

# TOP 10 THREATS TO CHILDHOOD IN CANADA

## A Generation at Risk



The *Raising Canada* report series has tracked the top 10 threats to childhood since 2018, providing an evidence-driven, solutions-oriented roadmap for safeguarding the well-being of children and youth, ultimately mobilizing action toward Children First Canada (CFC)'s vision of making this the best place in the world for kids to grow up. Despite incremental progress in certain areas, the broader reality is undeniable: **Canada is falling short in adequately protecting its youngest citizens and upholding their fundamental rights to a safe, healthy, and fulfilling childhood.**

As **Children First Canada marks its 10th anniversary**, we are reminded that **the work ahead is as urgent as ever**. While we have made strides in raising awareness and advocating for change, the challenges facing children today—from rising online harms to increasing food insecurity—demand immediate, collective action. This anniversary is **not just a time for reflection but a renewed call to all Canadians and every sector of society to join us** in ensuring that Canada becomes a place where children's rights are fully realized and every child is empowered to thrive.

## KEY FINDINGS:

### THREAT 1

## UNINTENTIONAL AND PREVENTABLE INJURIES

Unintentional injuries remain the **leading cause of death for children and youth** in Canada (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2020). **Motor vehicle crashes** are the top cause of **fatal injuries among youth aged 1 to 24**, and **traffic crashes account for about 71% of unintentional deaths** among 15- to 19-year-olds (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2020).

Although young people make up only **12% to 15% of ATV riders**, they account for a staggering **27% to 35% of all ORV-related fatalities in Canada**. (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2024)

**CANADA NOW RANKS 67TH OUT OF 193 COUNTRIES ON THE GLOBAL KIDSRIGHTS INDEX, A TROUBLING DECLINE FROM OUR 66TH PLACE STANDING IN 2024.**

### THREAT 2

## POOR MENTAL HEALTH

By the age of 25 approximately, **1 in 5 Canadians will be diagnosed with a mental illness**, with a majority of this segment beginning to experience symptoms before the age of 18 (CIHI, 2025).

About **one in five young people** aged 12 to 17 report symptoms consistent with a mental disorder, with **anxiety, depression, and ADHD** being especially common (Statistics Canada, 2023). The **COVID-19 pandemic made these issues worse**, as isolation, disrupted routines, and family stress have contributed to rising rates of anxiety and depression (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2023; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024b).

### THREAT 3

## VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN / CHILD ABUSE

**Violence against children remains a serious and widespread issue in Canada**, disrupting healthy development and leaving lasting physical and mental health impacts (World Health Organization, 2023). It includes **physical abuse, emotional maltreatment, sexual abuse, neglect, and cyberviolence** (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024).

In Canada, approximately **one-third (34.1%) of the population has experienced some form of childhood maltreatment** before their 15th birthday.

In 2023, over **70,000 substantiated cases of child maltreatment** were reported, though the actual number is likely much higher due to underreporting (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024).

Online **sexual exploitation is an emerging risk**, with reports **rising by over 35%** between 2022 and 2024 (Cybertip.ca, 2024).

## THREAT 4

# POVERTY

Poverty remains a critical and escalating threat to childhood well-being in Canada, with interconnected challenges in income, housing, food, and long-term health outcomes.

In 2023, nearly **1.4 million children live in poverty** in Canada or roughly 1 in 5 children (Campaign2000, 2024).

Between **35,000–40,000 youth face homelessness annually**, comprising 20% of the total homeless population (Covenant House, 2024). Key risk groups include **2SLGBTQIA+ youth and youth who have experienced government care—45% of unhoused youth had care involvement, and 51% among Indigenous respondents** (Health Canada, 2024).

As of 2024, **2.5 million children in Canada live in food-insecure households** (PROOF, 2025). This is the third consecutive year of increasing food insecurity, with **disproportionate impacts on Black (46.7%) and Indigenous (39.9%) households** compared to non-racialized groups (21.6%) (Statistics Canada, 2025b).

## THREAT 5

# VACCINE- PREVENTABLE ILLNESSES

Vaccine-preventable illnesses remain a **significant public health concern** for children and youth in Canada.

**Measles cases rose sharply** in 2025, with over **4,638 cases** reported and nearly **half affecting children aged 5 to 17** (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024b).

**Influenza** continues to **disproportionately affect young children**, but **vaccine coverage for kids remains low at just 31%** in 2023–2024, declining from previous years (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024a).

**COVID-19 hospitalizations** also remain **highest among children under 5**, with significant gaps in future vaccination intentions among parents (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024a).

## THREAT 6

# SYSTEMIC RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

**54% of foster children** under the age of 15 were **Indigenous, despite Indigenous children comprising only 8% of the overall child population** in Canada.<sup>42</sup> This overrepresentation **highlights the systemic biases and discriminatory practices** within the child welfare system that **disproportionately impact Indigenous families**. (Statistics Canada).

**Black individuals had two to three times the probability of experiencing everyday discrimination**, compared to their White peers. These outcomes were also associated with a **40% to twofold increase in the odds of experiencing adverse mental health outcomes**, even when compared to the already high prevalence of adverse mental health outcomes in their White counterparts.

**2SLGBTQIA+ young people** between 16–24 are **1.6 times more likely to have been clinically depressed**, and **non-binary young people are 1.8 times more likely** in comparison to their peers.<sup>115</sup> **Suicidal intent and ideation** are also **disproportionately high** among non-binary youth (34.7%) and 2SLGBTQIA+ young adults (36.1%) (CMHA).

