determine the best ways to support their health and well-being through a national strategy. We also call for parliamentarians to participate in and support the Young Canadians' Parliament – an initiative that amplifies the voices of children at the highest levels of government and supports their participation in public policy that affects their lives.

### **3) Publish a children's budget that includes dedicated resources to address the top 10 threats to children in Canada, as well as \$250 million to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on children**

*Every child has the right to access the best attainable standard of health.*

One-third of children in Canada do not enjoy a safe and healthy childhood. This reality has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, causing unprecedented challenges for children and their families. We call for the federal government to publish a children's budget that includes adequate resources to address the top 10 threats to children and provides transparency on federal expenditures.

We were pleased that the government's Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) measures in the 2019 budget included an increased focus on young people. For the first time ever, the budget also included an accompanying budget booklet dedicated to young Canadians. Although this additional analysis does not go as far as a children's budget, it is an important step in the right direction.

Children's budgets are a proven strategy that have been used in jurisdictions around the world to ensure that investments are made towards evidence-based programs that improve the lives of children and of future adults. They help ensure that children get their fair share of resources, and often do not result in more money spent, but in money being spent more wisely. We urge the federal government to continue to strengthen the application of the GBA+ lens in relation to children who represent one-quarter of Canada's population.

As the pandemic continues, children are heading back to school in September amid tremendous uncertainty, ongoing COVID-19 restrictions and health concerns. Immediate action is needed to protect the physical and mental health of children, keep children safe from violence, and support the resilience of young people. We call for the federal government to invest \$250 million to address these priorities – including the short-, medium- and long-term impacts of the pandemic on children in Canada.

## A CALL TO ACTION FOR CANADIANS

### Sign the Raising Canada Call to Action to urge the government to tackle the top 10 threats to childhood and mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on children

Collectively, Canadians have the power to influence government decisions and improve the lives of children in Canada. Children are uniquely impacted by the pandemic and need urgent attention and support.

We call on Canadians to join our efforts by signing the Raising Canada Call to Action at [childrenfirstcanada.org](http://childrenfirstcanada.org).

**Together, we can make Canada the best place in the world for kids to grow up.**

#### *Children First Canada's Council of Champions*

The Council of Champions unites the leaders of Canada's children's charities and hospitals, research institutes and major corporations that invest in kids. Together, they speak up for children in Canada and jointly pursue Children First Canada's vision of making Canada the best place in the world for kids to grow up.

- Sara Austin, Founder & CEO, Children First Canada
- Dr. Susa Benseler, Director, Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute, ACHF Chair in Pediatric Research, and Husky Energy Chair in Child and Maternal Health
- Dr. Kevin Chan, Medical Director, Children's Health, Trillium Health Partners
- Owen Charters, President & CEO, Boys and Girls Club of Canada
- Dr. Ronald Cohen, President and CEO, The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids)
- Irwin Elman, Former Ontario Child Advocate, Global Strategic Champion, Until the Last Child
- Debbie Field, Coalition for Healthy School Food & Food Secure Canada
- Emily Gruenwoltdt, President & CEO, Children's Healthcare Canada and Executive Director of Pediatric Chairs of Canada
- Dr. Mary Jo Haddad, Chancellor of the University of Windsor and President of MJH Consulting
- Christine Hampson, PhD, President & CEO, The Sandbox Project
- Julia Hanigsberg, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital
- Kathy Hay, CEO, Kids Help Phone
- Mark Hierlihy, CEO, Canada's Children's Hospital Foundations
- Dr. Krista Jangaard, CEO, IWK Health Centre (Halifax)
- Karyn Kennedy, President & CEO, Boost Child & Youth Advocacy Centre
- Valerie McMurty, CEO, Children's Aid Foundation of Canada
- Alex Munter, CEO, CHEO, Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario
- Dr. Holden Sheffield, Chief of Pediatrics and General Pediatrician at Qikiqtani General Hospital (Iqaluit)
- Dr. Michael Shevell, Chair of Pediatrics, McGill University Health Centre
- Ariel Siller, President and CEO of the Canadian Children's Literacy Foundation
- Bruce Squires, CEO, McMaster Children's Hospital
- Kathleen Taylor, Board of Trustees of SickKids Foundation, Chair of the Board of RBC Royal Bank
- Dr. Michael Ungar, Canada Research Chair in Child, Family and Community Resilience, Director of the Resilience Research Centre, Dalhousie University



[childrenfirstcanada.org](http://childrenfirstcanada.org)  
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