



10 **TOP** THREATS

TO CHILDHOOD IN CANADA
RECOVERING FROM THE
IMPACTS OF COVID-19

CALLS TO ACTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In what is now known as Canada,ⁱ the health and well-being of children have been on a steady decline – putting the lives of children at grave risk and the future of our country at stake. Over the past decade, Canada has fallen from 10th to 30th place among 38 affluent countries for childhood well-being, yet there remains a persistent myth that Canada is one of the best places in the world to raise a child.

Over the past year, the effects of prolonged school closures have played a significant role in accelerating the top 10 threats to childhood. This fall, three school years will have been disrupted by COVID-19 restrictions. The learning loss and health challenges experienced by young people during the pandemic will affect them for years to come. Children need access to in-person learning not only for their education, but also for nutritional programs, physical activity, social and emotional support, and safeguards against abuse.

Children and youth have suffered devastating impacts to their mental and physical health as a result of school closures and lockdown measures. Children's hospitals have reported unprecedented admissions for suicide attempts, eating disorders and substance-use disorders. There is also a growing backlog of surgeries and rehabilitation services that continue to leave children and youth in dire circumstances.

The urgency to support children and youth has never been greater. Immediate policy action by all levels of government is needed to address

the short-, medium-, and long-term impacts of COVID-19, along with the systemic underlying factors related to the top 10 threats and the four cross-cutting themes in the *Raising Canada 2021* report.

In light of the crisis unfolding across the country, Children First Canada partnered with children's hospitals and other leading child advocates this year to declare #codePINK, a term used for pediatric emergencies.

The #codePINK campaign calls for an emergency response by the prime minister and premiers, including an urgent First Ministers Meeting. Immediate action must be taken to address the following:

- Safely reopening schools, camps, parks and other recreational facilities
- Scaling up virtual care programs, and reducing backlogs for surgeries and rehabilitation

i Here we use the language “what is now known as Canada” to acknowledge that Canada is situated on the traditional land of Turtle Island, and to acknowledge the oppressive impacts that settler colonialism continues to have on the land and many diverse First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. For the purposes of this document, we will use the term “Canada” going forward, though we recognize that this land will always be Turtle Island.

- Investing in new models of mental health programs to meet the urgent and rising demands
- Planning now for a safe return to school in the fall

At the time of publication, #codePINK remained in effect and an emergency response from all levels of government was still pending.

Although some cities or provinces may reopen schools this fall under “near normal” conditions, there are numerous threats to childhood that predate the pandemic that have been exacerbated. The data in the *Raising Canada 2021* report reveals that many of the top 10 threats to childhood described in previous *Raising Canada* reports (2018-2019) are persistent, and for many young people, dangers are increasing.



This year’s report highlights new research that has emerged over the past year related to these threats and informed by the lived experiences of youth, and call for urgent action to resolve these concerns.

Raising Canada 2021 is published by Children First Canada. The report is also released with joint calls to action from the Council of Champions.

The Top 10 Threats: What’s New?

Over the past 12 months, a significant amount of new research related to the state of childhood in Canada has been released. The *Raising Canada 2021* report includes some of this new data, as well as contributions from a diverse group of subject matter experts that were engaged to form an interdisciplinary team.

This year, *Raising Canada 2021* provides recommendations for addressing each threat, indicating the various ways that government leaders and stakeholders can take action. This key addition harnesses the data to equip policy makers with the tools needed to improve the lives of young people in Canada.

Children and youth are citizens with rights. In *Raising Canada 2021*, a child rights framework is utilized to examine the extent to which adults are fulfilling their duties towards children. Young people have the right to be active and engaged citizens and to participate in decisions that affect their lives. A child rights analysis not only brings to light what we can do for children, but also what children can do for themselves.

◀ “When I go to the clinic they take my blood, the information in my blood helps tons of other kids. Not all kids are the same, but my blood can help them and I can love them!”

Leah, 8, British Columbia

When we examine the top 10 threats to childhood through the lens of child rights, two things become apparent: As a society, we are failing to meet our most basic responsibilities to enable children's survival and development; and children are rarely involved in policy decisions that affect them.

