



Where Does Canada Stand?

The Canadian Index of
Child and Youth Well-being
2019 Baseline Report

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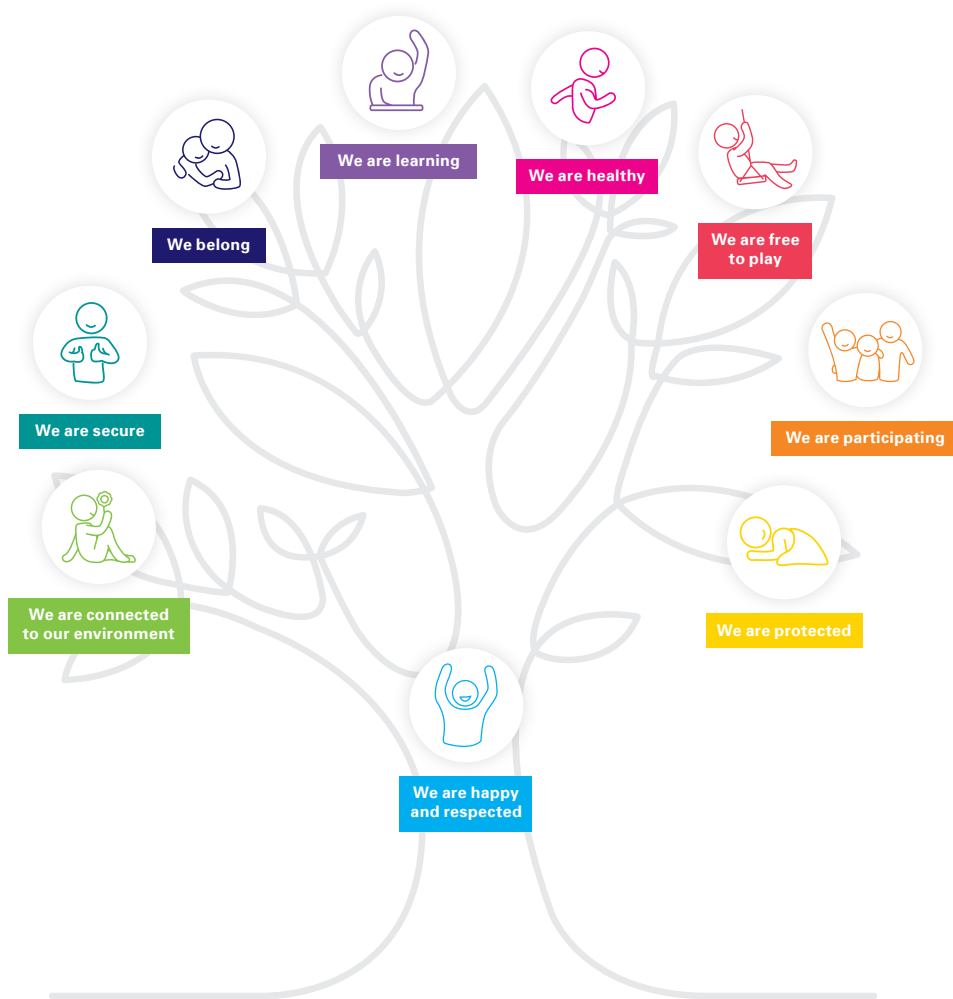
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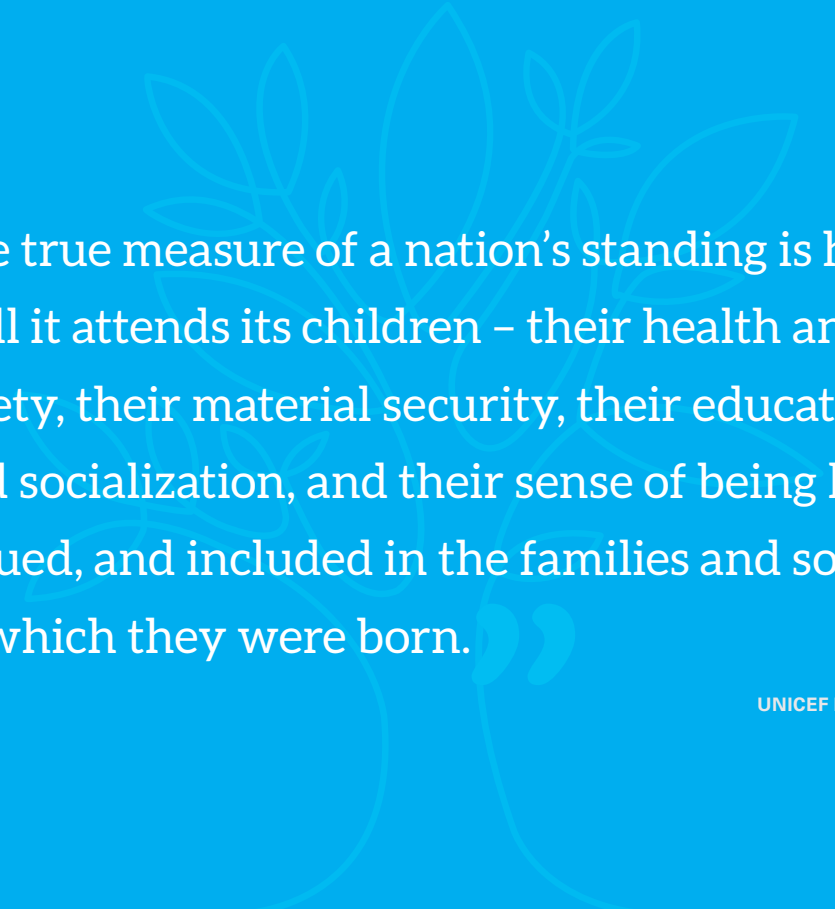
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For more information about the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being: www.unicef.ca



Where we stand

oneyouth.unicef.ca | [@OneYouthCanada](https://twitter.com/OneYouthCanada) | [#OurBigSelfie](https://twitter.com/OneYouthCanada)



“ The true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies to which they were born. ”

UNICEF REPORT CARD 7

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About the Index:

125 Indicators for 1 Childhood

Many Canadians believe that Canada is the best place in the world to grow up. Is it?

Canada's wealth has been steadily rising, but our overall level of child and youth well-being hasn't budged in more than a decade.¹ Why?

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being measures levels, inequalities and trends in the state of children and youth. It's a big 'selfie' of Canada, a snapshot that looks at many aspects of childhood to help Canadians understand what growing up is like for kids, focus efforts and accelerate progress where it is most needed.

The Index brings together a wide range of data into one framework to encourage a comprehensive and balanced view of how kids in Canada are faring. We are tracking 125 indicators across nine dimensions of the lives of children and youth, from birth to age 18, using the most recent, population-level, statistical data.² This report is a profile of children and youth that provides a baseline from which future reports will track progress. It complements the UNICEF Report Cards that look at life for kids in the world's rich countries.

In one of the world's wealthiest societies, we still have to measure how well Canada is meeting basic needs like nutrition and clean drinking water because we are not fulfilling these human rights for every child. Because child and youth well-being is also fundamentally determined by opportunity to participate in Canadian society and decided by how kids feel about their lives, the Index measures these as well.

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being was built by and for children and youth, across the country and farthest from opportunity, and provides an inspiring and challenging view of what well-being looks and feels like to them. **What we measure is important to kids from their perspectives, from their pets to their risk of poverty.** Many of the indicators,

about 60 per cent, are based on how children and youth report their own well-being. More than 90 adult experts from diverse perspectives also contributed to the development of the Index, and we also took international evidence and practice into account (please see the report, *How We Built the Index*, for more information about the development of the Index).

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being also tracks how Canada is delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). About one third of the indicators measure Canada's achievement of the SDG targets for children. With a decade to go until 2030, when Canada promised to deliver on the goals, we clearly must accelerate progress in key areas.

What are children and youth telling us about their lives?

Kids of Canada have mixed feelings about their lives, but many are not very happy:

- About half (55.0 per cent) rate their lives high on the life satisfaction scale
- Around one in four (27.4 per cent) has felt sad or hopeless for a long period
- Most (84.6 per cent) feel a strong sense of belonging to their communities. Yet just over half (57.3 per cent) say they receive good support within their families, and less than half (42.9 per cent) get good support at school
- One in four (24.5 per cent) is lonely, but almost all 11 to 15 year olds (96.2 per cent) have someone they can talk to

Kids of Canada experience poverty differently than adults do:

- One in ten (9.0 per cent) lives in families without enough income to meet their basic needs
- One in five (20.0 per cent) lives in relative poverty, without enough income to fully participate in life in Canada
- One in four (23.3 per cent) goes to bed or school hungry at least sometimes because there is not enough food at home
- About half (56.1 per cent) feel their family is well off

¹UNICEF Report Cards measure overall child and youth well-being based on multiple indicators for the world's wealthiest countries.

²Some indicators have an age range above 18 such as the teen birth rate, the graduation rate and the NEET rate. The data tables provide the age range for each indicator.

Kids of Canada are often listened to, except by their governments:

- Three in four (74.2 per cent) feel their family listens to them when they speak and a similar number can freely express themselves to their family and friends (77.9 per cent)
- None can vote in political elections

Kids of Canada don't play much:

- One in five (20.8 per cent) 5 to 11 year olds gets 1.5 hours or more of daily play time
- One in four (23.4 per cent) 11 to 15 year olds never or rarely meets their friends in person after school/ before 8 pm
- 16.5 per cent of adolescents report high time pressure
- 12.4 per cent of adolescents work 16 hours or more per week

Kids of Canada experience high levels of violence, often with the people and in the places where they should be safest:

- More than one quarter experience fighting (28.3 per cent) and/or regular bullying (27.0 per cent)
- One in four (24.6 per cent) has experienced violence at home before the age of 15
- The rate of child homicide (0.7 per 100,000 among 0 to 19 year olds) is among the highest in the rich world
- Most (92.6 per cent) feel satisfied with their personal safety from crime, and most (88.7 per cent) have not been victims of violent crimes

Kids of Canada are learning at school, but they aren't necessarily learning for life:

- More than one in four (27.0 per cent) starts kindergarten with developmental challenges
- Most (80.8 per cent) achieve the international level of proficiency in reading, math and science in high school
- 93.9 per cent complete high school; 6.3 per cent of school-aged youth are not in some kind of education, employment or training
- Less than half (46.9 per cent) feel positive about school; and one in four (26.8 per cent) says they have more school work than they can handle

Kids of Canada aren't as healthy as we should expect, but it's not because of their choices:

- One in three mothers (32.1 per cent) is exclusively breastfeeding for at least six months, far below the world target of 50 per cent
- 90.2 per cent have at least one dose of measles vaccine at age 2, fewer children than necessary for population protection
- One in ten (10.6 per cent age 5 to 17) is obese
- More than half of young people age 11 to 15 (59.8 per cent) go to school feeling tired
- One third (34.2 per cent) of 11 to 15 year olds experience weekly symptoms of mental distress, including headaches, stomach aches and trouble sleeping, and one in ten (10.5 per cent) 12 to 17 year olds reports living with a mood and/or anxiety disorder
- 7.2 per cent of 14 and 15 year olds are involved in frequent, higher-risk substance use

Kids of Canada are 'canaries' of environmental change:

- One in ten homes with children (11.1 per cent) was informed of a boil-water advisory in the most recent year for available data
- The air they breathe in cities is just below the safe limit for fine particulate pollution
- Most (71.0 per cent) understand complex environmental issues

The kids of Canada have
one chance to be children.

Canada has a chance to be a
better country for children.

Stand with children.



Who Are We?

Kids of Canada

Canada's population includes nearly 8 million children and youth under age 18, about a fifth of our population. They are the most urbanized, diverse and educated generation Canada has ever raised. Three in four (73.0 per cent) live in urban centres. They live in more diverse families than any previous generation. And they are unequal, with wide gaps between children based on their ethnicity, legal status, gender and gender identity, disability, economic security and geographic location.

Indigenous children, including First Nations, Métis and Inuit, are 7.6 per cent of the child population, and reconciliation must overcome discrimination if the future of childhood in Canada is going to be brighter.

Close to 10 per cent of children in Canada (9.4 per cent) were born outside the country; about 40 per cent are foreign-born or have at least one foreign-born parent, a figure that is expected to rise to about 50 per cent over the next generation. While many of these children have better health and education outcomes than Canadian-born children, some struggle to belong. About 1.7 per cent of children do not speak English or French.

65.6%

The percentage of parents who are satisfied with the balance between their jobs and their home lives³

is smaller than the senior population. However, Indigenous communities (particularly Inuit communities) have much younger populations than other groups in Canada, and children outnumber seniors. Indigenous children are the fastest-growing child population.

Despite their relatively small population size, children face outsized challenges in some aspects of their lives. Many

experience violence. They are more likely to be poor. As their numbers decline relative to older groups, children may be more likely to be passed over by governments focused on other priorities – an 'invisible' group of citizens.

66.2%

The percentage of parents who say they are satisfied with life⁴

We are Canada

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being is really about all of us.

It is not an assessment of how competent or fit children are for Canadian society, but how fit Canada is for children. It is not an evaluation of children's skills, behaviour or resilience, but an assessment of the character of our nation and the kinds of childhoods our society offers its children.

The indicators of well-being in the Index focus on the 'status' of children, and they are influenced by a web of family, peers, communities, cultures, public policies, social norms and attitudes, political ideologies and environmental conditions.

All of the indicators in the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being are sensitive to action.

UNICEF Canada believes that reducing income and social inequality is the greatest challenge and opportunity of our time, with potentially the greatest effects on all aspects of children's lives in Canada. Income inequality affects children's relationships, material security, freedom to play, learning, health, protection and sense of belonging.

Some countries have set bold goals to be the best places in the world for children. One Youth is a campaign with a goal to see Canada join the countries at the top of UNICEF's international league tables of child and youth well-being – those countries whose children are generally healthier, safer

³Percentage of respondents to the 2016 Statistics Canada General Social Survey with at least one child 19 or under living at home who are satisfied with the balance between job and home life.

⁴Percentage of respondents to the 2016 Statistics Canada General Social Survey with at least one child 19 or under at home who are satisfied with life as a whole right now.

and happier. Everyone in Canada can take action that will change the data we are tracking with this Index, so the next

report will be a record of better young lives. We are measuring progress to make progress.

Happier Parents, Happier Kids

ANN DOUGLAS
AUTHOR, RADIO COLUMNIST, SPEAKER

One of the key ingredients in the recipe for a happy child is a happy parent. When parents do better, kids do better – and vice versa. And, as for the recipe for a happy parent, the key ingredient in that recipe is good public policy.

Parenting doesn't happen in a bubble. Parents can't help but be affected by what's happening in the world beyond their front door. And when it comes to policy decisions, the impact on parenting can be quite dramatic.

Research conducted by the Council on Contemporary Families has found, for example, that parental happiness levels increase in the presence of policies that make it less stressful and less costly for parents to juggle the competing demands of work and family. There is, after all, a solid body of research to demonstrate that parents who struggle with high levels of work-life conflict are more likely to be stressed, anxious and depressed. And, what's more, they're also likely to be less healthy and more dissatisfied with their relationships with their partners and their kids. When work-life conflict is prolonged or extreme, parents end up being distant, inattentive, less sensitive and less emotionally available to

their kids. That, in turn, takes a toll on the happiness of both parents and kids.

It isn't just happiness that's at stake. When parents are feeling stressed and overloaded, everything tends to fall apart on the health and wellness front – with the impact even greater if the mother is the parent who is feeling stressed. The good news is that there's a way to put the brakes on this kind of downward spiral – and to create an upward spiral that allows both parents and kids to thrive.

It starts with family-friendly policies. As it turns out, access to quality, affordable child care is a complete game changer on this front, helping to minimize work-life conflict, encouraging greater gender equity within couple relationships and eliminating the so-called motherhood tax (the fact that mothers are penalized in the workplace for being the ones who typically take the lead on care).

Economic policy that helps to reduce income inequality is equally critical to help relieve the anxiety that so many parents and children experience. As the economic stakes get higher, the pressure on parents and kids gets ever greater, and

parents are more likely to decide that harsher and more controlling parenting is the best way to respond to the challenges posed by an uncertain future.

For some parents dealing with trauma and health challenges, child care and other community supports can help them be the parents they want to be.

If we're actually serious about producing a generation of children who are happier and healthier than their parents, we need public policies that help those children's parents feel less anxious, less guilty and less overwhelmed. In order to make that happen, we need to shift from treating parenting as a problem that every family needs to solve on its own to choosing instead to embrace it as a collective opportunity to raise up the next generation of citizens together.

As it turns out, that happens to be a winning strategy. Societies that invest in children and their parents by implementing wise and forward-looking public policy also happen to be the societies that reap the greatest dividends on the happiness front. In other words, they're the best countries in the world to be a parent and to be a kid.

The day will come when nations will be judged not by their military or economic strength, nor by the splendour of their capital cities and public buildings, but by the well-being of their people: by their levels of health, nutrition and education; by their opportunities to earn a fair reward for their labours; by their ability to participate in decisions that affect their lives; by the respect that is shown for their civil and political liberties; by the provision that is made for those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged; and by the protection that is afforded to the growing minds and bodies of their children.

UNICEF, THE PROGRESS OF NATIONS, 1998

What Is Well-being?

There is no official definition of well-being. Different individuals, cultures, communities and age groups have different concepts and experiences of well-being. They have different goals and values. **All citizens, including children, have the right to define what well-being means to them, their community and their society.** No single index or approach can do this. However, well-being includes some common ideas.

“Fitness + mental health + wealth + friends.”

