



HEALTHY FUTURES FOR ALL:

Advancing a National Strategy for Child and Youth Health

CANADA IS EXPERIENCING A CRISIS IN CHILD AND YOUTH HEALTHCARE.

Canada is experiencing a crisis in child and youth health and healthcare.

Where Canada once ranked amongst the top 10 OECD countries with respect to children's health outcomes, the 2020 UNICEF Report Card 16 reveals Canada's standing has now fallen to 30th of 38 countries with respect to children's physical health and 31st of 38 countries regarding children's mental health.¹

At the same time, health systems serving children and youth are experiencing unprecedented demands for services. Most children's hospitals are now operating consistently at or above 100 percent capacity, while pediatric programs in community hospitals and pediatricians in office-based practices are facing reduced capacity and resources to meet the growing demands.

As a wealthy nation, we disproportionately and systemically underinvest in child and youth health and well-being compared to other comparable jurisdictions. In fact, Canada only invests 1.68 percent of GDP on policies and investments directed toward children and youth. In comparison, countries, like France, the United Kingdom, and Sweden, which ranked higher on the 2020 UNICEF report card, invest up to 3.68 percent.²

Canadians imagine a healthier future for their children. The time is right to develop a bold pan-Canadian child and youth health strategy, one that will right-size historical inequities, meet the challenges of today, and anticipate and be able to respond to the needs of tomorrow.

In 2020, Children's Healthcare Canada partnered with the Pediatric Chairs of Canada, UNICEF Canada, and CIHR Institute of Human Development, Child and Youth Health to launch a pan-Canadian initiative called [Inspiring Healthy Futures](#) to measurably improve the health and well-being of children, youth, and families. A broad, cross-sector consultation engaging 1,500 stakeholders identified five interlinked priorities to create conditions for children to thrive. The report serves as a blueprint for a national child and youth health strategy.

We recommend the following themed policy priorities to aid in developing a strategy that includes national standards, is rooted in principles of health equity, and reflects the foundational importance of timely access to quality healthcare for all children and youth across the full continuum of care.

¹ UNICEF Report Card 16. [UNICEF REPORT CARD 16 | UNICEF Canada: For Every Child](#)

² UNICEF Report Card 16 Canadian Companion. [UNICEF RC16 Canadian Companion EN_Web.pdf](#)

1.5

MILLION
CHILDREN DO
NOT HAVE
ACCESS TO
PRIMARY CARE



1 IN 5

CHILDREN
AND YOUTH
SUFFER FROM
POOR MENTAL
HEALTH

ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL HEALTHCARE SERVICES AND MEDICATIONS FOR CHILDREN:

From coast to coast, children are now waiting longer for many essential health services than adults.³ As many as 1.5 million children do not have access to primary care, there are an estimated 100,000 children in the queue for community-based mental health services from

coast to coast, and over 50 percent of children waiting for life-changing surgical interventions are now waiting longer than clinically recommended. Children's hospital emergency departments are experiencing historic patient volumes, approximately 30-80 percent higher than usual.

PRIMARY CARE

Primary care, whether delivered by a pediatrician, a family physician, a nurse practitioner, or a multidisciplinary team, provides essential routine and preventative care to growing children. Preventative health care improves health outcomes, ensuring access to routine vaccinations to prevent disease and providing early detection of disorders, and assessment of developmental milestones.

While an estimated one in five children and youth suffer from poor mental health, fewer than 20 percent receive timely and appropriate treatment. Even prior to the pandemic, children and youth faced long waits to access mental health services. In Ontario, for example, over 30,000 children and youth are currently waiting for mental health services, some waiting as long as two years.^{4,5}

CHILDREN WITH MEDICAL COMPLEXITY AND DISABILITIES

Children with medical complexity and disabilities (children with complex chronic disease and/or functional disability) experience high healthcare utilization, often requiring health services from providers in multiple care settings (primary care,

community services, and hospital and emergency department care). Integrated patient and family-centred models of care are urgently required to optimize health outcomes.⁶

PEDIATRIC PALLIATIVE AND END OF LIFE

Pediatric Palliative and End of Life Care are essential services for a growing number of children and youth each year. There are critical barriers to

symptom management, respite, supportive, and end-of-life care for children facing chronic complex and life-limiting conditions.

³ Make Kids Count Action Plan. Children's Health Coalition.