Children are not viewed as equal citizens, and their rights are often overlooked and deprioritized. This has been evident throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Data shows that children and youth in Canada have experienced grave violations of their economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights.

The research process for *Raising Canada 2021* included more child and youth consultation than in previous years – to ensure this report is informed by the lived experiences of young people in Canada. These perspectives also influenced how the findings of this report are framed.

Key Findings

Threat #1: Unintentional and Preventable Injuries

- While there has been an overall reduction in children attending emergency departments with **unintentional and preventable injuries**, there has been a steady rise in the rate of children dying from opioid-related deaths and an increase in poisonings and cannabis ingestions.

Threat #2: Poor Mental Health

- Poor mental health was an existing concern before the pandemic, and the effects of school closures have accelerated this threat. Children are facing new or increased stressors, resulting in **poor mental health** that jeopardizes their survival and development.

- Children and youth have continued to face **mental health challenges** during the pandemic, with various sources indicating increased levels of eating disorders, substance-use disorders among adolescents, suicide attempts, and increased risk of stress associated with social isolation.

Threat #3: Systemic Racism and Discrimination

- The engrained and widespread impacts of **systemic racism and discrimination** have continued throughout the pandemic. Anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Asian racism, anti-Black racism, anti-Muslim hate and anti-Semitism have become particularly prevalent.
- One critical finding is that First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Black children are disproportionately overrepresented in the child welfare system. From recent data sources, status First Nations children represented 4% of the total child population in Canada in 2016, but they made up 36% of all foster children living in private households in Canada.

Threat #4: Child Abuse

- In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars and child advocates have voiced significant concerns over rising and undetected rates of **child abuse**. In some jurisdictions, clinicians have seen twice as many infants for maltreatment-related concerns, specifically fractures and head trauma.

Threat #5: Vaccine-Preventable Illnesses

- As rates of vaccination against COVID-19 increase among young Canadians aged 12 and older, concerns about the re-emergence of **vaccine-preventable illnesses** due to routine immunization delays (among toddlers and adolescents) are heightened. In a recent survey,

45% of clinicians acknowledged the pandemic has negatively impacted immunization services in their practices.

- Access to COVID-19 vaccines for children under the age of 12 remains an ongoing concern. Trials are still ongoing and vaccines may not be available until 2022.

Threat #6: Poverty

- There are persistently high rates of **child poverty** in Canada. Almost one in five children lives in poverty.
- Rates of childhood poverty have continued to increase throughout the pandemic in certain populations. Close to one-third of children living in female lone-parent families were living in poverty, compared with less than one-tenth of children living in couple families.

Threat #7: Food and Nutritional Insecurity

- During the pandemic, there has been a 39% increase in the prevalence of **food insecurity** in Canada. Households with children are more likely to face food insecurity compared to households without children.
- Children in Canada continue to face a **nutritional crisis**. Canada was ranked 37th out of 41 affluent countries when it comes to providing healthy food for children.

Threat #8: Infant Mortality

- In 2021, Canada's **infant mortality** rate has increased. It is now the second highest among 17 OECDⁱⁱ countries, at approximately 4.4 infant deaths/1,000 live births. This is a marked change from 1960, when Canada ranked fifth lowest.

Threat #9: Bullying

- Children and youth are often **bullied** for the following reasons: identifying as 2SLGBTQ+,ⁱⁱⁱ their race or ethnicity, newcomer status, disability, religion and Indigenous identity. Unfortunately, when student victims of bullying told someone about their experiences, resolution only occurred in about one-third of the cases.

Threat #10: Limited Physical Activity and Play

- For many children, **physical inactivity** has posed a significant concern during the pandemic, along with an increase in rates of sedentary behaviours. In all regions in Canada, parents reported that children exhibited a decrease in time spent outdoors and in outdoor play, with Ontario having experienced the greatest decline in both.