## THREAT 7

# INFANT MORTALITY

Infant mortality remains a **concerning public health issue** in Canada, with a national rate of **4.6 deaths per 1,000 live births** in 2023 (Statistics Canada, 2025).

In **Nunavut, the infant mortality rate is 18.9 per 1,000 live births**, reflecting serious **inequities in remote and Indigenous communities** (Statistics Canada, 2025).

Canada does not collect race-based infant mortality data, which **limits understanding** and makes it **difficult to design targeted interventions** and policies (Ekpe et al., 2024).

## THREAT 8

# BULLYING

An **overwhelming majority of young Canadians – 71% of youth** between the ages of 12–17 – reported **experiencing some form of bullying** in the past 12 months (Statistics Canada, 2023).

The most common forms of bullying experienced by youth were **name calling (59%)**, the **spreading of rumours (34%)** and **exclusion from activities (32%)** (Statistics Canada, 2023).

While **71% of teachers** claim that they **act to prevent forms of bullying** only **25% of students feel supported** by teachers within the school setting (SafeCanada, 2024).

At least **one in five teens (25%) reported experiencing cyberbullying** in the previous year (Statistics Canada, 2023).

**58% of youth** reported witnessing **racially motivated bullying** while at school while **14% reported experiencing raced-based bullying themselves** (Sainju et al., 2025). These findings reflect the **growing issue of identity-based bullying** within Canada.

## THREAT 9

# LIMITED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND PLAY

**Physical inactivity** remains a **growing concern for children and youth** in Canada. Only **39% of children** aged 5 to 17 meet the **recommended 60 minutes** of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily, falling short of World Health Organization standards (ParticipACTION, 2024; World Health Organization, 2023).

A study from Ontario showed that **children's BMI nearly doubled post-pandemic**, reflecting reduced activity during lockdowns (McQuillan et al., 2024).

Childhood **obesity rates** in Canada have **tripled over the past three decades**, highlighting the **long-term health risks** associated with inactivity (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2023).

## CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change is an **escalating threat to the health and well-being** of children in Canada. Its impacts include increased exposure to **extreme weather events**, **worsening air quality**, and growing **food insecurity** (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024). Children are **more vulnerable than adults** because of their developing bodies, reliance on caregivers, and lack of political voice (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2024). Climate-related stressors are already **disproportionately affecting children in marginalized communities** (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2024).

Both physical and mental health is at risk. **Air pollution** has contributed to **spikes in pediatric asthma cases**, especially in western provinces (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2024), while **rising temperatures** have increased the risk of **heat-related illnesses** and the spread of **vector-borne diseases** such as **Lyme disease** and **West Nile virus** (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2023).

Many children report experiencing **climate anxiety**, **distress about their future**, and **post-traumatic stress** after natural disasters. These impacts are not distributed equally: children in **northern and remote regions**, particularly in **Indigenous communities**, face **greater risks** due to **limited infrastructure**, **unsafe drinking water**, and **food insecurity** (Assembly of First Nations, 2024).

## EMERGING THREAT:

## ONLINE HARMS

Based on responses from **2,502 Canadians aged 16 and older**, youth and equity-deserving groups, including racialized individuals, newcomers, people with disabilities, and 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, are **disproportionately affected by hate speech** at rates **50 to 100% higher** than the general population (Dyer et al, 2025; Lockhart, Aguns. *Survey of Online Harms in Canada 2025*. The Dais. 2025).

In 2025, **hate speech** related to **immigration (18%)** and the **Israel-Palestine conflict (17%)** were the most frequently cited themes (Lockhart, Aguns. *Survey of Online Harms in Canada 2025*. The Dais. 2025).

## CALL TO ACTION

The following Calls to Action, endorsed by our Youth Advisory Council, Young Canadians' Parliament, and Council of Champions, provide the framework for addressing the deepening crises children face:

- 1. Implement a National Strategy for Children and Youth:** We urge the Government of Canada to create and execute a National Strategy for Children and Youth, which tackles the top threats to childhood and promotes the full realization of children's rights. This strategy should include the establishment of an independent Commissioner for Children and Youth, who can ensure accountability and advocate for children's best interests at all levels of government.
- 2. Invest in Children as a Nation-Building Priority:** We call for the federal government to not only honour its current budget commitments, but also also earmark a proportionate share of public health and social budgets for children—who make up 25% of the population and represent 100% of our future—and ensure further transparency and accountability. This includes publishing a Children's Budget to ensure equitable distribution of resources that prioritize the needs of all children, with special attention to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children. We also demand the full implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, including the Spirit Bear Plan, to correct historical injustices.
- 3. Empower Children to Shape Their Future:** We urge all levels of government to invest in child rights education and actively involve children and youth in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. This includes lowering the voting age to 16, ensuring young people have a direct say in the policies that shape their future. Their voices must be central to the creation of policies and programs designed to support them, empowering them to take an active role in their communities and democracy. This is essential in creating a future that reflects the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of children and youth across Canada.

However, the responsibility for change does not lie solely with government. **Every Canadian—parents, educators, community leaders, business leaders, and children themselves—must play a role in ensuring a brighter, safer future for our children.** We must come together as a society to take bold action, fostering an environment where every child has the opportunity to thrive. Our children deserve a childhood in which they can flourish, and a future built on opportunity and support.

**LET'S RISE TO THE CHALLENGE AND CREATE A FUTURE WHERE EVERY CHILD IN CANADA IS PROTECTED, EMPOWERED, AND READY TO LEAD.**