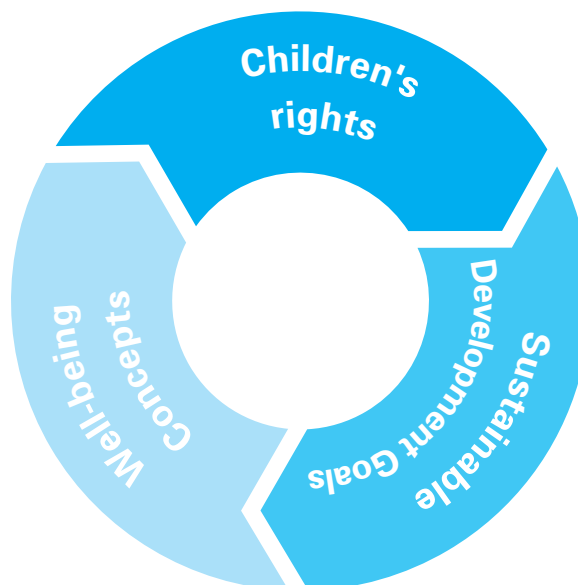
WHAT WELL-BEING LOOKS LIKE TO A YOUTH PARTICIPANT IN A UNICEF WORKSHOP TO BUILD THE CANADIAN INDEX OF CHILD AND YOUTH WELL-BEING

UNICEF Canada asked hundreds of people – including Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and children and youth – in different parts of Canada about what well-being means.ⁱ We are building the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being around their inspiring and achievable visions of children’s lives in an equitable and sustainable society:

A country where no child lives in poverty; where they’re healthy, safe and secure; where they’re free to dream, play, wonder and learn; where they know who they are, where they came from and where they’re going; where they have access to the resources they need to reach their full potential; where they feel loved and included.ⁱⁱ

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a universal set of entitlements that every child in Canada has and provides a unifying framework for the Index. Concepts of child well-being and children’s rights substantially overlap, but there are also differences. For example, friendships are important for children’s well-being, but it is not possible to have a right to a good friend.ⁱⁱⁱ Children’s rights might best be understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition for child well-being.⁵ The child-focused indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are also embedded in the Index because these are policy commitments Canada made with a pledge to leave no child behind.^{iv}

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being incorporates these elements to measure the state of children and youth



⁵ There is a global convergence toward measuring social well-being, incorporating influences that include positivist approaches (policy and statistics-driven), human rights frameworks, international benchmarking (including the Sustainable Development Goals) and worldviews including Indigenous and Buddhist concepts of well-being.

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being: #OurBigSelfie

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being is a holistic and balanced picture of the rights and well-being of children and youth under age 18. The Index is guided by an ecological systems approach that recognizes the interdependence of key areas – or dimensions – of the lives of children and youth, all of which affect their well-being. It tracks 125 indicators in nine interrelated dimensions of children’s lives. Each dimension tells a story.



Are We Happy and Respected?

- Feeling balanced physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally
- Feeling free to set my own goals
- Feeling sad or hopeless for a long time
- Feeling satisfied with life
- Feeling self-confident
- Feeling stressed
- Feeling valued and respected
- Having a sense of purpose in life
- Managing the demands of life

Do We Belong?

- Being charged with an offence
- Being involved in groups and group activities
- Being separated from my family
- Caring for a pet
- Feeling left out
- Feeling like I belong to my local community
- Feeling lonely
- Feeling supported by my community
- Feeling supported by my family
- Feeling supported by my friends
- Feeling supported by my teachers
- Having emotional challenges in the early years
- Keeping family relationships

Are We Secure?

- Being excluded from opportunities
- Feeling like my family has as much money as others
- Getting child benefits
- Getting support for disabilities
- Going hungry
- Going without things I need at home
- Having parents with insecure work
- Having safe and secure housing
- Homeless
- Living in poverty
- Living in severe poverty
- My basic needs are not affordable
- Not getting enough healthy food

Are We Participating?

Able to register a business

Contributing income tax on the money I make

Free to be online

Free to choose relationships

Free to express ideas and opinions

Free to express my identity and culture

Having citizenship

Having control over my life

Having opportunities to engage in reconciliation

Indigenous children speaking an Indigenous language

Managing my money

Not getting information I need

Participating in decision-making

Voting in elections

Are We Free to Play?

Balancing my activities and responsibilities

Balancing physical activity, sleep and screen time

Feeling time pressure

Getting around on my own

Having barriers to participating in activities

Not spending much time with friends

Playing actively or independently

Spending a lot of time at a job

Spending a lot of time on family responsibilities

Spending time in outdoor play

Are We Protected?

Abuse at home

Abuse in an intimate relationship

Bullying

Discrimination

Feeling safe in my neighbourhood

Fighting

Getting injured at work

Having control over my reputation and privacy

Having someone to talk to

Having strategies to deal with risky situations

Homicide

Physical punishment

Satisfied with access to justice

Serious injury

Violent crime

Are We Learning?

Achieving in high school

Being suspended from school

Disengaged from learning and employment

Feeling positive about school

Graduating from high school

Having opportunities to explore my potential, passions and interests

Having talk time with adults

Having too much homework to manage

Knowing my human rights

Not ready for school with the skills I need

Participating in cultural activities and events

Participating in preschool

Participating in quality early learning and child care

Reading well in primary school

Thriving in the middle years

Are We Healthy?

Breastfeeding

Feeling satisfied with my health care

Feeling tired before school

Getting health care

Getting vaccinated

Having frequent mental and physical symptoms

Having good self-rated health

Having good self-rated mental health

Having good spiritual health

Having low birth weight

Having poor dental health

Having thoughts of suicide

Infant death

Liking how I look

Living with a mental health condition

Managing my health

My activities are limited by my health

Obesity

Preterm birth

Suicide

Taking risks

Teen births

Are We Connected to our Environment?

Being affected by a disaster

Being environmentally aware

Feeling satisfied with my local area

Having access to public transit

Having barriers to getting places

Having clean water sources

Having parks and open space

Having places to spend free time

Having polluted air

Having recreation facilities

Having safe drinking water

Living in a sustainable ecosystem

Living with a sustainable climate



Interpreting the Index

Dimensions represent broad, conceptual aspects of children’s lives. There are eight dimensions in the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being, including ‘We are Protected’ and ‘We are Participating,’ that influence young people’s sense of well-being, within the central dimension, ‘We are Happy and Respected.’

Measures describe distinct aspects of child and youth well-being in each dimension. The measures take on a particular meaning within the dimension in which they are embedded. The measures are equally weighted, recognizing the importance of balance in achieving well-being and that children’s rights are not subject to a hierarchy. The names of the measures are general descriptions that are understandable for young people.

Indicators are statistical definitions of the measures. The indicators are the closest fit possible to the measurement concept, data selection criteria and available data. More ‘objective’ indicators such as incidence counts (e.g., breastfeeding rate) are balanced with more ‘subjective’ assessments by children and youth of their experiences (e.g., feeling left out) in every dimension of life. As much as possible, the indicators focus on the state or status of children (reported by children or observable in the lives of children), rather than on ‘inputs’ or conditions that might influence the state of children.

Data are population-level, statistical, numeric values – mainly reported as rates (percentages of a child population). Most of the data are collected by pan-Canadian surveys by governments and researchers; some are from administrative data sets. There are many gaps in available data for the indicators, particularly to break down the data for specific groups of children.

Proxy indicator (PI): The indicator does not fully describe the measurement concept, but a partial indicator has been developed for survey use and, in some cases, there are available data.

Limited data (LD): The indicator is collected in national surveys or data sets, but data are reported only for particular regions or populations in Canada at this time. Consequently, reported data might not be entirely representative of Canada, or a national average is not currently available.

No data (NI/D): There is no existing indicator for a measure identified as an important aspect of well-being, there are no current data available for the measurement concept at the national level, and/or the data are not available due to high cost and access barriers. For the measures with no data, indicators that have been developed or are in development at national or subnational levels are described; for others, model indicators are proposed as an agenda for action.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG): The indicator aligns with an official target of the Sustainable Development Goals for children and youth.

The example below shows the connections among dimensions, measures, indicators and data:

DIMENSION	MEASURE	INDICATOR	DATA
We Are Secure	Living in poverty	Percentage of children under 18 living in a household with income lower than 60 per cent of the median (LIM)	20.0%

Why Kids Need Their Own Index

With many different well-being frameworks and indexes available at different scales, from local to international, why do the kids of Canada need their own national index?

Kids Need Different Things

Children and youth have important needs and entitlements that are distinct from what adults need. Childhood is a period of development in which breastfeeding, immunization, schooling, language development and playing are among children's distinct needs and rights. Because of their developmental stage, children are also more vulnerable than adults to deprivations such as food insecurity and exposures such as air pollution. Children are also more vulnerable to violence and exploitation because of their developmental stage and their legal status. At the same time, children and youth have many of the same rights as adults, such as the right to participate in decisions affecting them, but they struggle to have their rights recognized and respected.

Kids Think Different Things are Important to Their Well-being

Adults tend to place a great deal of emphasis on certain aspects of child and youth well-being, such as health and educational achievement. While these are also important to young people, they also report that a sustainable ecosystem is part of well-being and that their relationships with their pets are very important, among other things that adults rarely consider. Kids may be taking fewer health risks and graduating from high school at higher rates than previous generations, but they are also feeling unprecedented pressure and anxiety about succeeding and belonging that impairs their well-being. Taking a comprehensive and balanced view of well-being, from the perspective of kids, is critical to understanding their lives.

“I feel a lot of pressure from those around me to act ‘perfectly’ and get good grades and scores on tests. I don’t want to let anyone down, but sometimes, I don’t always want to be the kid who is a ‘model student.’ I want to act like a kid.”

YOUTH CONTRIBUTOR

Kids Experience Life Differently

Kids experience life differently than adults do. In some indicators of well-being, such as poverty and exposure to air pollution, children are disproportionately affected compared to adults. In life satisfaction, a standard indicator of overall happiness and well-being, children and youth in Canada report lower levels than do adults. In fact, many global indexes of well-being rank Canada near the top for adult-focused or general population indicators, but much lower for child-focused indicators. As well, adults may over- or under-estimate how young people experience bullying, mental health and other aspects of their lives – even in the lives of children close to them. In some surveys, parents or teachers are asked about children's experiences, but they are proxies for children's views. However, in most of the surveys used for the Index, children are asked about their own views and experiences: about 60 per cent of the indicators are based on young people's self-reported perspectives and experiences. This respects their right to be heard and to participate in decisions affecting them.

Blended Worlds: Online and Offline

Children and youth live in blended worlds; there is not much of an online/offline dichotomy. Learning music or math often takes place through integrated online and offline experiences. Both friendships and bullying can start and follow young people online and offline, often involving the same people they see in person and on screen. The indicators in the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being are status indicators that can be more or less influenced by young people's engagement with digital technology and content, and by many other factors.



For all of these reasons, the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being includes some different measures of child and youth well-being than instruments designed for an adult or general population; compares how kids experience life differently than adults, where data permits; and includes indicators in which kids rate their own experiences and perceptions.



CANADA

We used U-Report Canada to ask young people for their perspectives on various topics related to the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being. Keep your eye out for this icon to see what young people in Canada are thinking. U-Report is a polling platform developed by UNICEF Canada and our partners for youth ages 13-24. We gather youth voice and perspective to understand how different groups are being affected by decisions, policies, services and events, and to involve youth across Canada in decisions that affect them. Visit <https://www.unicef.ca/one-youth/u-report/> for more information.



A need statement by a youth participant in the 'Belonging' Change Summit in Montreal, Quebec in May 2019, hosted by UNICEF Canada and the Dawson Boys and Girls Club.

Where Does Canada Stand?

What Stands Out

How are Canada's 8 million children and youth doing? It is a complicated question. Which children? Indigenous or immigrant children? Children in which province? Children and youth are diverse and have diverse lives.

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being uses national rates and averages of population-level, statistical data to provide a high-level, bird's eye view of the state of children and youth. National averages reveal important patterns and trends, and can benchmark 'normal' life as a child in Canada. If the average level of life satisfaction among kids is low, it is not just because of challenges among a small group of children (the population numbers are typically too small to sway the average value); rather, it is a telling picture of the state of many Canadian children and youth.

But there is no such thing as an average child. National averages mask differences among children that can be inequitable. We complement national averages with disaggregated data about the lives of smaller groups of children where the data are available and focus our discussion where differences are the greatest.

Measuring and understanding child and youth well-being are ongoing, multi-faceted efforts. This is our take. For each dimension of well-being, we focus on some of Canada's greatest challenges and opportunities to fulfill the human rights of every young person. The 'snapshots' that follow overview some of the findings that stand out. We hope you will go further: ask new questions, find new answers and take new actions to make Canada truly – measurably – the best place to grow up.

Snapshot 1: How do Canadian children feel about their lives?

Asking young people how they feel about their lives is a relatively new effort in data collection. The majority of the indicators in the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being involve young people's self-reports about their lives. If there is one thing that really stands out, it is the discouraging number of children and youth who say they are very satisfied with their lives – an overall take on their sense of well-being. According to the most recent data from the World Health Organization's Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) survey, only 55.0 per cent of children and youth in Canada rated their lives high on a life satisfaction scale. Only half of girls, 49.9 per cent, reported a high level of satisfaction with their lives, compared to about 60.3 per cent of boys.

Why are so many children unhappy? There are signals of gendered differences and inequalities within other indicators in the Index. Girls are more likely to report poor body image, lack of confidence and exclusion from decision-making, while boys are less likely to achieve in school. There are strong signals that the stress of striving to achieve academically and socially in an increasingly competitive society may be falling more heavily on girls. They are far more likely to report extreme time pressure (26.3 per cent of girls compared to 8.3 per cent of boys), lack of life balance and being tired at the start of the school day.

Snapshot 2: Children and youth are sensitive indicators of their environments

The mental health of young people is a bigger focus of public discussion than in any previous generation. About one in three young people (34.2 per cent) reports weekly symptoms – including headaches and stomach aches – linked to mental distress. Recent findings from the Ontario Child Health Study suggest that overall, the number of children and youth experiencing mental illness has not increased, but the types of mental health problems they experience have shifted. Among children ages 12 to 16, the prevalence of anxiety and depression has significantly increased.

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being includes a range of indicators that signal how children and youth are experiencing mental health, from the frequency of feeling physically ill, to experiencing mental illness, to self-harm. Measures of mental well-being in the Index have an evident gender gap. Girls are more likely to report mood and/or anxiety disorders than boys (12.2 per cent compared to 8.9 per cent),

and they more often report signs of psychological distress (43.4 per cent compared to 24.3 per cent).

Putting the mental health of children and youth in perspective requires recognizing that children's health status is a sensitive indication of social conditions. Well established in health research is that medical/clinical care accounts for only about 25 per cent of an individual's health status, while 50 per cent or more can be attributed to social and economic factors.^v Children's health is not merely the result of personal, lifestyle choices (e.g., eating fruit), skills and behaviours to manage stress (e.g., meditation and physical activity), or even the accessibility and quality of health care. The question, requiring more investigation, is whether the relatively high rate of psychological symptoms and the increase in anxiety and depression disorders among young people are warning signs that wider income and social inequalities are threatening their well-being.

Snapshot 3: Connected or disconnected?

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being includes decidedly mixed signals about young people's sense of belonging with or connection to family, friends and society. The quality of relationships young people have is changing in a rapidly changing society experiencing rising inequality, urbanization, immigration and technological disruption. Unlike many American studies finding distressing ruptures in young people's connection and trust in their communities, a high percentage of Canadian children and youth, 84.6 per cent, report a strong sense of belonging to their local communities. Young people in smaller communities and rural areas are more likely to feel the strongest sense of belonging (close to 90 per cent), but even youth in more urbanized areas report positive community connection.

Community connection is somewhat contradicted by how connected many children and youth feel in their relationships with family, friends, other groups and the institutional setting of school. Close to two thirds (65.9 per cent) say they feel well supported by their friends; 57.3 per cent say they feel well supported by their families; and 42.9 per cent report a high level of support from their teachers. One in four children (24.5 per cent) reports feeling lonely – almost one in three girls (29.7 per cent). It is encouraging that the vast majority of children and youth (96.2 per cent) report that they have someone to talk to when they face a problem.



More than one third of young people (35.2 per cent) report experiences of discrimination and unfair treatment, which occur in their homes, at school and in the community. The pattern of such experiences is substantially uneven across the country. For example, 72.8 per cent of children and youth in Saskatchewan report incidents of discrimination or unfair treatment, and young people in Alberta (44.5 per cent) and Manitoba (40.9 per cent) report relatively higher rates of discrimination. In addition, there are signs of problems with young people's trust in some institutions; 43.6 per cent of adolescents say the police force does a good job at being approachable, treating people fairly and providing information. Local studies in Canada have linked this lack of trust to racial discrimination. In the United States of America, a dramatic drop in public trust has been linked to growing inequality, a signal picked up in the most recent World Gallup Poll.

Snapshot 4: The poverty of well-being

In 2019, the Government of Canada announced a strategy to reduce poverty in Canada by 50 per cent by 2030, a target of the SDGs. Recent changes to the Canada Child Benefit have contributed to a modest reduction in child poverty, from 22.2 per cent^{vi} to 20.0 per cent.⁶ In fact, the rate of child poverty dipped slightly below the average population rate for the first time in many years. However, many children and youth continue to go to school or bed hungry and some live in precarious and substandard housing. For the first time, the Government of Canada has defined an official 'poverty line,' but the impact of inequality doesn't stop at the 'poverty line.'

Growing up in a more unequal society, with a wider gap between the top and bottom incomes than in previous generations, is more difficult for kids at the bottom of the family income gradient. Beyond not having their basic needs met, they face a wider gap to fair opportunity and participation in society. Starting with a gap in early child development, children experience gaps in academic achievement, health and happiness. While equitable public education can level some

differences, income inequality makes it much more difficult. Income inequality affects almost every aspect of child well-being, not only for the lowest income group but also for the children in the middle. On the thirtieth anniversary of Canada's pledge to ensure human rights for every child and to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000, we have clearly let our children down.⁷ Canada's commitment to deliver the global SDGs is a fresh opportunity to ensure the well-being of children and youth rises along with Canada's steadily increasing wealth. The costs of failing to deliver for every child are too high.

