

A Plan for Kids in Canada

Fact Sheet – May 2025

The issue

The health and wellbeing of Canada's children and youth is worsening, year over year, decade over decade.

In 2020, UNICEF reported that Canada ranked 30th out of 38 wealthy countries with respect to the physical health of children and youth; 31st out of 38 countries with respect to mental health. As a wealthy nation, Canada disproportionately and systemically underinvests in child and youth health and well-being compared to other comparable jurisdictions. In fact, Canada invests only 1.68 percent of our GDP on policies and investments directed toward children and youth. In comparison, countries, like France, the United Kingdom, and Sweden invest up to 3.68 percent, yielding measurably stronger health outcomes for young people.

To reverse these troubling trends, incremental improvements are not enough. Canada must rethink how it prioritizes and addresses the diverse and interconnected needs of children, youth, and families. Recognizing that transformative change requires a fundamentally new approach, the CIHR Institute of Human Development, Child and Youth Health (IHDCYH), Children's Healthcare Canada, UNICEF Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada convened children's champions including children and youth to design a pan-Canadian framework to measurably improve the health and well-being of children, youth and families.

Why It Matters

Canadians imagine a healthier future for their children. The time is right for federal leadership to implement a cross-sector framework to right-size historical inequities, to meet the challenges children and youth face today, and to be responsive to their needs tomorrow.

While the *proportion* of children living in Canada has not increased significantly over the last 20 years, the *population* of children is growing. By 2040, it is anticipated that Canada will be home to nearly 9.2 million children and youth (1.2 million more than in 2021).¹ This growing cohort of young Canadians will inherit unprecedented social, economic, and environmental challenges, underscoring the urgency of comprehensive action.

The "Inspiring Healthy Futures" framework was co-created by 1,500 children, youth, healthcare leaders, policy leaders, researchers, educators and other social service leaders to measurably improve the health and well-being of children, youth, and families. This community identified five interlinked priorities to create conditions for children to thrive. The report serves as a blueprint for a national child and youth health and wellbeing strategy with five interlinked priorities: impactful research and knowledge, child-centred policies and structures, schools and communities and hubs of health and wellbeing, accessible adaptable health systems, and mobilized communities supporting children, youth and families. Recognizing that Canada will not be successful until or unless we take action in all five areas, this is a vision to guide research, policy, community action, health and well-being systems and local networks, creating a platform for both urgent and ongoing change.

Canada was once a top-ten performer within UNICEF's international rankings and has fallen significantly with respect to measures of children's physical and mental health.ⁱⁱ Countries that routinely rank highly on the UNICEF indices have three things in common: they have declared children's health a national priority, they have made deliberate and sustained investments in children's health and wellbeing, and they have identified a leader accountable for measurably improving health outcomes. Canada has yet to make similar commitments. Without a commitment to long-term, strategic change, we risk a further decline in our standing and, more importantly, a further reduction in the quality of life for our children, youth, and families.

Policy Solutions for the Federal Government

Children's Healthcare Canada recommends the federal government work with provinces and territories, children's advocates, child health researchers, family partners, and healthcare system leaders to implement a **National Children's Health and Wellbeing Strategy, modelled after the work of Inspiring Healthy Futures**. A National Strategy should articulate clear outcomes-based targets for children's health and wellbeing, a timeline to achieve these targets, earmarked funds to realize this vision and a public reporting mechanism on progress. It should also and provide jurisdictions the flexibility to advance local priorities.

This strategy must be evidence-informed and underpinned by a strong, integrated, and sustained child health data and research strategy to achieve its short-, medium-, and long-term goals.

To support this work, we recommend the appointment of a **Chief Children's Officer**. Without a leader accountable for implementing a national children's health and wellbeing strategy, we will not see the measurable change required to improve children's health outcomes. We recommend the implementation of a CCO to guide strategy implementation efforts, to support relationship building between all levels of government and civil society children's advocates, and to support the spread and scale of innovations to build capacity in health systems serving children. Similar pan-Canadian "Officer" roles exist, it is a model that works.

References

ⁱ Statistics Canada: Annual Demographics Estimates: Canada, Provinces and Territories; 2021.

ⁱⁱ UNICEF Canada: Canadian Summary of the UNICEF Report Card 16; 2023.