

TOP 10 THREATS
TO CHILDHOOD
IN CANADA

INEQUITY AND
THE IMPACTS
OF COVID-19

CALLS TO ACTION



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There can be no keener revelation
of a society's soul than the way in
which it treats its children.

– Nelson Mandela



Children and youth thrive in environments that are safe, nurturing, predictable and structured.¹ However, this is not the reality for many kids in what is now known as Canadaⁱ. One-third do not enjoy a safe and healthy childhood, and the top 10 threats to childhood are depriving millions of children of their basic rights.

While the pandemic has brought many challenges for children to the forefront, a crisis has been brewing for more than a decade. Once ranked 10th among affluent countries, Canada has fallen sharply to 30th place.² Despite this downward trend, Canadians generally perceive that children are well cared for and their rights are upheld. But research suggests Canada has reached a tipping point, putting the lives of children and youth – and the future of our country – in jeopardy.³

From coast to coast to coast, many children do not make it to their 18th birthday: The infant mortality rate in Canada is higher than in most wealthy countries, and Canada has one of the highest rates of youth suicide among OECD countries. These devastating statistics are too alarming to be ignored.

Every child deserves to survive and thrive.

The ongoing threats to children and youth are well documented in previous *Raising Canada*

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.

reports. Over the last two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has in many ways amplified and accelerated the top 10 threats to childhood. School closures, social isolation, limited recreational and social activities, and increased social and economic pressures among families have been particularly detrimental to children and youth.

This year, the findings of the *Raising Canada* report highlight a disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on equity-deserving children and youth. This includes young people from racialized communities, First Nations, Métis and Inuit children, 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and young people with disabilities.⁴ Systemic racism and discrimination continue to threaten the health and well-being of children across the country. This reveals a jarring contrast within our borders: While Canada ranks 14th for global prosperity,⁵ drinking water advisories are still in effect in many Indigenous communities. This continues to deprive children of their basic right to access clean water to drink and bathe.

The challenges faced by Canada's health care system – including the interlocking of 10 provincial and three territorial health systems – are also taking an immense toll on children and their families. Rates of emergency visits for mental health issues are at an all-time high,⁶ and wait times for surgery, rehabilitation and even routine medical care remain unacceptably long. More than two years into the pandemic, children's hospitals across the country continue to sound the alarm on the pediatric health crisis.

When kids suffer, Canada suffers

Historically, children and youth have not been viewed with the same importance as adults.³ Public policy decisions and budgetary allocations often do not prioritize Canada's youngest citizens, which is evident at all levels of government. Yet children represent a quarter of the Canadian population and 100 per cent of

our future. This systematic underinvestment in young people is putting the lives of all 8 million⁷ children in Canada at risk.

There is overwhelming evidence that investing in young people can yield great economic returns, benefiting all Canadians. As our country begins to rebuild from the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent and compelling need to make big, bold investments in Canada's most valuable natural resource: children and youth.

Young people deserve to be heard

Raising Canada 2022 seeks to elevate the voices of children and youth, reinforcing their right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Building a more prosperous and inclusive society will require the leadership of children and youth. They are our next generation of business leaders, teachers, doctors, activists and politicians. Many are already leaders in their schools and communities, launching climate movements, organizing social justice marches, and urging companies to align more closely with their values.



Children and youth were incorporated into all aspects of the research. They will also continue to play a central role in disseminating the findings and advocating for policies and investments to ensure the protection of their rights.