Cross-Cutting Themes

In addition to the persistent top 10 threats, *Raising Canada 2021* also identifies **four cross-cutting themes** that were evident from the literature:

Theme #1: Access to Education and Child Care

- **School closures** have perpetuated mental health concerns that children have faced as a result of social isolation, a lack of recreational programs, and education-based changes associated with the pandemic. The closures have also resulted in children facing harms in other areas of their lives, including food security challenges, exposure to violence, and declines in physical activity. Beyond these crucial, multifaceted concerns, “third-bucket children,” or children who have been “ousted” from school and have not attended school in-person or online, are becoming more prevalent.

ii Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

iii 2SLGBTQ+ refers to individuals who identify as the following: two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and additional sexual orientations and gender identities.

In Canada, there are an estimated 200,000 children in this position.

- **Child care closures** have had a similarly negative impact, especially on families navigating the challenges of balancing work-home life during a lockdown and/or returning to work.

Theme #2: Access to Health Care and Social Services

- Young people in Canada have experienced delays in their ability to **access both health care and social care**. They have also faced delays in receiving medical diagnoses, accessing rehabilitation services and proceeding with surgeries – with the possibility of leading to serious and potentially irreversible consequences. For instance, clinicians have seen a decline in the number of new type 1 diabetics they have diagnosed compared to previous trends, and there have also been more instances of children presenting with severe ketoacidosis – a life-threatening consequence of untreated diabetes.

Theme #3: Inequity and Inequality

- Throughout each of the threats, **various inequities and inequalities** have been raised that are associated with elements of a young person's identity (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation and disability). Where intersectional identities exist, these inequities and inequalities are compounded. Racialized individuals (including children and youth) have experienced significant disparities in mental health concerns compared to their white counterparts, and rates of mental health concerns differ across racialized groups.

Theme #4: Climate Change

- Children, as a population, are most at risk of climate-related health impacts as a result of direct and indirect effects of **climate change**.

The effects of climate change have especially profound impacts on First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities and young people, with the potential to decimate traditional food systems and disrupt the rights and well-being of Indigenous communities.

Continuation of COVID-19 Concerns

Over the past 12 months, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been considerable for children and adolescents, affecting essentially every aspect of their lives in significant and complex ways. This is not entirely unpredictable, especially given the early concerns highlighted in *Raising Canada 2020*. However, emerging evidence continues to indicate that young people have experienced a variety of complex impacts generated or perpetuated by the pandemic, with **both immediate and long-term impacts**. In many ways these impacts have been tightly linked to the persistent top 10 threats raised by Children First Canada. As such, the *Raising Canada 2021* report highlights COVID-19-related evidence, among other evidence, pertaining to each of the threats.

Lessons Learned

Since 2018, Children First Canada's *Raising Canada* reports have been sounding the alarm on the persistent threats to children's health and well-being, the lack of protection of their rights, and the implications of inaction. The lack of prioritization of young people both prior to and during the pandemic has led to devastating consequences for children.

Perhaps what is more startling than the data contained in this report – and previous *Raising Canada* reports – is that in spite of the overwhelming evidence about the threats to children's survival and development, so little has been done to intervene.

It is time for Canada to take a stand. As the country rebuilds from the pandemic, many have acknowledged that a societal reset is in order. This great reset must involve putting children at the heart of pandemic recovery plans, and investing in the short-, medium-, and long-term solutions needed for children to survive and thrive.

This will require leadership and commitment at all levels – including on the part of policy makers, the private sector, community leaders, clinicians, teachers and parents – to uphold the rights of children.

A societal reset will also require leadership on the part of children themselves. They must have the opportunity to learn about and act on their rights, and be involved in decisions that affect

their lives. Children have valuable ideas and opinions that are crucial for the development of truly child-centred policies. When young people are informed and engaged, better decisions will be made within families, schools and even at the highest levels of government. Effective and sustainable change can only happen when we act with children, not for them.

For the past decade, children have suffered grave threats, which have been further amplified throughout the pandemic. The evidence is clear: the cost of social and political inaction is too high.