Why income inequality matters to children and youth

Income inequality may not be the most obvious explanation for many of the patterns revealed in the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being, but it is one of the most powerful. What matters is not only the difference in income between those below and above the poverty line, but also the difference in income between the top and bottom. Canada's level of income inequality has increased sharply over the past 15 years. In 2009, researchers Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson's book, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, explored the relationship between income inequality and a host of health and social problems.^{vii} The deeper the level of income inequality in a country, the more likely the population is to experience lower reading ability, public trust and social mobility, and higher rates of mental health problems, substance abuse, obesity, teen pregnancy, violence and imprisonment. Not surprisingly, the researchers found a strong relationship between overall income inequality within a country and child well-being outcomes.

A decade later, in 2019, the same researchers investigated how income inequality affects emotional well-being, including challenges to relationships with friends and family and higher rates of stress and social anxiety.^{viii} It became clearer that income inequality within and between countries is a better predictor of how people feel about their lives than income levels. American studies that have been tracking trends in the

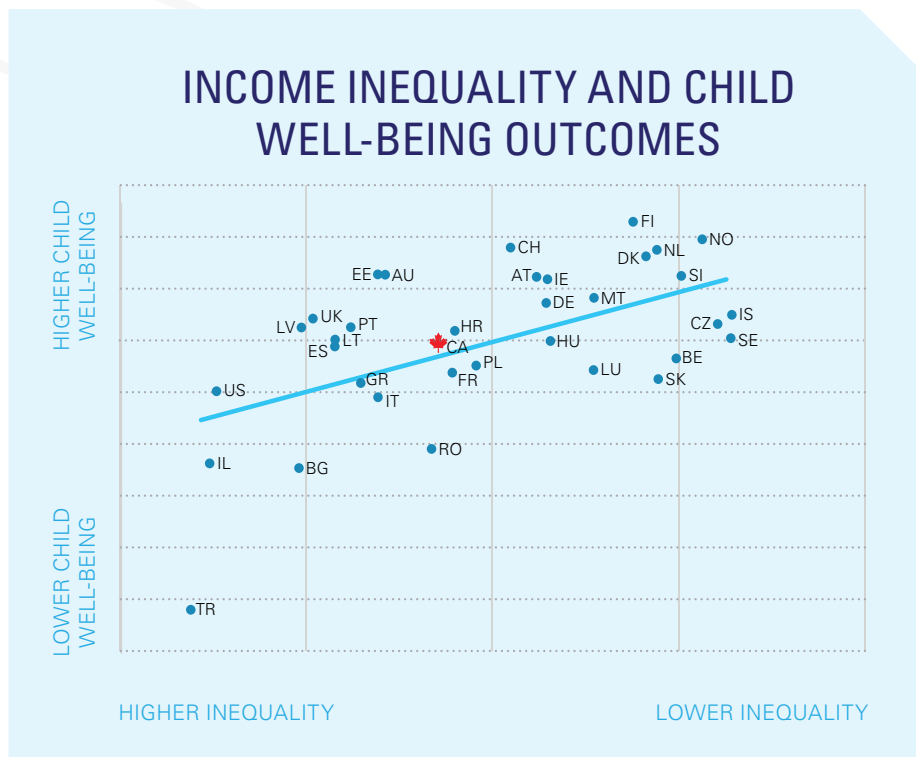
⁶ The data are derived from what is known as the Low Income Measure (LIM), the recognized international standard for cross-country comparability. LIM shows the proportion of each country's children living in a household where disposable income is less than 60 per cent of the national median (after taking taxes and benefits into account and adjusting family size and composition). In Canada, the new, official headline measure of poverty at the federal level tells us the percentage of children in a household below the Market Basket Measure of income. Poverty using this method is measured as approximately 9 per cent; this is a low-water mark that focuses on how many children live in families who can't afford to meet basic needs, though these needs are not defined for children and youth. The Market Basket Measure was created by Statistics Canada as a measure of low income based on the cost of a specific basket of goods and services for a modest, basic standard of living. Included in the basket are qualities and quantities of food, clothing, footwear, transportation, shelter and other expenses for a reference family and adjusted for family size and local geographic area.

⁷ In 1989, the Government of Canada signed on to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the House of Commons unanimously voted to end child poverty by the year 2000.

psychosocial well-being of children using survey data from the 1930s to the present day, like Pickett and Wilkinson, have found a correlation between rising income inequality and escalating narcissism, a decline in public trust, and more loneliness and other forms of disconnection.^{ix,x} In another study, Elgar and Currie (2016) identify a relationship between income inequality and adolescent subjective well-being: young people in countries with higher income inequality are more likely to report lower satisfaction with life.^{xi} UNICEF Report Cards have been tracking the relationship between income inequality and child well-being since 2015, finding that income inequality appears to sustain or increase gaps between children in many aspects of life and limits the overall well-being of children.

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being profiles a generation shaped by a sharp increase in income inequality. Income inequality appears to undermine a collective

commitment to well-being, foster a social climate of competition and limit the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. Research has long made the connection between excluding low-income children from fair opportunity and lower academic aspirations, substance abuse and other forms of self-harm. More recently, research is documenting the effects on children and youth across the socio-economic gradient, and the Index shows strong signs of this. The growth of 'concerted cultivation' describes how adults are pushing children to intense participation in education, sport, cultural and social activities to improve their competitive opportunities. A body of research points to the contribution of such competitive pressures to a rise in mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. We believe that investing a fair share of Canada's rising national wealth in children and youth to reduce inequality is one of the greatest opportunities of our time.





Are we happy and respected?

Well-being for children and youth is a state of mind, at a critical stage of life. Young people's sense of well-being – how they tell us they are – is ultimately how we know how Canada measures up. To feel happy and respected is the confluence of many indicators of different dimensions of well-being. Young people express their overall sense of well-being in different ways. Life satisfaction is a strong proxy indicator of overall well-being. Young people who participated in developing the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being said that when they feel valued and respected, achieve balance across different dimensions of well-being, have goals and a sense of purpose, and are coping with stress and managing the demands of life – you can trust that they are doing well. All of the indicators in the Index influence the overall assessments kids make about their lives to answer the question, 'Are we happy and respected?'

Children's life satisfaction is an indicator of their overall well-being.

Measure	National Estimate	Indicator
Feeling balanced physically, emotionally, spiritually & mentally	No data	MODEL INDICATOR: Percentage of 9–17 year-olds who report their life feels balanced most of the time
Feeling free to set my own goals	No data	MODEL INDICATOR: Percentage of 9–17 year-olds who report they're free to set their own goals
Feeling sad or hopeless for a long time	27.4	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report feeling sad or hopeless
Feeling satisfied with life	55.0	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report high life satisfaction
Feeling self-confident	65.9	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report having confidence in themselves
Feeling stressed	12.5	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who report finding most days stressful
Feeling valued and respected	88.2	Percentage of 10–19 year-olds who report feeling their parents think they are good at things
Having a sense of purpose in life	80.4	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report that it's important to experience joy in life and that their life has meaning and purpose
Managing the demands of life	Limited data	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who report being able to handle the day-to-day demands in life

● SDG
● Proxy

17%



of U-Reporters said that their opinions are taken seriously by adults 'always or a lot,' while 42% said their opinions are 'rarely or never' taken seriously.

Snapshot

Only half (55.0 per cent) of Canadian children and youth say they are happy. Close to one in four (27.4 per cent) has felt sad or hopeless for a long period in the past year. Children's life satisfaction is an overall indicator of their well-being from their perspectives. It is heavily influenced by how secure they are – free from poverty and included in their society – and by the quality of their close relationships. These are, in turn, affected by rising income inequality, which may explain the free fall in young people's life satisfaction in recent years. The level of happiness (life satisfaction) among Canada's kids is a sensitive indicator of social, economic and possibly environmental changes: **happily, it is something we can change.**



As surely as January 1 follows December, the new year arrives with media stories reporting what parents of New Year's babies hope for their newborn children. Almost invariably, their first priority is 'happiness.' The second is typically 'success.' When Canadian parents were asked in a recent survey what they wanted most for their children in life, they largely agreed – happiness (HSBC, 2015). Internationally, only French parents rated happiness as more important (86 per cent) than Canadian parents (78 per cent).^{xii} Their hopes are consistent with the central question that young people want the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being to answer: 'Are we happy and respected?'

How do we measure happiness, and how does happiness relate to other aspects of child and youth well-being? Over the last several decades, substantial research has been done on happiness. Researchers define 'hedonic' or subjective well-being as the cognitive evaluations that children and youth make about life, commonly measured as life satisfaction and satisfaction with dimensions of life such as material security. Another component of hedonic well-being is the affective or emotional state of children – their moods and feelings such as sadness or stress. The third aspect of 'happiness' is 'eudaimonic,' often referred to as psychological well-being. It focuses on children's psychological needs, such as self-confidence, control and purpose in life.^{xiii}

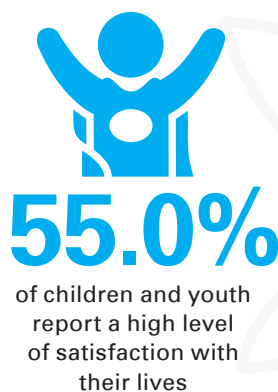
Children's happiness is an indicator of their overall well-being

Across Canada, public or political outrage has erupted over children's falling math scores. In contrast, relative silence greets the results of reports documenting how unhappy children are.^{xvi} No one asks why so many kids are so unhappy.

In the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being, only 55.0 per cent of children report a high level of satisfaction with life. One in four (27.4 per cent) report feeling sad or hopeless for two weeks or more, to the point where their normal activities were affected. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being shows a gender gap in how young people feel about their lives, with 35.0 per cent of girls feeling sad or hopeless compared to 19.5 per cent of boys, as well as reporting lower life satisfaction than boys (49.9 per cent compared

to 60.3 per cent). The findings are consistent with emerging studies in the United States observing growing rates of low psychological well-being, such as sadness, suicidal ideation and self-harm, particularly among girls and young women.^{xv;xvii} Unfortunately, data are not available in Canada to investigate long-term trends.

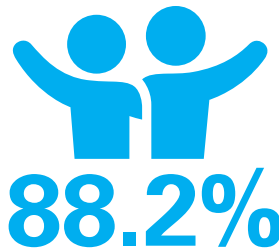
How happy can we expect kids to be? A 2013 UNICEF Report Card is the most recent reference, showing that Canada ranked twenty-fourth among 27 wealthy countries based on children's self-reported life satisfaction.^{xviii} Of greater concern, the rate had fallen fast and hard over the previous decade, and it was also much lower among children and youth than among adults in Canada.^{xix} If children's happiness is a priority among parents, why is there so little reaction to such disappointing results? Missing from the public debate is recognition that low life satisfaction among young people signals wide-ranging problems, including school dropout, substance abuse, difficult relationships and aggression.^{xx;xxi;xxii}



Happiness is an indicator of the conditions in which children grow up

Why are children unhappy? The societal dynamics driving this trend are not clear, even from more substantial American research. Explanations range from the over-use of smart phones and social media to increasing income inequality. Some research suggests that a state of feeling 'happy' is primarily the outcome of genetics and personality, which can influence how a child views and responds to life's circumstances and opportunities. In the world of social psychology, many factors may explain the differences in children's happiness. Prominent among these is children's sense of mastery that, it is argued, enables positive psychological well-being. Composed of characteristics including self-confidence, self-efficacy, purpose in life and optimism for the future, a sense of mastery suggests that the individual feels an internal locus of control – they believe they can control their life circumstances and outcomes. Conversely, an external locus of control is associated with being less optimistic, attributing life circumstances more to chance, luck or fate.^{xxiii} The empirical evidence suggests that internal control and a strong sense of mastery are conducive to happiness.

But what influences the development of mastery and an internal locus of control? A growing evidence base suggests that self-reported well-being – happiness – is also influenced by the social context of life, at least to a certain level of income. Material security, including a decent home and opportunities to participate in society, freedom from bullying and the freedom to play and move independently in the community have been linked to subjective well-being. But after a certain level of personal and national wealth, many kids are pretty unhappy. Rather than poor life satisfaction leading to weak academic performance and other problems, is competition for high academic performance affecting life satisfaction and psychological well-being? Considering the emerging evidence, the multiple data points in the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being, and listening to kids across the country, we conclude that rising income inequality and the way society is adapting to it, focusing on a competitive drive for excellence



88.2%
of children and youth
report feeling their
parents think they are
good at things

and academic achievement, is contributing to lower life satisfaction.

If many parents in Canada hope their children have happy lives, what do kids hope for? Most young people (80.4 per cent) say it's important to experience joy and that their life has meaning and purpose. Most children and youth in Canada report feeling their parents think they are good at things (88.2 per cent), which can lead to greater feelings of value among those youth. There is no substantial gender gap (88.6 per cent among boys and 87.7 per cent among girls) or even a regional gap. But only 65.9 per cent feel confidence in themselves, and boys are far more likely to feel confidence in themselves (76.8 per cent) than females (55.6 per cent). The implication, although far from conclusive, suggests the pressure to achieve and succeed might be felt most by girls responding to parental and social expectations.

When Canadian parents were asked in a recent survey what they wanted most for their children in life, they largely agreed – **happiness.**

Measuring Happiness

Life satisfaction is not exactly the same thing as happiness, but is one of the measures used by some researchers to describe happiness, and happiness is a term often used as a general descriptor of life satisfaction (see <https://ourworldindata.org/happiness-and-life-satisfaction>).





Do we belong?

Belonging for children and youth means feeling loved and supported and having mutually caring and respectful relationships. Feeling supported by and connected to family, friends, teachers, people in the community and, for some, their pets contribute to a sense of belonging and to many aspects of well-being, including health, learning and protection. Supportive connections with others – even just a few – can reduce loneliness, which can occur even when young people are participating in groups and social activities. Fostering healthy family relationships from birth, reducing the separation of children from their families and cultures, and restoring relationships that are damaged by trauma, stress, poverty and other factors are all critical to belonging. Belonging also means building relationships with young people who are disengaged, disenfranchised and furthest from protective and supportive environments, including eliminating youth homelessness, providing rights-enhancing environments for children in care and making every effort to provide positive pathways for youth in contact with justice systems.

43% of U-Reporters said they feel most comfortable with their friends; **41%** with family. Only **3%** feel comfortable enough to be themselves at school.



Snapshot

Many young people find supportive relationships. But just over half (57.3 per cent) report having a high level of family support. One in three (34.1 per cent) reports they don't have a high level of support from friends, one in three (31.5 per cent) is not involved in social groups and activities, and about one in four says they often feel lonely (24.5 per cent) and left out (23.8 per cent). School is not a place of support for more than half of children and youth (57.1 per cent), though they are much more likely to feel connected to their local communities. Some children and youth are involved in institutions including the child welfare, immigration and justice systems. Without sufficient data for public monitoring and accountability at a national level, tracking how well these institutions fulfill their duties to protect and help restore children's family relationships is difficult. The digital revolution is often blamed for eroding young people's relationships and fostering loneliness and disconnection. However, the impact on relationships is mixed and does not explain the trends that began well before the digital era. Rising income inequality and erosion in indicators of belonging appear to be strongly linked, though the lack of longitudinal data in Canada limits the ability to explain the 'belonging slide' evident in some other countries and in the cross-sectional, internationally comparable data.

Feeling supported by and connected to family, friends, teachers and people in the community contributes to a sense of belonging.

Measure	National Estimate	Indicator
Being charged with an offence	1.3	Ratio of youth not charged to youth charged, based on rates for 12–17 year-olds per 100,000 population
Being involved in groups and group activities	68.5	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds involved in groups or group activities
Being separated from my family	No data	MODEL INDICATOR: Percentage of children separated from their families in migration and waiting for reunification
Caring for a pet	52.2	Average daily amount of time spent on pet care in minutes, by households with children under 15 years
Feeling left out	23.8	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who feel left out of things
Feeling like I belong to my local community	84.6	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds with a strong sense of belonging to local community
Feeling lonely	24.5	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report feeling lonely
Feeling supported by my community	Limited data	Average score on the Social Provisions Scale for Attachment, Guidance, Reliable alliance and Reassurance of worth for 12–17 year-olds
Feeling supported by my family	57.3	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds in the high family support group, based on the Family Support Scale
Feeling supported by my friends	65.9	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds in the high friend support group, based on the Friend Support Scale
Feeling supported by my siblings	No data	MODEL INDICATOR: Percentage of children and youth under 18 with siblings who report that they have a positive relationship with their siblings
Feeling supported by my teachers	42.9	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds in the high teacher support group, based on the Teacher Support Scale
Having emotional challenges in the early years	12.7	Percentage of kindergarten students who are vulnerable on the 'Emotional maturity' domain of the Early Development Instrument (EDI)
Keeping family relationships	Limited data	Percentage of children in care who are reunified with families

● SDG
● Proxy



In 2017, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health released the annual report, *Connected Communities, Healthier Together*.^{xxiv} The report laid out just some of the evidence demonstrating that a sense of belonging is so critical to personal well-being that it can actually be measured in life expectancy. Research has suggested that lacking social connections has a negative impact on health equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and that social isolation can be as deadly as obesity and diabetes. So strong is the evidence connecting belonging, health and well-being that the National Health Service in England has introduced a program called 'social prescribing,' in which health care professionals write paid referrals for isolated, lonely individuals to connect with different forms of social support in their communities. A sense of belonging is critical for children and youth, just as for all human beings.

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being focuses on 'belonging' as a dimension of well-being, based on the relationships that children have with their families, peers, schools and other social institutions. However, belonging encompasses many dimensions of the Index, including material security, opportunities to participate in one's culture and protection from violence. At the Change Summits that UNICEF Canada co-hosted in 2019 with Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCA Canada, which brought young people together in five communities from coast to coast, participants generated hundreds of 'needs statements' in relation to belonging.