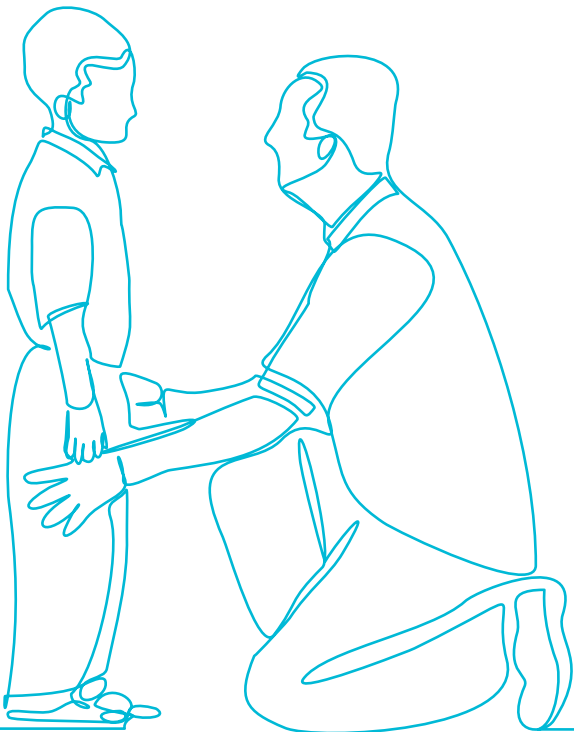
This report includes a literature review that focuses on self-reports of children (studies that focus on asking children questions), as well as those of parents and other experts. It also incorporates multiple views from individuals who work with young people on the top 10 threats faced by children and youth.

Raising Canada 2022 builds on the recommendations of the Young Canadians' Parliament (YCP) report, *Our Commitment to Today and Tomorrow, 2021-2022*. The YCP is a program designed to enable children and youth to learn about their rights and take action on the most pressing challenges facing their generation.

Members of the YCP, Children First Canada's Youth Advisory Council, and Youth Ambassadors played a pivotal role in *Raising Canada 2022*. Specifically, they helped shape the key findings, recommendations and calls to action. They will also continue to participate in ongoing knowledge mobilization and advocacy efforts.

Throughout this report, young people's views are incorporated through art. **Each artistic expression reflects a childhood experience or an idea on how to make Canada a better place to grow up.**

Raising Canada 2022 is published by Children First Canada. The report is also released with joint calls to action from the Council of Champions.



KEY FINDINGS

Threat #1: Unintentional and Preventable Injuries

Unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death for children and youth in Canada.^{8,9} **The leading causes of injury for children (aged 0-14) are falls, sports injuries, and transport injuries, respectively.**

There has been a 28% increase in children attending emergency departments.⁶ Many of these visits are due to unintentional injuries.

Accidents from cannabis use, such as driving accidents, have particularly increased during COVID-19 and since its legalization.¹⁰

Threat #2: Poor Mental Health

Overall, the mental health of children and youth has declined during the pandemic. In particular, substance use,^{11,12} suicide attempts,¹³ eating disorders,¹⁴ and stress and anxiety associated with the lack of supportive activities posed an extensive challenge for children and youth.¹⁵

A quarter of young people (aged 2-17) in Canada experience mental health challenges.¹⁶ More than half of youth (aged 12-18) across all provinces and territories in Canada experience depression, and 39% face anxiety.¹¹

Threat #3: Systemic Racism and Discrimination

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacts children from racialized communities, First Nations, Métis and Inuit children, 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and young people with disabilities.⁴ This fuels inequitable access to critical services, such as health care, housing, education and employment opportunities.

Indigenous children are 12.4 times more likely to be taken out of their homes and placed in foster care than non-Indigenous children.¹⁷

Transgender adolescents (aged 15-17) are 7.6 times as likely to have attempted suicide compared to their peers.¹⁸

Threat #4: Child Abuse

Approximately 1 in 3 Canadians report experiencing some form of child abuse by the age of 15.^{19,20} This statistic is higher among Indigenous populations (40%).²¹ Approximately 1 in 3 children with disabilities also face violence in their lives.²²

Among students in Canada, **1 in 4 children surveyed experienced sexual harassment or assault in schools by Grade 7.²³**

The prevalence of online sexual abuse has been increasing within the last five years at higher rates than other forms of abuse, including physical, emotional and neglect.²⁴

Threat #5: Vaccine-Preventable Illnesses

Approximately 1 in 4 children in Canada are behind in their routine vaccinations.²⁵