We must invest in the health and well-being of children today and ensure the protection of their rights. The future of Canada depends on it.

>
“COVID-19 sucks. I want
to go outside and play.”

Sophie, 8, Ontario





NEXT STEPS & CALLS TO ACTION

Children First Canada calls on *all* federal parties to pledge to:

Make a big, bold plan to improve the lives of children and make Canada the best place in the world for kids to grow up.

Ensure that children's voices are heard and that their issues are prioritized.

Put children at the heart of Canada's pandemic recovery plans, and invest in short-, medium- and long-term solutions for children to survive and thrive.

There are six essential building blocks to improve the lives of all 8 million kids in Canada:

1. Appoint an independent Commissioner for Children and Youth.

As highlighted in *Raising Canada 2020*, the Government of Canada has a responsibility to ensure that children's rights are being met and that children are able to reach their potential, as Canada ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 30 years ago.

There are many ways in which the rights of children in Canada, outlined in the CRC, can be realized more fully. This includes having a federal Commissioner for Children and Youth whose role would be to ensure that the CRC is implemented and that children's best interests are prioritized in all relevant policy decisions.

2. Develop a National Strategy for Children to tackle the top 10 threats to childhood in Canada and ensure the full protection of children's rights.

As highlighted throughout the *Raising Canada 2021* report, children and youth in Canada have faced serious and complex threats to their state of well-being and health. These impacts also affect young people who face marginalization to an even greater degree. As such, there is reason to once again call on the federal government to take urgent action, in partnership with provincial and territorial governments, to create and implement a national strategy to address the top 10 threats to children in Canada and to ensure the full scope of the CRC is realized in Canada.

3. Establish a Catalytic Investment Fund for Children and Children's Budget to address the top 10 threats to childhood in Canada.

Establish an investment fund of \$2 billion to be allocated over the next four years to catalyze efforts to tackle the top 10 threats to childhood and put Canada back into the top 10 global rankings for children's well-being. Funds should be made available to national and local child- and youth-serving organizations to implement proven and effective strategies to address the short-, medium- and long-term needs of children, and drive meaningful change for children's mental and physical health and the protection of their rights.

We also call on the government to publish a Children's Budget to ensure transparency and accountability for all federal expenditures for children. Children's budgets are a proven strategy that has 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. Children's budgets help ensure that kids get their fair share of resources. This strategy often does not result in more money spent – but rather in money being spent more wisely. We urge the federal government to continue to strengthen the application of the Gender-based Analysis+ lens in relation to children, who represent a quarter of Canada's population.

4. Measure what matters by implementing a longitudinal study on children's health and well-being, ensuring the collection of disaggregated population-level data through the Canadian Health Survey of Children and Youth (CHSCY), and leveraging the real-time aggravate data of direct service providers, such as Kids Help Phone.

While *Raising Canada 2021* highlights a substantial fraction of the enormous amount of evidence emerging in Canada related to children and youth, there is still a need to invest in research related to children's well-being and health. For example, we lack national longitudinal studies (and related data) on children and youth that can provide a foundation on examining how Canadian child and youth mental health changes across time (including during the pandemic). As such, investing in a comprehensive survey led by Statistics Canada, as a follow-up to the CHSCY, represents an opportunity to obtain missing information about mental health impacts. Additionally, there must be a national priority to collect and analyze race-based data related to children, especially using longitudinal methods.

We were pleased by the Canadian Institute of Health Research's (CIHR's) announcement of a funding opportunity that aims to understand and mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, youth and families in Canada. This grant opportunity was made possible by the CIHR Institute of Human Development, Child and Youth Health, in collaboration with various additional CIHR institutes. More opportunities to support scholars in undertaking child-centred research is necessary.

5. Provide equitable funding and services for First Nations, Métis and Inuit children through implementing the TRC's Calls to Action and the Spirit Bear Plan.

A key takeaway from the *Raising Canada 2021* report is the continued and disproportionate harms that First Nations, Métis and Inuit children face, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. These impacts are the result of generational trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples, families and communities, the ongoing consequences of settler colonialism, and the devastating genocide that continues to harm Indigenous children. Recommendations for urgent action have previously been outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC's) Calls to Actions.