Moving through the circles – relationships with family, friends and school

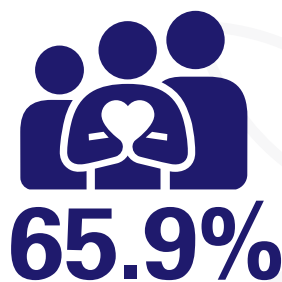
Calling it the 'circles of life,' Asher Ben-Arieh describes the layers of relationships that construct a social infrastructure around a child and mediate a child's sense of belonging: family, friends, schoolmates and teachers.^{xxv, xxvi} The family is the most critical 'circle' of relationships shaping how children experience a sense of belonging and, with it, their sense of well-being. As children grow up, peers become increasingly important, but early family relationships are the most influential.

Belonging at home

Social psychologist Jean Twenge, who has tracked the feelings and behaviours of American teenagers in surveys from the 1930s to the present, finds a paradox in the current generation of children. Despite spending more time with

their parents than any other generation, a gap in the quality of relationships between children and their family members is widening.^{xxvii} In the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being, just 57.3 per cent of young people report they have a high level of support within their family. They are more likely to report difficult relationships with their mothers and fathers than children in most other high-income countries: 79.3 per cent said it is easy to talk to their mothers compared to 91.7 per cent in the Netherlands and only 62.6 per cent said it is easy to talk to their fathers, compared to their Dutch counterparts at 81.4 per cent.^{xiv}

A surprising lack of data exists to describe children's relationships with siblings; these relationships can be complicated, and the nature of relationships varies with age, but how positive sibling relationships are in a child's life and whether a child has opportunities to forge or sustain relationships with their siblings are key aspects of these relationships.



of children and youth report a high level of support from their friends.

For some children, government decisions mediate their relationships with their families. When children are separated from families by government policies, administrative procedures and systems, it should generally be a measure of last resort and only in the best interests of children. It is not possible to report from a national perspective how many children are

separated from their parents or other family members on the basis of child protection or immigration status or how many are restored to their families. Provincial and territorial governments do not maintain sufficiently comparable data in relation to child welfare, and the federal government does not provide comprehensive data for separated children in the migration context. Indigenous children and some racialized children clearly face discrimination in child welfare systems that often fail to prioritize prevention and then sometimes fail to protect children separated from their families and communities. However, it is encouraging that young people who are charged with offences are increasingly provided with restorative justice opportunities, including support to reintegrate into their communities.

Belonging with friends

Almost two thirds of young people (65.9 per cent) report having a high level of support from their friends. The fact that the survey data are for youth ages 11 to 15 years old may

help explain why young people report more support from friends than family, as this is a time when peer relationships can become more important to them than family. But there is also a gender divide: girls report a substantially lower level of support within their families than do boys (54.5 per cent compared to 60.2 per cent). With friends, the gender difference is reversed: only 58.5 per cent of boys say they are supported by their friends compared to 72.9 per cent of girls. This may reflect prevailing differences in social norms influencing how males and females establish and utilize relationships.⁸

Despite a relatively high overall level of support from friends, one in four young people feels lonely (24.5 per cent) and excluded (23.8 per cent). One in three young people (31.5 per cent) reports no social involvement through groups and group activities. Participating in organized activities is generally regarded as an important way for young people to build social connections and relationships, but a lot depends on the nature of the activity. Boys are more likely to report group involvement compared to girls (the difference is likely explained by higher rates of participation in organized sports), but this does not translate into greater social support from friends. Despite higher friend support, more girls report feeling lonely than do boys (29.7 per cent compared to 18.9 per cent), and a gender gap is also evident in feeling left out, with more girls (28.9 per cent) than boys (18.2 per cent) reporting it.

Spending time in front of a computer screen or on social media receives a lot of blame for weakening the number and quality of relationships children have. However, the association between digital activity and loneliness is complex and unclear. Teens who spend more time on social media also tend to spend more time with their friends in person; highly social teens are more social in both venues.

Belonging at school

Well under half of students, male and female, report a high level of support from teachers (42.9 per cent). International research consistently finds that when children feel they

belong to and are supported by the school community, they are far more likely to be engaged and committed in their education and less likely to be at risk of violence, substance abuse and dropping out.

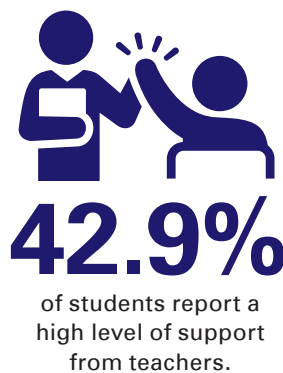
Belonging in the community

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being includes a measure of children's sense of belonging to their community. The available data focuses on children's local, place-based community, rather than other communities that become increasingly important and accessible as children grow up and might be characterized by people or interests they identify with, online or in physical space.

Overall, most adolescents (ages 12 to 17 year olds) in Canada express a strong sense of belonging with their local communities, with a national average of 84.6 per cent. Yet, there are some striking differences. In large, urban areas where populations are often geographically and socially mobile, children can have challenges making or sustaining connections. In smaller, more stable population areas, some children may not be able to connect with others with whom they identify. Disconnections and connections can occur based on ethnicity, language, socio-economic status, ability and along many other dimensions. However, most young people in Canada are finding people and spaces in their communities where they can forge a sense of belonging.

Stable, mutually supportive relationships are important aspects of belonging, but they are conditioned by other systemic factors such as economic security and racial discrimination. These factors contribute to or alleviate stress and violence that affect relationships and a sense of belonging. They shape how the child sees themselves and the extent to which they fit into a community and into Canadian society. Governments, institutions and communities have a responsibility to generate opportunities and the social climate for children to reciprocally engage.

Young people often talk about another relationship when



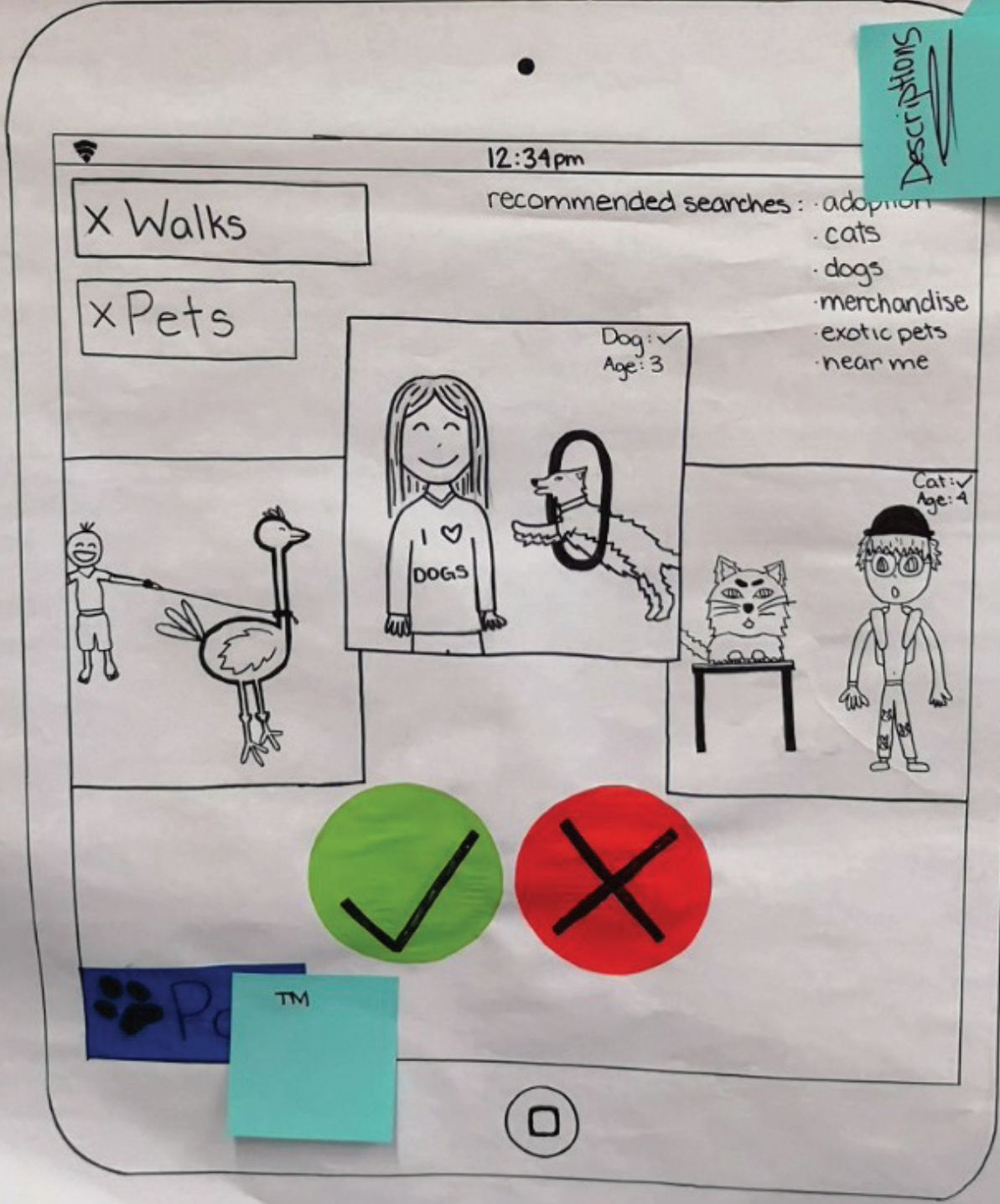
⁸ Some caution should be noted for this age cohort in that a variety of studies from the United States, Finland, Australia and other jurisdictions suggest that this time period is particularly vulnerable for children, as it involves transitions from primary school to middle and secondary school. As such, responses might reflect a transitional phase, although this would not explain the considerable variation with the Netherlands where children also experience school transitions.

asked what supports their sense of belonging and well-being: pets. About half of Canada's children report spending time caring for a pet. Our anecdotal data suggests that many young people have a relationship with a pet that is important

as a reliable source of mutual affection, companionship and acceptance. The importance of a pet may be greater when relationships with family, friends and others are weaker.

Change Summits: A Year of Belonging

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being is a tool not only to measure problems, but to activate solutions. That is why we partnered with the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada and YMCA Canada to host Change Summits. In 2019, Change Summits focused on the Index dimension 'We Belong,' because belonging can be tough. Change Summits have taken place in Moncton, Whitehorse, Montreal, Ottawa and Calgary to bring young people and their communities together to deepen understanding of what belonging means and create innovative solutions. One such solution is 'Paw Pals,' an app prototyped by Tamika, Caleb, Kaylee and Raven in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory. It aims to connect young people who are lonely and feeling isolated based on a mutual interest in caring for animals. The app features live chat, service offerings (e.g., to walk or care for each other's pets), opportunities to trade and share pet products, and information about meeting animal breeders.



Descriptions

TM



Are we secure?

Material security – having enough family income and resources to support good child development and provide opportunities to participate normally in society – is fundamental to the well-being of children and youth. Children are secure when their parents have access to decent employment, and when they live in safe and affordable housing, have enough nutritious food, and can meet their basic needs, as well as the things that enable them to feel included in society and among their peers, such as having access to the Internet. For some children, this includes affordable public transportation and sports equipment. For others, it is music lessons, textbooks or hygiene products. Families and their children should have access to universal, high-quality public services – including health, education, school nutrition, recreation, child care, income support, transportation and housing support when needed – but sufficient family incomes are also essential to a sense of security and belonging in society. Material security supports health, protection, learning, freedom to play and the opportunity to dream.

Snapshot

Children’s material security can be viewed from two distinct, yet overlapping, perspectives. One perspective is that every child is entitled to have their basic needs met. The other perspective is that children should have similar opportunities to participate ‘normally’ or fully in society. Both are necessary for the well-being of children and the future of Canada. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being reports that about one in ten young people (9.0 per cent) lives in families without enough income to meet even their basic needs. About one in five (20.0 per cent) is relatively poor, which can limit opportunity compared to their peers. But as many as one in four (23.3 per cent) at least sometimes goes to school or to bed hungry because there isn’t enough food at home. Half of young people (56.1 per cent) report feeling their family is well off, suggesting that although they perceive a social distance even when they live above the poverty line, many feel their needs are met. There are hopeful signs that the overall rate of children and youth living in poverty is declining, but Canada still lags behind many comparable, high-income countries and would have to cut the rate of poverty in half to achieve the benchmark set by the best-performing countries. The evidence about the policies that can lift children out of poverty and achieve material security is clear. The poverty gap is really a gap in action to fulfill a decades-old pledge. What is not spent on children today to lift every child out of poverty will be spent in the future, on poor health and life expectancy gaps, remedial education, violence, income assistance and substance abuse.

U-Reporters said transportation is the most difficult basic need to access in Canada’s official measure of poverty. They also said this measure, which should include what every young person should have, is missing basic needs including sanitary products and access to mental health services.



The poverty gap is really a gap in action to fulfill a decades-old pledge to **eliminate child poverty**.

Measure	National Estimate	Indicator
Being excluded from opportunities	Limited data	● Percentage of 12– 17 year-olds who are not satisfied with their financial situation
Feeling like my family has as much money as others	56.1	● Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report feeling their family is well off
● Getting child benefits	90.3	● Percentage of economic families with children receiving a child benefit
● Getting support for disabilities	No data	● MODEL INDICATOR: Percentage of families with children under 18 with disabilities receiving disability benefits
● Going hungry	23.3	● Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report going to school or to bed hungry because there is not enough food at home
Going without things I need at home	No data	● MODEL INDICATOR: Percentage of 9–17 year-olds who report being deprived of 3 or more items in a Deprivation Item Scale
Having parents with insecure work	28.2	● Percentage of adults with children under 18, with some form of nonstandard employment
● Having safe and secure housing	12.6	● Percentage of children under 18 who have a core housing need
● Homeless	3.0	● Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who have ever been homeless and/or have ever experienced hidden homelessness
● Living in poverty	20.0	● Percentage of children under 18 living in a household with income lower than 60% of the median (LIM)
● Living in severe poverty	3.5	● Percentage of children under 18 living in deep income poverty (below 75% of Canada's Official Poverty Line)
● My basic needs are not affordable	9.0	● Percentage of children under 18 living in low income based on the Market Basket Measure
● Not getting enough healthy food	Limited data	● Percentage of children under 18 living in households affected by some level of food insecurity

● SDG
● Proxy

Can money buy happiness? A large body of evidence shows a robust correlation between children's life satisfaction and the security of their 'material conditions.' Bradshaw (2015), after careful empirical investigation, concludes "...children would be happier if they lived in decent houses, in safe neighbourhoods... and are not materially deprived."^{xxviii} But above a certain level of individual or national wealth, people are not necessarily happier. For example, the kids of Canada are unhappier than children in some countries with less wealth, such as Estonia and Portugal.^{xxix} But in countries with lower rates of poverty and inequality, children tend to be happier.

The greater the economic distance of a young person's household from the norm in society, the more likely they will have insufficient food, live in an impoverished home in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, experience more violence and go without opportunities. In other words, the deeper the economic poverty, the greater the distance to well-being, big dreams and future accomplishments. A large bank of studies provides strong evidence that poorer children tend to have worse cognitive, social-behavioural and health outcomes. Living longer in poverty appears to have a stronger negative impact on child well-being than short-term exposures to low income. Research also suggests the timing of low-income experience is important, with the strongest negative effects evident in the early, preschool years.^{xxx; xxxi; xxxii} So, while money might not buy happiness, the empirical evidence suggests it can be a significant down payment.

On November 24, 1989, the House of Commons passed a unanimous, all-party resolution to "seek to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000." On the thirtieth anniversary of this pledge, the question is simple: has Canada eliminated child poverty? Despite the many complexities and methodological debates about the measurement of poverty over the past three decades, the answer is also simple – no. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being helps answer a bigger question:

do children and youth have the resources and opportunities they need, not only to meet their basic needs but also to grow up great?

Meeting children's basic needs

Canada's new, official headline measure of poverty tells us the percentage of children in a household below the Market Basket Measure (MBM) of income.⁹ This is a low-water mark that focuses on how many children live in families who can't afford to meet basic needs, though these needs are not fully defined for children. Nine per cent of children and youth live in families without adequate income to meet basic needs. This is reflected in the fact that 12.6 per cent have a 'core housing need'; in other words, they lack safe and secure housing.



Another way of exploring the depths of material insecurity, in terms of family income, is by measuring severe or deep poverty. The national average of children and youth living in deep poverty is 3.5 per cent. The rate is relatively consistent across the country at the provincial and territorial level, although the rates rise above 4 per cent in the Atlantic provinces, and Indigenous children are far more likely than other children to live in deep poverty. To put deep poverty into international perspective, UNICEF

data and analysis suggests that Canada sits in the upper-middle of the pack among high-income countries, doing much worse on deep poverty than countries like Norway, France and Germany, but significantly outperforming the United States.^{xiv} The implication is that while policies in Canada fail to provide sufficient protection for children from experiencing poverty, they establish a 'floor' that prevents many young people from falling too deep into poverty. Lower rates of income inequality and severe child poverty may help explain why Canada outperforms the United States in rates of educational achievement, levels of violence and social mobility.

Providing children with opportunities

Shouldn't one of the wealthiest countries in the world aim higher than simply meeting children's basic needs? How much opportunity children and youth have to develop and participate

⁹ The Market Basket Measure was created by Statistics Canada as a measure of low income based on the cost of a specific basket of goods and services representing a modest, basic standard of living. Included in the basket are qualities and quantities of food, clothing, footwear, transportation, shelter and other expenses for a reference family and adjusted for family size and local geographic area. However, MBM was developed as an alternative measure of low income rather than a specific multi-dimensional poverty measure and provides no specific data on what a family lacks and experiences.

in society is a major influence on all aspects of their lives. The gold-standard measure of children's material security in rich countries, the Low Income Measure (LIM), captures what can be called the 'width' of poverty: the percentage of children who live in households with incomes less than 60 per cent of the median. It measures poverty of opportunity as well as of basic needs.