<https://www.chcontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Make-Kids-Count-Action-Plan-from-the-Childrens-Health-Coalition-2.pdf>

⁴ Harding, K.E., Camden, C., Lewis, A.K., Perreault, K., & Taylor, N. F. (2022). *Service red redesign interventions to reduce waiting time for paediatric rehabilitation and therapy services: A systematic review of the literature*. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 30(6), 2057-2070. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.13866>



IMPROVING ACCESS TO SPECIALIZED AND CULTURALLY BASED SERVICES

Improving access to specialized and culturally based services for **rural, remote, and Indigenous populations** is critical to addressing health disparities and promoting health equity in children's

healthcare in Canada. Leadership is urgently required to help build capacity to address systemic barriers to healthcare and ensure access to culturally appropriate specialized health services.

ACCESS TO SAFE AND EFFECTIVE MEDICATIONS AND MEDICAL DEVICES

Access to safe and effective medications and medical devices purposely designed and developed for children and youth is paramount to improving the quality and safety of children's healthcare delivery in Canada. An estimated 80 percent of all medications currently prescribed and administered in Canadian pediatric hospitals are not on label

for those under the age of 18, meaning that they deviate from the dose, administration, patient age, and often the medical indication listed on the product monograph. Regulatory reforms are needed to address inadequacies in research, funding, and approval of pediatric drugs and therapeutics in Canada.

⁵ Wiebe, K., Kelley, S., & Kirsch, R. E., (2022). *Revisiting the concept of urgency in surgical prioritization and addressing backlogs in elective surgery provision*: CMAJ. Canadian Medical Association Journal, 194(29), E1037-E1039. <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.220420>

⁶ Canadian Institute for Health Information. *Children and Youth With Medical Complexity in Canada*. Ottawa, ON: CIHI; 2020.

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HEALTH SYSTEMS MANAGEMENT:

Canada's population of children is growing. Statistics Canada reports an estimated 1.2 million more children will live in Canada by 2040.⁷ With demands for health services for children and youth increasing, the hospitals and healthcare systems serving children require scaled-up infrastructure to deliver specialty pediatric care.

Children's healthcare systems of the future must enable better beginnings by prioritizing maternal and newborn health to give families the best start possible; must advance precision health and wellness through world-class care for very sick children requiring hospitalization; and must enable children living with neurodiversity,

disability, and chronic diseases to transition from vulnerable to thriving. A comprehensive strategy would not only address the existing gaps and challenges but also anticipate the needs of the future.

Children's healthcare systems of the future must include a workforce purpose-trained to deliver care for kids. Health human resource gaps have had a significant impact on the ability of healthcare systems to deliver appropriate and timely care for Canada's children and youth. Critically low nurse staffing levels, particularly in acute care settings, are resulting in bed and service closures.



1.2
MILLION MORE
CHILDREN WILL
LIVE IN CANADA
BY 2040

⁷ Statistics Canada. *Annual Demographic Estimates: Canada, Provinces and Territories, 2021*. Accessed December 20, 2022. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/91-215-x/2021001/sec2-eng.htm>



HEALTH SYSTEM PERFORMANCE AND OUTCOMES:

A robust maternal, child, and youth health research agenda is required to contribute to the generating of new knowledge regarding children's health. Waning investments undermine the ability to leverage evidence to inform policy and programs/services which address child health priorities. Investment is urgently required to advance a robust research agenda that includes: a life cycle approach to understanding health and well-being from pre-conception through end-of-life; accelerating mobilization of knowledge to policy, practice, and health promotion, and developing a comprehensive open, accessible data strategy across research networks.

What gets measured, matters. **Better health data** is critical to improving health services and outcomes for Canada's kids. Canada is currently without an overarching plan to guide the development, collection, and use of data and information about the health of children and youth. An integrated, cross-sector, cross-jurisdiction child health data strategy is necessary to accelerate the mobilization of knowledge to policy, practice, and health promotion. Such a strategy would help strengthen pediatric healthcare and overall child and youth mental and physical health by making clinically useful, appropriate, current, and accurate health data available at every interaction between a child and a health and social service provider.

Children's Healthcare Canada, the Canadian Paediatric Society, the Pediatric Chairs of Canada, and the Canadian Association of Pediatric Nurses are uniquely positioned to guide the development of a national child and youth health strategy that includes clear targets and timelines to measurably improve children's health outcomes. In 2020, all four organizations participated in a pan-Canadian initiative called *Inspiring Healthy Futures* which identified five interlinked priorities that together, create conditions for children to thrive. The report serves as a blueprint to make children's health and well-being a priority for the public, funders, and decision-makers. Accessible and adaptable health systems for children are not only a desirable outcome, but a necessary one to improve the health and wealth of Canada.

Our country stands at a critical juncture. We need to address the current crisis facing children and youth and the health systems that serve them, while also planning for the challenges of tomorrow. We have the expertise, knowledge, and tools to restore our global standing on children's health. What is needed now is bold leadership and a commitment from governments at all levels to make this possible.



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