COVID-19 vaccination rates vary considerably based on age and geography in Canada. Alberta faces the lowest rate of vaccination for children (aged 5-11), with less than 35% who have received two vaccinations. Newfoundland and Labrador have the highest vaccination rate for children (aged 5-11) with 69% who have received two vaccinations.²⁶

Young people in Canada (aged 0-19) comprise about 19% of all COVID-19 cases.²⁷ Recent evidence also suggests that **25% of children who contract SARS-CoV-2 will develop long-COVID.**²⁸

Threat #6: Poverty and Food and Nutritional Insecurity

Over 1.3 million children in Canada (or about 1 in 5 children) live in poverty.^{29, 30}

In 2021, approximately 1 in 5 children lived in food insecure households.³¹

Threat #7: Infant Mortality

In 2021, **the infant mortality rate in Canada was particularly high compared with other OECD countries, with a rate of 4 infant deaths per 1,000 births.**³²

There are five leading causes of infant mortality in Canada: immaturity (not fully grown); structural or functional birth defects; severe lack of oxygen; infection; and sudden infant death syndrome.³³

Threat #8: Bullying

In Canada, approximately 1 in 3 youth experience bullying. The prevalence has remained relatively consistent over the past 12 years.³⁴

Even though bullying can affect children regardless of their individual characteristics, evidence shows that rates of **bullying are higher among children from minority groups (2SLGBTQIA+, immigrants, refugees, and Indigenousⁱⁱ youth).**^{35, 36}

Threat #9: Limited Physical Activity and Play

Physical activity and play deteriorated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic due to school closures and limited extracurricular programs and gatherings.

In one study, only **12% of respondents (aged 12-17) met the guidelines for moderate-to-vigorous physical activity.**³⁷

Threat #10: Climate Change

Child acute bronchitis episodes related to wildfires have seen an upward trend every year. These episodes more than doubled between 2013 to 2018.^{38, 39} **Estimated asthma symptom days for children (aged 5-19) have followed a similar trend, more than doubling in the same period.**^{38, 39}

Canada ranks 24th in child illness from unsafe water and 20th in child deaths from unsafe water – despite having the third-largest freshwater reserve in the world.³⁹

ii Indigenous is an all-encompassing term, though it is important to note that differences can and often do exist across First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. Where data is separated based on community, we will specify using particular terminology.

Cross-Cutting Themes

THEME 1: DISRUPTION TO EDUCATION

During the pandemic, the learning gap increased by half a year of schooling for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.⁴¹ Students who were experiencing difficulties during the pandemic have dealt worse with learning disruptions. A recent global study on learning loss by the World Bank found that learning losses on average amounted to 0.17 of a standard deviation, **equivalent to roughly one-half year's worth of learning. The study confirmed that learning loss is real and significant.**⁴²

The effects of remote or hybrid learning methods are not yet fully understood and require further research. However, "there is widespread consensus from families, educators, and children themselves that students learn better in person than online, and that access to online learning is a challenge for many due to technical, economic, or other barriers."⁴³

Evidence suggests that educational strategies need to be developed and resources must be allocated for the youngest learners, children with special needs and children whose special needs have not been identified yet.⁴⁴

The closure of schools and child care not only impeded education, but also resulted in "significant physical, mental health and safety harms for students and children. **Statistical modelling suggests long-term impacts on students' lifetime earnings and the national economy.**"⁴⁵

THEME 2: ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE AND OTHER SOCIAL SERVICES

Wait times for accessing pediatric surgical services are up to 2.5 years beyond the clinically accepted timelines.⁴⁵

Public health protocols during COVID-19 added barriers to accessing cultural practices for Indigenous peoples, which led to an increase in social isolation.⁴⁶

THEME 3: YOUTH REPRESENTATION

In a recent scoping review, **only 24% of the interventions studied involved children and young people in the decision-making process and shared responsibility in the development of interventions.**⁴⁷

When children and youth are actively involved in research and intervention development, there is a mutual benefit to youth and communities.⁴⁸





CALLS TO ACTION

Children First Canada and the Council of Champions welcome the Government of Canada's commitment to ensure that the voices and needs of children are represented. We reiterate our pledge to work together to make Canada the best place for kids to grow up.[®]

The urgency to invest in kids has never been greater. A decade ago, Canada was ranked in 10th place among OECD countries for the well-being of children. Today, Canada ranks 30th.² The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated and amplified the top 10 threats to childhood and resulted in widespread violations of children's rights.