With a national average of 20.0 per cent of children living in low income relative to the rest of society, it is easy to conclude that the material security and the well-being of one in five children is precarious. While 20.0 per cent is an improvement over 22.2 per cent in 2014, it not only falls well short of the 1989 pledge to eliminate child poverty, it also compares unfavourably with the best-performing countries like Denmark (9.2 per cent in 2014) and Norway (10.2 per cent in 2014).^{xiv} It is no coincidence that these countries achieve better outcomes for children in many aspects of life, because the economic and social distance between children affects many aspects of their lives. This distance is even farther for First Nations children living in reserve communities, more than half of whom live in poverty.^{xxxiii}

The experiences of children in poverty

Poverty is typically measured with a focus on income, a critical and reliable way of examining standards of living and whether people have sufficient resources to participate in their society. But what low income measures don't explain is how children and youth are experiencing poverty and material insecurity. What are children going without and from what opportunities are they excluded? Deprivation tends to be more strongly associated with young people's sense of well-being than household income. Canada lags behind other countries in the measurement of multi-dimensional poverty. Unlike many European countries, Canada has unreliable information on the ability to purchase leisure experiences, school trips, cell phones and other things that young people say are important for a normal life.^{xxxiv} A measure of multi-dimensional poverty should incorporate children's own perspectives about their needs.

Food security is a key indicator of the experience of poverty.^{xxxv} Although the most recent survey data do not provide a national average, the Canadian Index of Child and Youth

Well-being reports that as many as one in four children (23.3 per cent) goes to school or to bed hungry (sometimes, often or always) because there is not enough food at home. While it is unacceptable that so many families can't afford food, going to bed hungry is also a red flag of stressful family circumstances.

Close to half of young people (56.1) say their families are well off. This suggests that a substantial number of young people above the poverty line do not feel well off when assessing their comparative socio-economic status. However, it also suggests that the majority of young people in the middle range of family incomes feel that their needs and opportunities are sufficiently provided for. This would be consistent with research that finds that adults in households tend to prioritize children's needs

over their own. Children's perceived social inclusion or exclusion tends to have more influence on their sense of well-being than household income poverty. Whatever their material living conditions, if young people judge themselves to be in a good material situation, they tend to have a greater sense of well-being.^{xxxvi}

Policies that raise children out of poverty and limit income inequality, including sufficient family income benefits; access to high-quality, early child education and care; and equitable public education create the foundations for child and youth well-

being and are powerful equalizers. Increasing the incomes of low-income families with children is as effective as increasing remedial program spending on early childhood education.

^{xxxvii} More than 90 per cent of families with children in Canada receive a child-focused income benefit, but increasing the benefit for lower-income families could reduce child poverty rates and improve many aspects of children's lives. Equitable funding of all public services on First Nations reserves, including education, health care, child welfare and basics such as water and sanitation is urgent; incremental steps do not respect the rights and dignity of children and their families.



children and youth (23.3%) at least sometimes go to school or to bed hungry because there is not enough food at home





Are we participating?

Children and youth have the right to have their voices heard and respected. As they develop, they should have every opportunity to participate in decisions affecting them, including decisions about the society they will lead and the environment that sustains them. Participating includes being actively engaged, according to their capacity, in family affairs, in community organizations, at school, in social movements and in civic and political life. Regular opportunities to participate in ways appropriate to each child should be provided and valued. Creating real opportunities for children and youth to participate helps develop their capacity to express themselves and their identity, exercise their rights responsibly, and develop a sense of agency and belonging. It also makes decisions more effective. To participate, young people need access to information; avenues to express themselves and be heard; fewer barriers to being fully included in society, to access services and to manage their affairs; and freedom to express their identity and culture and to choose their relationships.

Measure	National Estimate	Indicator
Able to register a business	60.6	Percentage of children under 18 who can register a business
Contributing income tax on the money I make	2.2	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who pay income tax
Free to be online	No data	MODEL INDICATOR: Percentage of 9–17 year-olds scoring high on the Free to Participate Online Index
Free to choose relationships	88.8	Percentage of 12–19 year-olds who feel they have a choice about which activities to do with their friends
Free to express ideas and opinions	81.5	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who feel confident to think/express their own ideas and opinions in past month
Free to express my identity and culture	77.9	Percentage of 12–19 year-olds who report feeling free to express themselves to family and friends
Having citizenship	94.0	Percentage of children under 18 with Canadian citizenship
Having control over my life	85.9	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who report feeling good at managing their daily responsibilities
Having opportunities to engage in reconciliation	No data	MODEL INDICATOR: Percentage of children in elementary schools that provide at least one Indigenous learning opportunity
Indigenous children speaking an Indigenous language	32.3	Percentage of Indigenous 15–17 year-olds who speak an Aboriginal language
Managing my money	87	Percentage of 15 year-olds reaching the baseline level of proficiency (Level 2) in financial literacy
Not getting information I need	Limited data	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who needed health information or advice and reported experiencing difficulties getting health information or advice
Participating in decision-making	74.2	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who feel their family listens to them when they speak
Voting in elections	0.0	Percentage of children under 18 who voted in last federal election

● SDG
● Proxy

76%



of U-Reporters said they don't know how to have their views included in politicians' election platforms.

Snapshot

The lack of data about young people's participation makes it challenging to answer the question, 'Are we participating?' The kids of Canada are permitted some forms of participation in their personal, family, civil and political lives, in laws and in institutions. About three quarters of young people (77.9 per cent) feel free to express themselves to their families and friends, but just as many don't know how to be heard by politicians. Policies lack coherence in determining how, when and where children and youth should be able to participate in society. Many young people work and some remit taxes – close to \$30 million in a year – yet none have the right to vote on the public policies that affect their lives. Participation has many benefits for children aligned with their evolving capacities, and limits should be questioned in relation to their assumptions and impacts. Fostering participation can help children from less materially secure backgrounds to build confidence, pathways and opportunities; however, there are signs of widening gaps between the materially advantaged and disadvantaged in terms of participation rates and types of participation.



Canada's young people are taking to the streets in protests across Canada. On Parliament Hill, children and youth have called for equitable services for Indigenous children. In Ontario, secondary school students walked out of class to protest changes to the education system, including larger class sizes and changes to sexual education curriculum. In Quebec, students took to the streets in support of a hijab-wearing teacher in the wake of the provincial government's secularism law. Meanwhile, students in Alberta walked out against proposed government changes to the student minimum wage and school policy affecting 2SLGBTQ+ students. Clearly, many young people desire an inclusive, participatory dialogue on laws, policies and other decisions affecting them. They may have few megaphones and limited avenues to participate in decisions that shape their lives, but they are well-informed and have opinions. Isn't it time to let them into the decision-making?

Participation in families

Close to three quarters of children and youth (74.2 per cent) feel that their families listen to them when they speak, and a similar number (77.9 per cent) feel free to express themselves to family and friends. On the other hand, one in four young people lacks these important opportunities for support and inclusion. Most young people (ages 12 to 19) in Canada report some freedom to make choices and decisions: 88.8 per cent say they are able to choose the activities they participate in with their friends. This is relatively consistent across all regions and for both males and females. Most young people, 85.9 per cent, feel good about managing their daily responsibilities.

Participation in society

Despite Canada's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a parliamentary study concluded that children are the 'silenced citizens.' They have civil and political rights, but many barriers to realizing them – in law, policy and practice. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being looks at diverse indicators to ask, 'How do children participate in society?' Many other indicators could tell the story, but data are limited.

Close to 70 per cent of children and youth are involved in groups and group activities, but relatively few have opportunities for political engagement, including advocacy. Research suggests that there can be significant income-based

differences, with higher-income young people more likely to participate than lower-income young people. Participation by socio-economic status is further distinguished by the types of activities; lower-income young people are more likely to be restricted to participation in sports, while higher-income young people engage in a wider spectrum of activities, including sports, clubs and student political bodies. The gap is growing as lower-income youth have become increasingly 'disengaged and disconnected,' while levels of participation in a variety of activities by higher-income young people have been intensifying since the 1990s.^{xxxviii} Growing inequality in participation is consistent with growing income inequality and a more competitive society, as higher-income families view participation as a necessary investment for post-secondary opportunity and career path-building, which may shift the reason for participation from the intrinsic qualities to the instrumental benefits.

The right to participate in society includes, in tandem, a right to information. In consultations, young people often express the desire for information about health (the student protests in relation to Ontario curriculum reform are not surprising in this context). As many as 87 per cent of 15 year olds meet the baseline level of financial literacy, but in consultations young people often report a desire to learn more about managing money.

Along with the limited availability of information that young people need to manage their lives, legal age limits on rights and capacities are a considerable barrier to their participation, and many are arbitrary. At age 15, young people are legally able to work, but only 60.6 per cent of youth under age 18 are legally able to register their own business. Young people under the age of 18 can establish and personally register a business as a recognized legal organization only in British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, PEI and the Yukon.

In the most recent year for which data are available, youth ages 15 to 17 paid close to \$30 million in federal taxes alone (most of the amount remitted from youth employment).¹⁰ A fundamental principle of Western democracy is 'no taxation without representation.' Arguably, the political interests of children and youth might be a higher priority if they could vote in political elections, rather than be limited to protesting.

¹⁰ Canada Revenue Agency, 2017 (custom data request).

Participation, Privacy and Protection Online

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MediaSmart's 'Young Canadians in a Wired World' research project (YCWW) has been exploring how young people use online technology since 1999, and the results are full of excellent examples of how networked communications provide young people with outstanding opportunities to participate – in culture, in learning, in politics. Consider a kindergarten class in Manitoba that emails their artwork to a remote high school so the teens can write stories and then read them to the tots during a weekly story time over videoconferencing. Or a young girl who videotapes her hands while she plays her own arrangements of songs on the piano and posts them on YouTube; kids from all over the world message her and ask for the music so they can play it too.

At the same time, YCWW has tracked young people's frustration with the ways in which they are monitored, swamped with advertising and censored by adults who – sometimes to protect children, sometimes to profit from them – use the open nature of the technology to place kids under surveillance. Consider again teens who are frustrated by well-meaning

parents who demand their social media passwords or school boards that force them to use tablets for math homework when they find it easier to think using pencil and paper, particularly when they know their work is being captured by the company that 'donated' the equipment.

Measuring young people's well-being in networked spaces is complicated precisely because the spaces themselves collapse so many traditional boundaries between home, school, the community and the marketplace. In such an environment, technology can enhance participation, but it can also make children visible in uncomfortable ways that shut down participation. For example, it becomes difficult for young people to participate in an online political discussion when the technology can capture traces of youthful mistakes and take them viral; this is even more worrisome since they know those same mistakes may follow them for the rest of their lives.

It is no surprise, then, that children report a strong desire for online privacy. In fact, privacy is an essential right because privacy ensures that young people have

the autonomy they need to access information, freely associate with others and express themselves. Regulators often focus on education that teaches young people to keep information private by not disclosing it to others, but kids tell us that they're required to disclose information by the platforms they use to chat, play, learn and explore the world. In such a world, non-disclosure isn't an option. Therefore, it is up to adults to ensure that the regulations that govern these platforms give young people the privacy they are entitled to, by barring corporations and others from collecting their information in the first place. Corporations can be prohibited from advertising to children online, especially when advertising is so fraught with unhealthy food and drink ads. And young people can be given a 'right to be forgotten,' so they can purge their online data shadow when they become adults.

Most importantly, adults need to think carefully about how to provide young people with opportunities to participate in a world where communications technologies are fully integrated into schools, playgrounds and homes.

Should young people have the right to vote – perhaps the ultimate indicator of participation in decisions affecting them? Legally, young people age 14 and up can join a political party in Canada. But despite advances in the rights of young people to vote in some countries and some support from politicians in Canada, children and youth under 18 are excluded from voting in Canada.

Opportunities for participation that are aligned with their

evolving capacities can foster young people's development in different areas, including coping skills, resilience, mastery and self-worth. Research points to a host of outcomes that are correlated with meaningful participation by young people, such as improved academic performance, lower drop-out rates and less substance abuse (e.g., smoking). Societies that normalize listening to young people and including them in daily decision-making, such as the Netherlands, have some of the world's happiest kids.^{xiv}





Are we free to play?



Play and leisure are children’s rights because they are critical to development and influence every aspect of well-being. Free time and free space for self-directed play and leisure – for fun! – are necessary for children’s mental and physical health, safety and learning, as well as developing independence, social skills and decision-making. Organized social and cultural activities are also important opportunities for children and youth to explore their interests and identities and to express and define themselves. Opportunities for leisure must be accessible to all, and should include affordable, appealing and welcoming places and programs for all ages. Being free to play also depends on having sufficient time, with young people having a say in how they spend their time to balance their needs and responsibilities.

Measure	National Estimate	Indicator
Balancing my activities and responsibilities	20.6	Average percentage of time spent by 15–17 year-olds on the previous day in leisure activities
Balancing physical activity, sleep and screen time	9.5	Percentage of 5–17 year-olds who meet the moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA), screen time and sleep recommendations within the Canadian 24-Hour Movement Behaviour Guidelines for Children and Youth
Feeling time pressure	16.5	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who report high levels of time pressure
Getting around on my own	76.4	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who report walking or cycling to get places or visit friends
Having barriers to participating in activities	11.9	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who stopped participating in a sport due to a negative experience
Not spending much time with friends	23.4	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who never or hardly ever meet friends before 8 p.m.
Playing actively or independently	20.8	Percentage of 5–11 year-olds whose parents report them engaging in active play or non-organized/unstructured leisure activities for at least 1.5 hours a day
Spending a lot of time at a job	12.4	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds working 16 or more hours per week
Spending a lot of time on family responsibilities	2.5	Average percentage of time spent by 15–17 year-olds on the previous day on family responsibilities
Spending time in outdoor play	80.1	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report spending four or more hours per week participating in outdoor play in free time

● SDG
● Proxy

Snapshot

Adults are very concerned about, and involved in, how children use their time, including their amount of physical activity, screen time and participation in organized activities. All of these are important, but the relationship between freedom to play and well-being is not yet widely recognized. Too few children are playing enough, with only one in five (20.8 per cent) getting at least 1.5 hours a day in active and unstructured activities. One in four young people (23.6 per cent) doesn't walk or bike around their neighbourhood. A small but significant group of school-aged young people get too little quality sleep and have too much work. Adding up their time use, 16.5 per cent of young people ages 15 to 17 people report feeling considerable time pressure. In an era of income inequality and economic insecurity, parents and caregivers appear to respond by increasingly controlling and constructing children's time, and time pressure may be affecting young people's stress levels, sleep and physical activity. Recognizing that children need time and space for independent play, according to their evolving capacities, for mental and physical health, learning and many important developmental benefits, this is the time to stop and reflect on how regulating children's time, across many institutions and systems, might be undermining their well-being. Freedom to play is a good overall measure of the state of children and youth, evident in a study of European countries that found a link between more freedom to play and higher levels of overall child well-being. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being offers a balanced view of children's lives that will track how children's time use changes in a changing world.

U-Reporters said the biggest reason young people don't join activities that get them moving is that they don't have enough time due to school, work and family responsibilities. The second-biggest reason is lack of confidence.



Adults seem to be obsessed with children's time use. Many parents drive their kids to school and schedule them in tutoring and organized activities – and they spend a lot of time with their kids, despite the fact that more parents work outside the home and many have longer commuting times than their parents did. Parents are not the only source of intense interest in how children and youth spend their time. A legion of researchers is empirically exploring how children spend time on screens, getting physical activity, in organized sports and activities, and in nature. Policies also regulate or fail to regulate how children spend time – at school, at work and in public spaces. Why are we so interested in how and where children spend their time?

Children have the right to play. The right to play might be considered a proxy for the right to a childhood. It is also a good proxy for the overall well-being of children and youth. Play is important, not only because fun is important, but also because play contributes to physical, cognitive and social development. An often-undervalued aspect of this right is 'leisure,' loosely defined as young people's free, self-directed and, as they mature, unsupervised play. Valuing play for its instrumental benefits can lead to problematic adult involvement and intrusion in play. Valuing leisure also has powerful developmental benefits for children and youth. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being measures the extent to which young people have time and space for play and leisure, balance their time uses and experience barriers to free play.

Do kids play anymore?

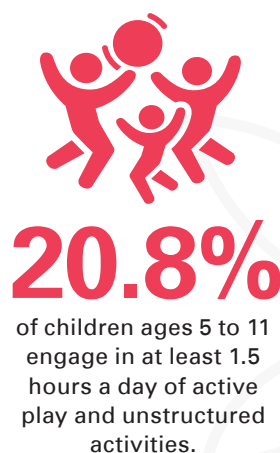
Do the kids of Canada have the freedom to play? Using the 'Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Youth' published by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology, there is good reason to suspect that too few children have enough freedom to play. Only 20.8 per cent of children (ages 5 to 11) engage in at least 1.5 hours a day of active play and unstructured activities, with a small but notable difference between boys (22.2 per cent) and girls (19.3 per cent). However, some caution is required in

interpreting the data, in that they do not tell us whether the freedom to play is constrained by external factors or whether many children are, for whatever reasons, restricting their own free play time. An older group of youth, ages 15 to 17, report spending 20.6 per cent of their time in leisure activities. Fewer than one in ten young people (9.5 per cent) meets the Guidelines' recommendations for balancing time spent in physical activity, on screens and sleeping.¹¹ Typically, young people get more screen time but less sleep and physical activity than recommended. Concerned adults often focus on limiting screen time to maximize physical activity and sleep. However, the relationships among children's time uses are somewhat complicated, because young people who report

more screen time are also often getting more physical activity and are more engaged socially. Research suggests that young people are sleeping less than previous generations and less than they should for physical and mental health, learning and other aspects of well-being. Older youth may be taking time away from sleep for leisure to relieve stress. Many possible reasons for this should be explored, including school start times that are too early, too much screen time, lack of physical activity and stress.

By late adolescence, many young people are facing a host of competing demands on their time, including homework, a part-time job and family responsibilities. A relatively small group of young people appear to have demands on their time that may be risky to their health and development. Among 15 to 17 year olds, 16.5 per cent report feeling high time pressure. A smaller group of young people, 12.4 per cent, work 16 or more hours a week. Working the equivalent of two business days during formal school years could be associated with financial insecurity, lack of attachment to school and other challenges.