Additionally, the Spirit Bear Plan has outlined actions that are necessary to end inequities in public services that First Nations children, youth and families have had to endure – a plan informed by Jordan's Principle. Despite these recommendations that have been informed by Indigenous communities, minimal progress has been made by the federal government to answer these calls in order to mitigate and resolve ongoing harms against First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. As such, we urge the federal government to take immediate action towards the calls in both the TRC and the Spirit Bear Plan.

6. Involve children in decisions that affect their lives.

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, young people have rights to be involved in decisions that impact their lives – to have their views acknowledged and meaningfully considered. However, this engagement is not consistent across policy-making that occurs federally and provincially/territorially. As such, governments must develop strategies to consult children and youth to determine how the government can best support young people's well-being and health.



> "I feel sad and bored because I can't do fun stuff."

Jack, 5, Alberta

These strategies must not be universal, and they must also allow for flexibility to meet children “where they are.” However, what must remain consistent is that engagement should avoid tokenizing children’s and youth’s perspectives and experiences, but should amplify these voices to meet their interests and needs. Mechanisms like the Young Canadians’ Parliament and youth advisory councils should be supported and regularly used by government to meaningfully engage them as leaders today and leaders of the future.

Finally, we also call on the federal government to lower the voting age in Canada. While some adults may view this as a radical concept, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms already protects the rights of every citizen to vote. Children are citizens, and they have a right to be involved in decisions that impact them, including electing members of Parliament.

All of Canada’s major federal political parties already allow 14-year-olds to join as members and enjoy full participatory rights, including voting in party leadership contests and local nomination contests. Many jurisdictions around the world have successfully lowered the voting age and boosted voter engagement.^{iv} When recommending that the voting age be lowered, youth have also called for increased education for children and adolescents about their civil and political rights and responsibilities, in addition to educating adults and combatting the stigma that youth aren’t capable.

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



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“Play outside. Eat well.
Stay healthy.”
Michelle, 9, British Columbia

^{iv} Countries that have lowered the voting age to 16 include: Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Ecuador, Estonia (in local elections), Germany (some state elections), Malta, Nicaragua, Scotland and Wales.

About Us

Children First Canada (CFC) is a national charitable organization that serves as a strong, effective and independent voice for all 8 million children in Canada. CFC harnesses the strength of many organizations and individuals that are committed to improving the lives of children in Canada, including children's charities and hospitals, research centres, government, corporations, community leaders, and children themselves. Visit childrenfirstcanada.org for more information.

Signatories from Children First Canada's Council of Champions

Dr. Susanne Benseler, Director, Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute, ACHF Chair in Pediatric Research, Husky Energy Chair in Child and Maternal Health

Dr. Ronald Cohn, President & CEO, The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids)

Irwin Elman, Former Ontario Child Advocate, Global Strategic Champion, Until The Last Child

Debbie Field, Coordinator, Coalition for Healthy School Food

Mary Jo Haddad, Chancellor of the University of Windsor, Former President & CEO of SickKids, Member of the Board of Directors of TELUS and TD Bank Group

Julia Hanigsberg, CEO, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital

Mark Hierlihy, President & CEO, Canada's Children's Hospital Foundations

Krista Jangaard, CEO, IWK Health Centre

Michael Kobor, Canada Research Chair in Social Epigenetics

Kimberly Moran, CEO, Children's Mental Health Ontario

Alex Munter, President & CEO, Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) and the Ottawa Children's Treatment Centre

Dr. Holden Sheffield, Chief of Pediatrics and General Pediatrician, Qikiqtani General Hospital, Iqaluit, Nunavut

Lori Spadorcia, Senior Vice-President, Public Affairs, Partnerships and Chief Strategy Officer, CAMH

Katie Taylor, Chair of RBC and Former Chair of SickKids Foundation

Michael Ungar, Canada Research Chair in Child, Family and Community Resilience