Therefore, we call on the government to improve the lives of all 8 million kids in Canada and address the inequities faced by Indigenous children, Black and other racialized youth, young people with disabilities, and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth by implementing three core recommendations:

1 Listen to Children and Youth and Prioritize their Best Interests

- Enable children and youth to be active and engaged citizens by:
 - » Promoting knowledge of their rights and responsibilities
 - » Supporting the Young Canadians' Parliament and Prime Minister Trudeau's Youth Council to engage with federal decision-makers
 - » Lowering the voting age and upholding the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
 - » Ratifying the 3rd Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to enable greater accountability when violations of children's rights occur
- Incorporate children's rights into federal law and conduct a child-rights impact assessment when developing or reviewing legislation, policies and budgets

2 Make a Plan and Invest in Changing Children’s Lives for the Better

- Create and implement a national Plan of Action to improve the lives of children, including protecting their rights and tackling the top 10 threats to childhood:
 - » Reducing unintentional and preventable injuries
 - » Improving child and youth mental health
 - » Eliminating systemic racism and discrimination
 - » Ending child abuse, including prohibiting all forms of violence against children
 - » Addressing vaccine-preventable illnesses
 - » Ending child poverty and improving food and nutritional security
 - » Reducing infant mortality
 - » Ending bullying
 - » Improving physical activity and play
 - » Reducing the impacts of climate change
- Launch a Catalytic Investment Fund that supports innovative and effective solutions that measurably improve the lives of children.
- Create transparency and accountability on federal expenditures related to children and youth by publishing a Children’s Budget.

3 Measure and Monitor What Matters in the Lives of Children and Youth

- Establish an independent Commissioner for Children and Youth that is dedicated to protecting the rights of children.
- Develop a comprehensive data strategy that would encompass the collection of disaggregated data on the health and well-being of children, supported by analysis, research and insights.
- Renew the national survey on the child- and youth-serving sector to identify and map all key decision-makers working to improve the lives of kids in Canada.

Specific recommendations on each of the top 10 threats to childhood and the cross-cutting themes have been identified throughout the *Raising Canada 2022* report. They warrant attention, investment and action by all levels of government, civil society organizations and the private sector.

As emphasized throughout the report, **all actions taken to improve the lives of children must directly include children and youth as experts in their own lives. They are both the leaders of the future and leaders today.**

ABOUT CHILDREN FIRST CANADA

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.

COUNCIL OF CHAMPIONS

Children First Canada acknowledges the leadership of the Council of Champions and their commitment to mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on children in Canada, and the vision of making Canada the best place in the world for kids to grow up!®

- **Dr. Susanne Benseler**, Director, Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute, ACHR 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
- **Christine Hampson**, President & CEO, The Sandbox Project
- **Julia Hanigsberg**, CEO, Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital
- **Mark Hierlihy**, President & CEO, Canada's Children's Hospital Foundations
- **Dr. Krista Jangaard**, CEO, IWK Health Centre
- **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
- **Dr. Michael Ungar**, Canada Research Chair in Child, Family and Community Resilience

YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

Children First Canada respects the rights of children and youth to participate in decisions that affect their lives. We gratefully acknowledge the leadership of our Youth Advisory Council and the members of the Young Canadians' Parliament who participated in *Raising Canada 2022*.

- **Thalia Bueno**
- **Jayden Paquet-Noiseux**
- **Simryth Sahota**
- **Katie Tremblett-Foley**

Note: Reference the *Raising Canada 2022* report for the full list of sources.