There is a substantial gender gap in how children 15 to 17 years old experience time pressure, with 26.3 per cent of girls indicating high levels of time pressure compared to 8.3 per cent of boys.¹² Consistent with other studies, girls



¹¹ The data should be interpreted with caution as the ranges of the coefficient of variation are between 16.6 per cent and 33.3 per cent.

¹² Caution should be used in interpreting the male response. However, the presence of a substantial gender gap identified in the national data is consistent with other studies in Canada and the United States, so there is good reason to believe the presence of such a gap.

¹³ While the national data suggests a female-male variation in family responsibilities, the gap is narrow and the data must also be interpreted with a high level of caution.

report carrying a larger load of family responsibilities.¹³ They also tend to be more focused on academic achievement, suggesting that the competitive intensity of academic performance is associated with negative impacts on other aspects of well-being. Boys are more likely to find time for leisure (23.6 per cent of time spent in leisure activities) than girls (17.0 per cent). On the other hand, boys are more likely to report working 16 hours or more per week (13.3 per cent) compared to girls (11.4 per cent). Distribution of leisure time also varies between regions across Canada. Generally, the West has a pattern of lower rates of leisure time, with moderate percentages in central Canada and high percentages in the Atlantic provinces.

In addition to sufficient time for free play, the freedom to be independently mobile is an important developmental issue for young people. A large majority of children (80.1 per cent, ages 11 to 15) report participating in outdoor play in free time for at least four hours a week, although some have suggested the benchmark for their parent's generation would likely be at least double that amount of time, at eight hours or more. The fact that only 76.4 per cent of young people ages 12 to 17 report that they walk or bike to get around, and 23.4 per cent ages 11 to 15 say they never or hardly ever meet their friends in person after school (before 8 p.m.), raises questions about how free young people are to go places.

What gets in the way of free play?

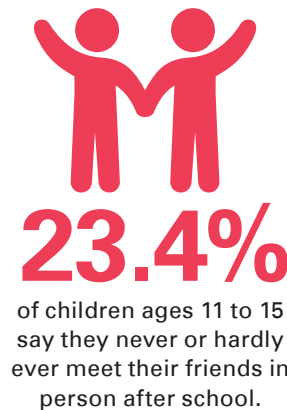
The role of parents in regulating children's free play is a key consideration. A variety of qualitative studies and anecdotal reports suggest some parents inhibit free play and mobility by driving their children to and from school and other activities when they could reasonably walk or bike; highly schedule their time into learning and other developmental activities; and otherwise place restrictions on time and mobility. When this restricts free play and contributes to time pressure, it may have negative impacts on children and youth.

Why are some parents today more inclined to circumscribe children's free play? Unlike many other indicators of child and youth well-being, the children at greatest disadvantage may be those higher up the family income gradient. Fear of injury and harm seem to be heightened among many parents, and related to that is a fear generated by rising financial

insecurity that their children will be disadvantaged if they are not protected and 'cultivated' with opportunity enrichment. Some researchers are asking how adult-constructed parameters, with the best intentions, might contribute to the loss of a child's relative independence and freedom, with a potential risk to their developing autonomy and resilience. Others are exploring how adult control of children's time might contribute to growing rates of adolescent anxiety and depression due to high expectations and time pressures.

Public policies can also mediate children's free play. Local policies determine the availability, accessibility and quality of public spaces, facilities, play programs and transportation.

All levels of government influence how safe neighbourhoods are for children. Government policies also determine school locations, hours and curriculum demands, youth employment conditions and support for family caregivers. Three quarters of 11 to 15 year olds (74.2 per cent) indicate that good places to spend free time (e.g., parks, recreation facilities) are located in their geographic neighbourhood, and a similar percentage (76.4 per cent) of 12 to 17 year olds are able to walk or cycle to such places and visit friends. The perceived quality of these places may partly explain why only a certain proportion of young people are independently mobile. The distribution of quality, accessible places facilitates free play; for instance, rural areas may have long distances with no reasonable independent transportation option, and urban areas may have higher rates of violence restricting where a child is free to go.



The freedom to play is a good indicator of the overall well-being of children and youth.





Are we protected?



Children and youth need to be safe and protected in their homes, at school, at work and in their communities, online and offline. They should not be exposed to bullying, discrimination, exploitation, serious crime or disproportionate risk of harm – physically, socially, emotionally or psychologically. Having information, safe environments, healthy relationships and people they trust and can rely upon, as well as opportunities to develop their own skills to manage risks, are important ways to protect young people. When harm occurs, young people need access to rehabilitative services and to appropriate advocacy and justice systems.

1/3

of U-Reporters said they don't feel safe being themselves in public or at school. Most feel the safest at home.



Snapshot

'Are we protected?' is a fundamental question in relation to childhood. UNICEF Report Cards and other studies show that compared to many rich countries, children and youth in Canada experience more bullying (27.0 per cent) and fighting (28.3 per cent) and are more likely to be victims of homicide. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being reports that one in four young people (24.6 per cent) has experienced violence at home. Although most young people report feeling satisfied with their personal safety from crime (92.6 per cent) and few experience violent crime (11.3 per cent), one in three (35.2 per cent) experiences discrimination. Experiences of violence vary with gender: girls are more likely to be victims of sexual violence and cyberbullying, and boys are more likely to experience physical abuse and fighting and to be victims of homicide. Some groups of children carry a much larger burden of violence, including Indigenous children, children with diverse gender identities and children of racialized ethnic minorities. Young people in low-income communities have a greater risk of severe injury. Young people have somewhat low trust in the authorities they should rely on to protect them, yet they are remarkably resilient and find their own ways to cope within a society that places them at unacceptable risk. Overall, rates of injury and violence have been declining over time, though the nature of risk is changing. It's time to end violence against children and make Canada a safer place for every child.

Most young people have strategies to protect themselves from crime. Canada needs a **strategy to protect young people** from many forms of violence.

Measure	National Estimate	Indicator
Abuse at home	24.6	Percentage of 15–24 year-olds who report having experienced abuse before the age of 15
Abuse in an intimate relationship	8.6	Percentage of 15–24 year-olds who have experienced abuse in an intimate partner relationship in the past 5 years
Bullying	27.0	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report experiencing bullying at least two to three times in the past couple of months
Discrimination	35.2	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who report experiencing discrimination or being treated unfairly by others in Canada in the past 5 years because of various traits/characteristics
Feeling safe in my neighbourhood	92.6	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who report being satisfied with their personal safety from crime
Fighting	28.3	Percentage of 11–15 year olds who have been in one or more physical fights in the past 12 months
Getting injured at work	9.4	Number of lost time claims for 15–19 year-old workers per 1,000 population
Having control over my reputation and privacy	No data	MODEL INDICATOR: Percentage of children and youth under age 18 who report having control over their reputation and privacy
Having someone to talk to	96.2	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report finding it easy to talk to someone about things that bother them
Having strategies to deal with risky situations	91.7	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who use various strategies to protect themselves or their property from crime
Homicide	0.7	Number of deaths of 0–19 year-olds by intentional assault, per 100,000 population
Physical punishment	No data	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who report being slapped on the hand or spanked before age 15
Satisfied with access to justice	43.6	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who think the local police force does a good job of being approachable, providing information and treating people fairly
Serious injury	No data	Percentage of 0–19 year-olds with a serious injury, based on the Serious Injury Indicator
Violent crime	88.7	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who have not been victims of violent crime (robbery, physical assault and/or sexual abuse)

● SDG
● Proxy

The focus of attention on childhood safety and protection is often based on fear of predatory strangers or street crime, extreme but relatively rare forms of violence against children from a national perspective. Some of the most common forms of violence, affecting about one in four children and youth, include bullying (27.0 per cent), fighting (28.3 per cent) and domestic violence (24.6 per cent). These often occur among the familiar people and in the familiar places where young people should be the safest. Countries that have higher levels of one kind of violence are more likely to have higher levels of other forms of violence, and they tend to be more prevalent in countries with wider income inequality. Children who experience one form of violence are more likely to experience multiple forms of violence.

Protection and risk across the circles: families, friends and communities

The vast majority of adolescents, 88.7 per cent, report that they have not been the victims of violent crimes in their communities (including robbery, physical assault or sexual abuse). Even in regions of Canada with the highest rates of children reporting such crimes, the rate is around 80 per cent. Most (92.6 per cent) report being satisfied with their safety from crime. The differences at the provincial level are fairly small, from 90.4 per cent in Alberta to 97.4 per cent in Newfoundland. Boys are more likely to report feeling safe than are girls (95.0 per cent compared to 90.1 per cent).

Rather than exposure to community crime and violence, young people are more likely to report experiences of discrimination or being treated unfairly based on race, sexual orientation and other factors. More than one in three adolescents (35.2 per cent) says they have experienced discrimination; adolescents in all provinces are far more likely to experience discrimination than exposure to violent crime or feeling unsafe. For example, in Saskatchewan, only 6.3 per cent of teenagers feel unsafe in their neighbourhoods, compared to 72.8 per cent who report an experience of discrimination.

The greatest risk of violence for children is, paradoxically, within the greatest source of protection – family and other familiar relationships.^{xii} About one in four young people (24.6 per cent) reports having experienced physical and/or sexual abuse or

witnessed violence at home before the age of 15. Canada lacks data to report on the rate of children experiencing physical punishment, a target for action in the SDGs. Levels of family-based violence may help explain why young people report difficulties communicating with their families, and 42.7 per cent do not feel a high level of family support.

Outside the family, children and youth report higher levels of fighting (28.3 per cent) and bullying (27.0 per cent) than peers in many other rich countries.^{xiv} About one in five young people (ages 15 to 20) reports being cyberbullied and/or cyberstalked.^{xiii} Internationally, Canada has one of the highest rates of bullying – a factor that might help explain students' relatively poor relationships with classmates and teachers (in an international survey, 58.2 per cent of Canadian students reported positive school climates¹⁴ compared to 80.4 per cent in the Netherlands).^{xiv} Bullying has a significant effect on the subjective well-being of children. Bradshaw (2015) suggests bullying might explain as much difference in life satisfaction or 'happiness' as all other individual and family characteristics combined.^{xxxii} The effects of bullying extend beyond subjective well-being to lower school performance, absenteeism, poor health, depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. Bullying affects not only the child being bullied; the rate of bullying within a school is significantly associated with the subjective well-being of other students.^{xiii}



Injury and the safety culture: who is left out?

Arguably, reducing injury and creating a 'safety culture' has been a larger focus of task forces and public health-oriented safety initiatives than a comprehensive approach to reducing violence has been. From seat belts and car seats to swimming lessons, some physical safety measures have helped reduce the serious injury rate among children and youth, demonstrating that with resolve and evidence-based solutions, Canada can protect its children. However, the leading cause of death among Canadian children is accidental injury.

Behind the national averages, a concerning inequity exists. A recent study by the Hospital for Sick Children suggests that children in poorer areas of Ontario face a greater risk of getting hit by vehicles than those in wealthier areas.^{xiv}

¹⁴ Using a different school climate scale, the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being reports that 46.9 per cent of 11 to 15 year olds rate their school highly.

While the rate of emergency department visits related to pedestrian–motor vehicle collisions decreased by 22 per cent in high-income neighbourhoods between 2008 and 2015, visits in low-income neighbourhoods increased by 14 per cent. Overall, children in the highest-income areas had a 48 per cent lower rate of emergency department visits due to serious injury than children in the lowest-income areas.

Young people are still getting hurt at work. They are at greater risk of injury than adults because of inexperience, lack of training, insufficient protection and exploitative practices.

An indicator of teen workplace injury is the rate of youth workers reporting lost time claims, 9.4 per 1,000 population, though this likely represents only a fraction of actual workplace injury.^{xlv} Rates of lost time claims vary substantially across provinces. How much of the variation can be explained by inadequate labour legislation and regulation and employer training and safety procedures is unknown. A study of adolescent workers in Canada between 1991 and 2012 found that the food and beverage industry accounted for the majority of visits to hospital emergency departments (e.g., burns), while hospital admissions due to serious workplace injuries such as crushed hands and amputations were largely from the trades or manufacturing (e.g., construction/repair, machinist, metal working, electrical and general labourers).^{xlv}

Resilient children or a resilient country?

Only 43.6 per cent of 15 to 17 year olds think their local police force does a good job of being approachable, providing information and treating people fairly. In Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan, only one in three young people thinks so.¹⁵ If

young people don't turn to the civil protection system, how do they cope with violence? There is ample evidence that many young people do not report bullying and other experiences of violence to authorities, including parents and teachers, for a variety of reasons. On the other hand, 91.7 per cent say they use various strategies to protect themselves from crime, and 96.2 per cent say they have someone to talk to about things that bother them. Adolescent girls more often report coping strategies to deal with risky situations than boys (95.0 per cent compared to 88.6 per cent).

Protecting children must not rely on addressing individual risk and protective factors, leaving it up to children to keep themselves safe. Children are at risk of violence because of wider societal norms and conditions, including laws and institutional policies and cultures. Many recent studies have drawn a robust correlation between the national level of income inequality and rates of violence against children in many forms, including bullying.^{vii, xivi} Income inequality is a signal of a more hierarchical, competitive society expressed both in individual relationships and in a weaker collective will to create public policies that spread fairness and help reduce violence.



Children and youth in poorer areas of Ontario face a greater risk of getting hit by vehicles than those in wealthier areas.

Protecting children must not rely on addressing individual risk and protective factors, leaving it up to children to keep themselves safe.

¹⁵ The perception of racism and institutional discrimination is certainly felt by many marginalized communities. A recent Toronto survey found that just 41 per cent of Black and just over 50 per cent of Indigenous people agreed that police officers are honest (compared to 72 per cent of white respondents).





Are we learning?

Children and youth have the right to learn in many different supportive and respectful environments. Learning begins from birth, in families, in communities and in cultures. It happens inside and outside schools. It is shaped by healthy and secure family relationships and material conditions, and opportunities for high-quality child care and preschool. When children start school, achieving proficiency in a diverse range of competencies is possible when education is provided equitably and safely and respects the individual passions and abilities in every child. Reading literacy is a gateway for school achievement and learning for life. Equally important are environments that foster opportunities for children to set their own goals and pursue them. Children need opportunities to wander and wonder and to recover from mistakes and challenges.

100%

of U-Reporters agreed or strongly agreed that all children, including Indigenous children, should have safe and comfortable schools, realizing Shannen's Dream.^{xivii}



Snapshot

Every child has the right to an education. In the preschool years, children in Canada have fewer opportunities for high-quality, early child care and learning than their peers in other rich countries, with considerable variability across Canada. More than one in four children (27.0 per cent) starts school with significant developmental vulnerabilities that hamper their readiness to learn. Canada's public education systems help many children achieve, and most children graduate high school. But there are education gaps between boys and girls and for some groups of children. The education journey is difficult for many young people. Less than half (46.9 per cent) say they have more positive perceptions of their school environment, and one in four young people (26.8 per cent) reports their workload is too much to handle. They are schooling, but are they learning for life? Beyond competence in reading, science and math, children also want to learn life skills – for example, how to manage their health and finances and information about their human rights. Many educators, policy-makers and other experts agree that student success in both school and life consists of much more than a hyper-competitive focus on grades, literacy and numeracy. Education that helps develop children's social and emotional skills, as well as their individual abilities and passions, enables children not only to learn the 'basics' but to develop a sense of control over their lives, become more resilient in the face of adversity and aim higher in their aspirations. Schools can't do this alone; they need to be backed by policies that help families and young people feel secure and optimistic amid changing economic and social conditions.

The education journey is difficult for many young people. Less than half have very positive perceptions of their school environment, and one in four young people reports their workload is too much to handle.

Measure	National Estimate	Indicator
Achieving in high school	80.8	Percentage of 15 year-olds achieving baseline competency in reading, mathematics and science
Being suspended from school	No data	MODEL INDICATOR: Percentage of children and youth under age 18 who have been suspended out of school at least once in the past school year for any reason
Disengaged from learning and employment	6.3	Percentage of 15–19 year-olds not in employment, education or training (NEET)
Feeling positive about school	46.9	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who rate their school high on the School Climate Scale
Graduating from high school	93.9	Percentage of 20–24 year-olds in the labour force with at least a high school diploma or some postsecondary education
Having opportunities to explore my potential, passions and interests	No data	MODEL INDICATOR: Percentage of 9–17 year-olds who report that they have opportunities to choose and develop their own passions and interests
Having talk time with adults	20.3	Parents' average daily time in interactions with their children under 18 years of age
Having too much homework to manage	26.8	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report they have more school work than they can handle
Knowing my human rights	No data	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who report having knowledge about children's rights in Canada
Not ready for school with the skills I need	27.0	Percentage of kindergarten students vulnerable on one or more domains of the Early Development Instrument (EDI)
Participating in cultural activities and events	31.9	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report involvement in arts groups
Participating in preschool	97	Percentage of children participating in organized learning one year before official age to enter primary school
Participating in quality early learning and child care	No data	Ratio of qualified to unqualified staff in preschool groups in licensed child care centres
Reading well in primary school	96	Percentage of students in Grade 4 achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in reading
Thriving in the middle years	Limited data	Percentage of children in the middle years thriving in physical health and social and emotional development

● SDG
● Proxy

Education could be described as ‘ground zero’ in debates about the well-being of children and youth. Is education a utilitarian commodity – a process focused on achievement to prepare children to compete for future careers? Is it the great equalizer – to support equitable achievement and help reduce socio-economic gaps? Should education foster the diverse abilities and passions of students and a climate that supports their well-being, leading to capable and well-rounded citizens? What else and how else should children learn, and for what ends? The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being brings together diverse indicators of how children experience schooling, the formal system for education and learning, as well as other opportunities to learn and develop their abilities and passions. The Index focuses on how well and how equitably the journey through school-based education supports learning achievement through to graduation, since there is a deficit of data to measure the other ways children learn. It also points to warning signs of the toll that pressure to succeed appears to be having on young people.

The performance culture

Despite hand-wringing across Canada about student achievement and school performance, Canada is one of the highest-ranking countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), both in terms of overall levels of achievement and the equalizing effect of Canada’s public schools. Close to 81 per cent of students reach the PISA baseline levels of proficiency in reading, math and science scores, a relatively high rate compared to other rich countries. Although there are differences, PISA achievement is relatively consistent across all ten provincial education systems included in the survey.

Canada does a better job than most rich countries in equalizing academic achievement while sustaining a high overall level of achievement.^{xlviii} The gender gap in compulsory school is not increasing; it is fairly small but persistent. Boys are not falling behind in school – they were never ahead – and girls are not falling behind in math and science. Research tells us that girls have, for at least a century of public education, achieved better grades than boys in language studies, math and science.^{xlix} Closing achievement gaps, particularly for Indigenous children and some racialized children, is the greatest opportunity Canada has to improve the education

of children and youth, but it is more challenging in an era of higher income inequality.

If more children had a better developmental start in the early years, Canada’s progress might improve. As other countries have been expanding children’s access to high-quality early learning and child care, Canada has lagged behind.^l The SDGs include a vision that all children benefit from quality preschool education (Target 4.2). All levels of government have, in recent years, advanced access to early learning and child care. Canada’s enrolment rate in preschool the year before primary education (kindergarten for most children) at 97 per cent is almost universal, but leaves out more children than most of its peer countries. Kindergarten is available across Canada but attendance is only mandatory in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Four jurisdictions offer a half-day program; however, evidence suggests that a half-day program doesn’t deliver a sufficient ‘dose’ of education to create the benefits for child development that full-day participation can.



26.8%

of students report having more school work than they feel they can handle.

There is much less support for the care and development of children from infancy to kindergarten than for school-aged children in Canada, despite the fact that most children in Canada need child care and benefit from early child development programs. In Canada, 54 per cent of children ages 2 to 4 years old attend centre-based early childhood education and care, but this figure hides substantial variation between the provinces and territories. The enrolment rate ranges from just 34 per cent in Newfoundland to 73 per cent in Quebec.^{li} The gaps in preschool participation in Canada are mainly due to the lack of a universal approach, with access limited by the availability and affordability of spaces. No national data reports the quality of early care and education that young children receive.

In this context, it is concerning but perhaps not surprising that 27.0 per cent of children entering primary school are vulnerable in one or more aspects of cognitive, social, physical and emotional development, so at the very start of primary school, large differences in children’s development and readiness to learn already exist.^{lii} This is measured by the Early Development Instrument (EDI) in Canada, which shows wide variation in physical, social, emotional, language

and communication skills and behaviours among children at kindergarten. That children tend to be the most vulnerable in social and emotional development suggests a great deal of family stress in the early years and too little support for child care and development, affecting children across the socio-economic gradient. Early child education also helps counteract the unequal starting conditions of children from different families, and the benefits can last through their school journey. Canada's school system is faced, at the outset, with remediation that could be avoided by investing in high-quality, accessible child care and education in the early years.

As Canada's public education systems work to close learning gaps, the vast majority of young people (93.9 per cent) graduate high school, and only 6.3 per cent of adolescents of formal school age aren't engaged in some type of education, training or employment (NEET). This compares favourably to other countries, but the young people who drop out of school are a focus of concern.ⁱⁱⁱ PISA surveys show that overall, Canada has a lower rate of student participation in school at age 15 compared to many other rich countries, suggesting more young people are excluded for various reasons that may include school drop-out. Young people's attachment to education could also be measured with the rate of suspension from school, but there are no national data to monitor it.

“Lots of homework without time to do it is stressful, which affects my well-being.”

YOUTH WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT

Going to school: flourishing or just surviving?

In conversations with young people across Canada, many lament that school does not energize their interests and enable their passions, but we have no statistical data to support this observation. Young people often report a desire to learn about their human rights, and they are very keen to learn about Indigenous cultures and reconciliation, but there are no data to report their access to education on these topics. Young people also give high importance to learning about sexual health and financial literacy, and they believe that schools are the preferred source of trustworthy information. Recognizing that young people should also have

opportunities to pursue their interests and develop their abilities outside of school, 31.9 per cent report involvement in arts groups, but we lack data to provide a more complete picture of these opportunities.

How do young people rate their education? Only 46.9 per cent of students ages 11 to 15 (47.8 per cent of boys and 45.9 per cent of girls) feel more positive about their school environment, despite relatively high levels of achievement. Studies suggest that for some children, disinterest is one of the factors linked to lower levels of positive feelings.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ The School Climate Scale captures other aspects of schooling, such as belonging, which can be affected by bullying and other factors. The fact that 26.8 per cent of students report having more school work than they feel they can handle is another signal that learning – or indeed schooling – requires more indicators than academic achievement to understand how children experience it.

Perhaps the biggest threat to the educational and overall well-being of children is income inequality and intensifying levels of academic competition and expectations, which have different gender effects. Young people frequently report high levels of stress and anxiety related to perceived pressure to succeed, particularly among girls. In contrast, boys have historically been more likely to underachieve, be suspended and drop out, and Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). While income inequality is associated with greater competition for social and economic advancement, it is also associated with more hopelessness and disconnection from education among young people in the lowest-income families.^{vii} However, it is critical to remember that girls can also disengage and disconnect, while many boys will experience stress, anxiety and mental health challenges. Social and economic policies that limit income inequality and create a more equitable start for more children in the early years can help Canada's education systems increase fairness, achievement and well-being for children.






Are we healthy?



The health of children and youth is a balance of mental, emotional, physical and spiritual conditions. Because of the comprehensive and subjective nature of health, many indicators are important. Children's health is shaped from birth and, as they grow, by their own choices, but most importantly by the conditions and resources that influence health. Material security and the availability of appropriate, sufficient and nutritious food have a major influence on health, including low birthweight, chronic disease and obesity. As they develop, young people seek to balance their mental and physical health. They take risks, but for most children risky behaviours do not impair their overall health. Some live with mental health conditions and activity limitations but may thrive in different areas of life. What every child should be able to count on, from birth, is to be born into an economically secure family where their chances of having low birthweight and preventable infant death are much lower, with support for good nutrition including breastfeeding, and with access to appropriate health care, including vaccination and dental care. As they mature, young people should be accessing appropriate health care and participating in health care decisions. Young people's own sense of health and their views about their health care are critical to their overall well-being. In turn, their health influences and is influenced by the other dimensions of well-being.

37% 

of U-Reporters said they mostly prefer individual activities such as jogging or yoga to be active in order to be healthy; **only 16%** prefer large group activities.

Snapshot

Are the kids of Canada healthy? The majority report good health, both mental and physical. However, more than half of young people (59.8 per cent) start their days feeling fatigued. One in three (34.2 per cent) experiences symptoms of mental distress. One in four (24.3 per cent) reports that their health isn't very good or excellent. One in five (18.8 per cent) reports that their activities are limited by a physical or mental condition. A much smaller group of young people, about one in ten, have significant health challenges such as obesity (10.6 per cent) or a mood or anxiety disorder (10.5 per cent). Canada has long valued its universal health care system – often viewed as an iconic symbol of our country. Despite the many challenges facing the system and the gaps in it, such as a lack of dental care, low vaccination rates and insufficient mental health services for children and youth, there is good evidence that the health systems across Canada contribute to the health and well-being of young people. The health care system is a key reason why the infant mortality rate has fallen over time and why more preterm and other fragile infants survive birth. But the variable rates of infant mortality across Canada also remind us what the health care system alone cannot accomplish – improving social conditions that contribute to children's physical, mental and spiritual health.

Measure	National Estimate	Indicator	Legend
Breastfeeding	32.1	Percentage of mothers exclusively breastfeeding for at least 6 months	● SDG
Feeling satisfied with my health care	Limited data	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who are satisfied with any health care services received in the past 12 months	● Proxy
Feeling tired before school	59.8	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report being tired when going to school in the morning	
Getting health care	85.6	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds with a regular health care provider	
Getting vaccinated	90.2	Percentage of 2 year-olds receiving at least one dose of measles vaccination	
Having frequent mental and physical symptoms	34.2	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report two or more psychological symptoms more than once a week	
Having good self-rated health	75.7	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who report their health status as being excellent or very good	
Having good self-rated mental health	76.0	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who report their mental health status as being excellent or very good	
Having good spiritual health	50.8	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report that spiritual health is important	
Having low birth weight	9.1	Percentage of babies born Small-for-Gestational Age (SGA), of live singleton births with gestational ages from 22 to 43 weeks	
Having poor dental health	12.1	Overall rate of dental surgery to treat early childhood caries (ECC) per 1,000 population aged 12–59 months	
Having thoughts of suicide	9.6	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who have ever seriously contemplated or considered suicide	
Infant death	4.5	Number of infant deaths during a given year per 1,000 live births	
Liking how I look	55.7	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who think their body is about the right size	
Living with a mental health condition	14.5	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who report having a mood and/or anxiety disorder	
Managing my health	Limited data	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who report wanting to improve their physical health and having something stopping them from improving their physical health	
My activities are limited by my health	18.8	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who report their activities are limited due to a long-term physical or mental condition or health problem	
Obesity	10.6	Percentage of 5–17 year-olds who are obese	
Preterm birth	7.6	Percentage of babies born preterm, of live births with a gestational age less than 37 weeks	
Suicide	9.0	Suicide rate of 15–19 year-olds per 100,000 population	
Taking risks	7.2	Percentage of 14–15 year-olds often taking risks with alcohol, cannabis and smoking	
Teen births	7.9	Live births to 15–19 year-old females per 1,000 population	

More than 30 years ago, the World Health Organization proclaimed what a growing body of empirical evidence affirmed: health is a sensitive indicator of broader social and economic conditions.^{iv} Most experts agree that the provision of health care accounts for only about 25 per cent of health and well-being status.^v In comparison, social and economic conditions are estimated to affect about 50 per cent of the health status of a population. The indicators of child and youth health in the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being measure not only their health status; many reflect unfair and remediable social conditions. Variations and inequities in children's health status – physical, mental and spiritual – often mirror variations and inequities in social conditions. Social and economic conditions tend to affect children's health more than individual choices such as diet and exercise. Social policy solutions, such as lifting children out of poverty and providing healthy food at school, are among the most efficient and effective ways to improve child health and well-being, beyond a certain level of health care. This is not to suggest that genes and behaviours have no influence or that medical care and clinical interventions play no role. The health and well-being of children and youth require a balanced system of social fairness, health promotion and prevention, environmental protection and, most certainly, universal and appropriate health care.

Health at birth

The health of children from birth may be less than we should expect. In high-income countries, infant mortality is relatively low and the variation across countries has become fairly narrow, reflecting a century of improvements in social conditions and advancements in medical care. However, small differences are important, as they represent serious and preventable challenges. With an infant mortality rate of 4.5 per 1,000 live births, Canada performs poorly compared to other rich countries like Sweden, Norway, Italy and Germany as reported by the World Health Organization. Some Canadian researchers contest that these differences can be explained as a measurement issue, based on how premature and low birthweight babies who are kept alive through advanced neo-natal care are counted as 'live births.' However, the

wide variation in infant mortality rates across Canada and the slower rate of decline in the national average relative to many other countries suggest that Canada's national average rate of infant mortality could be lower than it is, and that policy solutions may make a difference.

Infant mortality rates are much higher in provinces with larger proportions of Indigenous people – an observation consistent with other research findings that infant mortality rates among Indigenous groups are two times higher than the national rate (four times higher for Inuit populations).^{iv} Evidence suggests a strong association between infant mortality and social policies among rich countries; 20 per cent of the difference in infant mortality rates can be explained by differences in low income rates and the provision of income support policies.^{vi} Infant mortality is a particularly sensitive indicator of the most socially and economically marginalized groups' well-being. Low birthweight (Small-for-Gestational-Age) and preterm birth, a condition of 9.1 per cent and 7.8 per cent of births in Canada, respectively, are also sensitive to social and economic conditions.



Moving further along the childhood life course, at six months of age only 32.1 per cent of mothers in Canada are exclusively

breastfeeding. This is less than the World Health Assembly target of at least 50 per cent, and low compared to countries such as Norway (71 per cent) and New Zealand (60 per cent). The World Health Organization, UNICEF, Health Canada and many other international and national organizations recommend exclusive breastfeeding for at least six months for healthy term infants, given the benefits to children's nutrition, health and cognitive development. Although data measuring breastfeeding rates are less accurate than we would like, we are confident that the wide discrepancy between Canada's rate and the target indicates that many mothers – most of whom initiate breastfeeding at birth – are struggling to sustain it. Low breastfeeding rates are symptomatic of weak social support, including family, corporate and community attitudes and practices, and access to 'family-friendly policies' such as sufficient and inclusive parental leave can also play a role.

¹⁶The Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative, founded by the World Health Organization and UNICEF, sets standards and supports efforts in countries around the world to create conditions and practices in birthing facilities that are conducive to breastfeeding and other best practices for infant care.

Only an estimated 4.7 per cent of infants in Canada are born in facilities with the gold-standard Baby Friendly designation.¹⁶ The wide variation in breastfeeding rates across Canada, ranging from a high of 48.2 per cent in British Columbia to a low of 23.7 per cent in Quebec, reveals the complex nature of influences on breastfeeding.

Some children are at risk of vaccine-preventable illnesses, although this conclusion must be tempered by the fact that Canada lacks a reliable, quality system for tracking vaccinations. At age 2, only 90.2 per cent of children in Canada have had at least one dose of measles vaccine. This falls below the level required for 'herd immunity,' that is, to reduce the risk that anyone will contract measles. Complementary data indicates that only 75.8 per cent have had all the recommended doses of diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis vaccines.^{lvii} Canada's immunization rates need to be boosted with renewed commitment to public health promotion and data collection.

Growing up healthy

Another public health issue that captures the attention of Canadians is children's weights. Canada has one of the highest rates of overweight children in the world, where more than one in ten children ages 5 to 17 (10.6 per cent) is obese. A considerable focus of attention is on children's individual behaviours and 'lifestyle choices,' such as screen time and physical activity, without sufficient recognition that poverty (which limits access to and the ability to purchase enough nutritious food) and the food system (including the location of grocery stores, access to healthy meals at school, and the provision and marketing of foods high in salt, sugar and saturated fat) have been shown to have a major influence on what children eat.^{lviii} The North American Free Trade Agreement was associated with a substantial rise in calorie availability in Canada by increasing the supply of food with unhealthy, calorie-rich ingredients, such as high-fructose corn syrup, and contributing to rising obesity.^{lix} It may also help explain why children of higher socio-economic status here are more likely to be obese than low-income children in Norway. The unhealthy weight of children is the complex outcome of multiple societal factors.

Concern about sleep time among young people is also on the rise, as the importance of sufficient, quality sleep in relation to academic performance, emotional control and mental and physical health is recognized. The Canadian Paediatric Society

recommends adolescents should get between 8 and 10 hours of sleep, while studies suggest the actual average is close to 6.5 to 7.5 hours.^{lx} The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being focuses on a functional measure – whether children feel tired in the morning as they head to school – recognizing that being well-rested is not just a lifestyle choice young people make, but a confluence of different factors including length of sleep and school start times. Many young people (59.8 per cent, ages 11 to 15) report they experience fatigue before school. Many factors have been suggested to explain why young people today seem to be sleeping less, or at least, less than they need, including long work hours, staying up late on digital technology and too much school work and anxiety.

The gender gap, with more girls (63.8 per cent) than boys (55.5 per cent) reporting fatigue, may be related to the gender gap in reported time pressure.



As young people mature, they pass through a normal, developmental stage of taking risks and exploring their identities, their environment and their boundaries. Rivalling the heightened concern adults have with children's time use is heightened concern regarding behaviours that can have health

risks. Despite being the subject of a proliferation of surveys, the rates of many kinds of adolescent risk behaviours, including drug and alcohol use, have generally been falling over time and compared to the previous generation. While the nature of such behaviour changes over time (e.g., less cigarette smoking and cannabis use; more vaping and gambling), the risks to young people's health and broader well-being typically occur at a certain threshold of frequency that surpasses experimentation into regular, intense activity. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being created a risk index in collaboration with the Health Behaviours in School-Aged Children Survey, measuring frequent use of three sentinel types of risk behaviours: smoking, alcohol use and cannabis use. A small group of young people, 7.2 per cent, are taking risks in these and other activities. As well, a very small group of adolescent girls, 7.9 per 1,000 population, experiences teen births. Frequent risk-taking and teen births are, to a great extent, indicators of adverse socio-economic conditions and exclusion. Provinces and territories with a high proportion of Indigenous children – Nunavut, Northwest Territories, Saskatchewan and Manitoba – have teen birth rates substantially above the national rate, with the risk particularly high among Inuit adolescent females.

One Statistics Canada study reported that 45 per cent of Inuit women ages 20 to 44 report having a child before age 20.^{lxii} This provides more context to the indicators of infant mortality, low birthweight (SGA) and preterm birth.

The mental health of young people is another dominant concern. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being follows a range of indicators along a spectrum of mental health, from more common psychological symptoms, which have increased in recent years, to suicide, which has declined in recent years. The data are only available for older children, though young children also experience mental illness. The prevalence of psychological (psychosomatic) symptoms among Canadian children is striking, with one in three young people (34.2 per cent) ages 11 to 15 reporting weekly symptoms of distress, including headaches, stomach aches and problems sleeping. This is a much larger group of children than the 10.5 per cent who have reported a mood and/or anxiety disorder. Almost one quarter of boys (24.3 per cent) report such problems, but of particular significance is that 43.4 per cent of girls do. The high level of psychological distress among girls is consistent with other gender gaps, such as feeling extreme time pressure, feeling tired before school and spending less time in leisure activities. The gender gap in mental health status is further evident in reported excellent or very good self-rated mental health (72.2 per cent among girls and 79.6 per cent among boys) and in having a mood or anxiety disorder (12.2 per cent of girls and 8.9 per cent of boys).

The most recent, high-quality, epidemiological study in Canada, the Ontario Child Health Study, explored the prevalence of mental health disorders between 1983 and 2014 and concluded the prevalence remained stable at about 20 per cent, or 1 in 5 children.^{lxiii,17} Rather than increases in the overall prevalence, the study suggests the types of mental health challenges children experience have been changing. In particular, 12 to 16 year olds have experienced a striking increase in emotional disorders, such as anxiety and depression. Boys are less likely to engage in fights and criminal activity (consistent with patterns revealed in the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being, such as declining levels of some forms of physical violence and risk behaviours) but are more likely to be diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder.

Body image is related to mental well-being. About half of young people (55.7 per cent) report that their body is the right size. While boys are more likely to be obese, girls are more likely to view their body size negatively. In Western cultures, evidence finds that adolescents who depart from socially determined norms of attractiveness are vulnerable to body dissatisfaction. The intense consumption of mass media within socially competitive societies may contribute to widespread, idealized body norms and body 'shaming.'

Suicide is a major cause of death among young people, 9.0 in every 100,000 adolescents. Considering or contemplating suicide is more frequent, among 9.8 per cent of adolescents. Canada's rate of youth suicide is higher than in many other countries, but has been falling in recent years.^{lxiii} Consistent with other research, there are gender gaps, with females (12.6 per cent) more likely to think about suicide than males (7.2 per cent), and inversely, males more likely to complete suicide (11.2 per 100,000 population) than females (6.6 per 100,000 population). The higher rate of Indigenous children having thoughts of and completing a suicide is also well recognized in research. The suicide rate for Inuit youth is 11 times the national average and among the highest in the world.^{lxiv}

Children and youth in countries with higher rates of income inequality were more likely to report poor health.

Mental health and mental illness have many contributing factors and require many solutions. Social media is widely thought to be a major cause of poor mental health, and it may be an aggravating factor for a small group of young people. However, screen time is often a 'U-shaped' experience, presenting problems when some youth have too much or too little. Pressure to succeed, bullying and other contributing factors must be further explored. The lack of mental health services to respond to mental health problems is a barrier to good health, particularly in many Indigenous communities, where colonialization, exclusion, isolation and high rates of poverty deprive young people of good mental health.

¹⁷While caution is advised since the study was only for Ontario, the authors suggest the findings might be generalizable.

Health as health care

Having access to a regular, primary health care provider is viewed as a key health system performance indicator in Canada. A deep base of research indicates having access to such care is related to better health status due to the quality and continuity of care. Most adolescents, 85.6 per cent, report having access to a regular primary health care provider (e.g., family physician or nurse practitioner). Yet, in a country of universal health care, it is concerning that 11.5 per cent of girls and 17.3 per cent of boys lack such care. Although they might be receiving primary care from an alternative source such as a walk-in clinic, they lack the regular relationship in which trust and communication can be fostered.

Dental health is largely delivered through private care. Good dental health is more than a matter of healthy teeth. The evidence is strong that good dental health influences overall physical health status, with a small but growing body of research pointing to effects on psychosocial health status and social relations. Data on the dental health of children is weak. Any child can develop cavities and other dental problems, but the failure to address early dental health problems can be linked to poor child development and higher risk of hospital admissions. The number of children requiring paediatric day surgery for dental caries ('cavities'), 12.1 per 1,000, provides a picture of oral health neglect.^{lxv} Other studies have found a significant association between poor dental health and low income; higher rates of poor dental health in rural versus urban areas; and higher rates among Indigenous children.^{lxvi} The rates of paediatric dental surgery are much higher than the Canadian average in Saskatchewan (36.2), Manitoba (36.2), Newfoundland (27.8), Northwest Territories (47.6) and Nunavut (110.6) where there are higher proportions of Indigenous children and fewer available services.



The number of children requiring paediatric day surgery for dental caries ('cavities') provides a picture of oral health neglect.

(18.8 per cent) says their activities are limited by a long-term mental or physical condition or health problem, but the rate reaches over 30 per cent in the northern territories. No national data are available to describe how young people feel about the health services they can access or how they manage their own health.

Health is affected by health care, health promotion, social norms and policy fairness. An international study comparing income inequality with children's self-rated health status and psychological symptoms (e.g., poor sleep and anxiety) found weak evidence of the relationship between the level of health care spending and health status. Instead, the stronger predictor of health was the adequacy of social policies such as income benefits for families with children.^{lxvii} Children and youth in countries with higher rates of income inequality, itself an indicator of weak social policy, were more likely to report poor health and psychosomatic health complaints, even where public health care spending was high.

How young people rate their own health

Three quarters of young people in Canada (75.7 per cent) report their health status as excellent or very good, yet this leaves almost one in four who rates their health as good, fair or poor. In some provinces, between 30 and 40 per cent of young people report their health as less than very good or excellent. Almost one in five young people in Canada



Are we connected to our environment?

A relationship with and living in a sustainable environment are critical aspects of child and youth well-being. The sustained quality of the air, water and land, as well as the protection of the climate and ecosystems, are fundamental to children's survival, health and development. Children are more sensitive than adults to deprivations, toxins and air pollution, and they can be particularly vulnerable to disasters and displacement, which can threaten their survival and health, disrupt their education, relationships and culture, and drain resources that could have been used to invest in their well-being. Children and youth also need access to parks, trails and other green or open spaces in which they are welcome. They need to move freely around their environments for leisure, school, work, cultural activities and other pursuits. A sense of place supports a sense of belonging. Young people are also committed to being good stewards of the environment and should be included in decisions affecting it.

75%

of U-Reporters said they notice the impacts of climate change weekly or daily. Only **6%** are not taking any sort of action to combat climate change. **90%** are willing to pay the federal carbon levy that would be charged to fill a car with gas.



Snapshot

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being signals that children are affected by climate change and environmental degradation. Every child has the right to clean water, but one in ten homes with children (11.1 per cent) can't consistently rely on having clean water – in a country as abundant in natural and economic wealth as Canada. Children and youth in cities live just under the safe limit for fine, particulate air pollution. Although almost every home with children in Canada (93.8 per cent) has a park or green space close by, one in four young people (25.8 per cent) says they don't have good places to spend time in their neighbourhoods. Children are also disproportionately affected when environment-related disasters displace them from their homes and communities and disrupt their education, relationships and health. We can see Canada's environmental well-being in the well-being of children. They are telling us that we must protect our environment for their future and for future generations. Will we listen?

Children are typically more sensitive than adults to deprivations (such as clean water) and to exposures (such as air pollution) and they can be disproportionately affected by disasters.

Measure	National Estimate	Indicator
Being affected by a disaster	44	Number of evacuated persons attributed to disasters per 100,000 population
Being environmentally aware	71.0	Percentage of 15 year-olds familiar with, or knowing something about, five or more environmental issues
Feeling satisfied with my local area	Limited data	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who are satisfied with their neighbourhood
Having access to public transit	Limited data	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who report having a transit stop less than a 15 minute walk away
Having barriers to getting places	No data	MODEL INDICATOR: Percentage of children and youth under age 18 who have limited freedom to get around their community
Having clean water sources	83	Percentage of designated monitoring sites (rivers) in southern Canada with water quality identified as fair, good or excellent
Having parks and open space	93.8	Percentage of dwellings with children under 18 with a park and/or public green space close to home
Having places to spend free time	74.2	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report there are good places to spend free time
Having polluted air	9.7	Annual average PM2.5 concentrations in urban areas, weighted by proportion of child population (0-19) living in urban areas
Having recreation facilities	Limited data	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds with several free or low-cost recreation facilities in their neighbourhood
Having safe drinking water	11.1	Percentage of dwellings with children under 18 informed of a boil advisory
Living in a sustainable ecosystem	-10	Percentage increase or decrease in the Canadian Species Index from baseline (1970)
Living with a sustainable climate	716	Absolute greenhouse gas emissions (megatonnes of CO2 per year)

Canadian children are aware of the environmental crisis that threatens their future because they are affected by it today. Joining their peers around the globe on #FridaysForFuture, young people are demanding bolder action to protect the planet. From Victoria to Halifax, in smaller cities like London, Ontario, in suburban Mississauga, and in the oil capitals of Edmonton and Calgary, children and youth are asking, "What's the point of studying for a future we're not going to have?"

Only recently have dashboards tracking the status of children and youth begun to include the status of their environment. In the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being, the indicators to help answer the question 'Are we connected to our environment?' include children's access to clean air and water and to quality spaces and places. They include indicators of the broader health and sustainability of the ecosystem, including how environmental disasters may affect young people.

The basics: air to breathe and water to drink

Air pollution is a major health threat for adults, but that threat is amplified in childhood because children are more sensitive to air pollutants, which can have lifelong impacts. Even before birth, a mother's exposure to atmospheric particulate matter (PM) has been shown to affect the child's prenatal brain development and can lead to cognitive disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.^{lxviii} Exposure to air pollution has also been linked to premature birth and low birthweight. Even low levels of pollution can become a significant risk as children develop, because children's lungs are small and they inhale more air per unit of body weight.

The threat of air pollution to children and youth in Canada is measured by annual average PM_{2.5}¹⁸ concentrations in urban areas, weighted by the proportion of child population (ages 0 to 19) living in urban areas. About three in four children live in urban areas, exposed to 9.7 PM_{2.5}. Canada sits in the middle of the pack from an international perspective, just below the 'safe level' of under 10 PM_{2.5} set by the World Health Organization.^{lxix} Globally, Canada does better than Korea (24.8) and Israel (23.5), but lags considerably behind Norway and Ireland (both 4.8) and even the United States (8.8) and United Kingdom (8.9).^{lxx}

Canada is a country with one of the highest per capita rates of water consumption in the world. Fortunately, we have 7 per cent of the world's renewable freshwater and only 0.5 per cent of the world's population. Yet as many as one in ten dwellings with children (11.1 per cent) were informed of a boil water advisory in 2014-2015 (the most recent year for which data are available), mainly due to equipment and processing related problems. As a rule, Canadian cities tend to enjoy access to relatively clean and safe water due to water treatment facilities and stringent public health standards. In smaller communities, access to safe water can be less reliable, but lapses are typically short-lived.^{lxxi} However, many Indigenous communities are disproportionately affected by a persistent lack of access to clean, safe water, despite incremental progress. The lack of their right to clean water can have severe impacts on children's health and well-being, contributing to infections and illness not seen in other communities in Canada, but it also undermines the dignity of people and their overall well-being. The inequity of urban/rural and Indigenous exposure to unsafe water is visible in variation across Canada's provinces.

The land around us

The local environment in which children live should offer spaces – including natural places – that children can easily get to and where they are free to play and explore. Emerging evidence confirms the positive impacts of exposure to natural environments on many aspects of child and youth well-being. Unfortunately, little national data exists to monitor children's access to or how they rate their local environments. Most dwellings with children (93.8 per cent) are close to a park or some other public green space.¹⁹ But only three quarters of 11 to 15 year olds (74.2 per cent) feel that their neighbourhoods have good places to spend free time (a similar percentage of 12 to 17 year olds, 76.4 per cent, report they are able to walk or cycle to such places and visit friends).

The sustainability of children's environments

Canada doesn't have sufficient data to monitor how children and youth are affected by human-environment disasters, including floods, fires, heat waves and ice storms. Growing evidence suggests that these disasters take a toll on the physical and mental well-being of people. Deaths and injuries occur, and evacuations affect many more people.

¹⁸ PM_{2.5} is a measure of the concentration of particulate matter with a diameter of 2.5 microns or less. The risk level is due to the fine nature of these pollutant particles that can penetrate the lungs or enter the bloodstream. According to the WHO, the 'safe' level of air quality of PM_{2.5} is 10 micrograms or less.

¹⁹ Caution is advised in interpretation for some provinces such as PEI. In a small, significantly rural province with ample green space, the question might be read as municipally constructed parks and play spaces, rather than open fields and forest.

Evidence from other countries finds that children may be disproportionately affected by disaster, even if they are not injured or displaced.^{ix} Disasters can disrupt their education, play and relationships, and they can be a source of trauma. Recently, researchers in Australia investigated how exposure to disasters may influence the school performance of children. Using the experience of bushfires, the study compared reading and math scores of schools with students highly affected by such fires to those less affected. Affected children experienced a decline in academic performance (reading and math). Not only can these disasters drain family resources, the financial costs should be measured by the loss of potential national wealth that could be spent on positive investments for children and families. We estimate that in the most recent year for which data are available, Canada incurred \$410 million in direct economic losses attributed to disasters.

From knowledge comes hope

A large majority of children and youth in Canada are environmentally aware. The OECD PISA international benchmark of environmental literacy is the ability of young people to explain five of seven environmental issues: 1) Greenhouse gases in the atmosphere; 2) Genetically Modified Organisms; 3) Nuclear waste; 4) Implications of clearing the forest for other land use; 5) Air pollution; 6) Extinction of plants and animals; and 7) Global water shortage. At 71.0 per cent, the environmental literacy of students in Canada is well above the OECD average of 62.1 per cent.^{vi} Awareness is highest in Alberta. Canadian students fare better than their global peers such as those in the Netherlands (53.5 per cent) and New Zealand (49.7 per cent), although a substantial gap remains with the highest ranking of 82.0 per cent in Portugal. Moreover, a gender gap should be closed between boys (74.5 per cent) and girls (67.6 per cent).^{vi}

#Kids of Canada

UNICEF Canada respects the rights of young people to express their views as they see or experience the world around them, and we provide regular opportunities through our youth blogs (#KidsOfCanada) and other platforms. They tell us what growing up in Canada is like and about the challenges they face. What do security, learning, belonging, health, play and protection look like to the kids of Canada and how are they interconnected? This is one of their stories – a story behind the data.

Watering Down the Milk

S., AGE 20, ONTARIO

For a long time, I was a kid who didn't have a place to call home. Because of the unstable nature of my family environment, I was forced to move in and out of a number of cities. My mom and I lived in a number of shelters for abused women and children, and sometimes under the roofs of our relatives.

When asked where I was from, I couldn't give someone a solid answer. Should I identify with my cultural background, which I barely knew about or experienced? Should I identify with the city I had lived in most recently? Should I identify with where I lived now? This was especially difficult because I was in

middle school and I was supposed to be discovering my identity, but it seemed that my identity was incomplete because I had no place to call 'home.'

My mother did her best. She had to balance finding work, studying (my mom went back to college), taking care of me and the cultural stigma associated with being divorced twice. In the shelters, I remember mostly eating pizza pops and rock chocolate (chocolate in the shape of rocks). So moving to the houses of our relatives on occasion (usually when things got really bad) was like a breath of fresh air for me because of the variety of food I could suddenly access. I was very happy



Watering Down the Milk CONTINUED

to be eating food that I recognized and loved. Still, I could see the guilt in my mother's eyes when we lived under their roofs. I think she believed it was a kind of defeat. At times, my mother and I lived with my stepfamily: my four stepsiblings and my stepfather. The seven of us barely squeezed into a tiny basement apartment. Our car was an old cable van painted over in red. If the van was in the driveway, it meant that my stepfather would be home. I knew that the van in the parking space meant my mom would get hurt. I knew that the van meant I couldn't brush my teeth in a certain way, or listen to music, or speak my own language or call my mother 'mom' (because I had to pretend she was my 'aunt' so that my stepsiblings didn't feel excluded).

The times when we would move back in with my stepfather for a few months, for me, meant anorexia. My mother would worry and take me to see doctor after doctor. She would try to convince me to eat. She would tell me to drink a glass of milk in front of her as often as she could. I would water it down until it was only partially milk – just to pretend I was drinking milk, while not consuming too many calories. My mom never found out that the milk was watered down. I suppose I was just an 11 year old who wanted to control something in her life – even if that was just the food. The van was a symbol of defeat. It was a symbol that meant watered-down milk. It was a symbol that meant I would cry myself to sleep for years. But I would practise saying the word 'mommy' at night. I would call my mother 'mom' whenever my stepfather wasn't around.

The social workers changed when

the houses did. Some were good and helpful, some were nonchalant, and others I can barely remember. There were so many of them. Always a new social worker. They tried to help but nothing seemed to be changing. I found myself stuck in the same situations no matter where I went. I was bullied. I was anorexic. I was a girl with a history of being abused.

Middle school is a tough time for anyone, but having to move constantly and make new friends and connections each time made everything much worse for me. I was constantly bullied and told that I didn't belong – I was always the 'new girl.' I never had the same group of friends for more than a few months, while most of other girls had grown up together. I envied them so much – they had no idea what I would give to belong to a group, to have friends. While I drank my watered-down milk, they could drink whole milk. They could even drink chocolate milk. They allowed themselves to. They were happy.

I didn't enjoy being at school, but I also didn't enjoy going home from school. It meant going home to my abusive stepfather or going home and watching my mother look defeated.

A few years later, I decided to stick with an identity: 'the smart girl.' This meant that I could spend my time doing homework or writing poetry – perhaps the only things that kept me sane.

But it came with nicknames like 'nerd' and 'teacher's pet' that followed me everywhere. I was always the girl who was too skinny, too nerdy, too new – too imperfect. This meant I got acorns thrown at me during recess. That I would have

someone kick my chair at least once a day. That someone threatened to throw me in the school dumpster. That a girl knocked me down in the hallway and stepped on my face. That someone would replace all of the tags on my Facebook pictures with the word 'ugly.' Yet I stuck with that identity because I needed it – to distract me if nothing else.

This identity started to slip when we could no longer afford an Internet connection. I started getting C's on history papers while everyone else got A's. The milk I drank slowly became even more watery, until it was just partly cloudy water – I needed to hang onto something, even if that something was anorexia.

For more than seven years I would have to deal with the van, the shelters, the basement, the name-calling and drinking watered-down milk.

One day, I broke down and cried in class. I told my teachers that I was crying because I didn't have an Internet connection. In reality, I was crying about everything that had led to losing the Internet connection – witnessing domestic violence on a daily basis, not having an identity or a place to call home, and forcing myself to neurotically control my body weight.

One day at a time, I got through it. Despite everything, my passion for learning and education motivated me more than anything. When my stepfather and mom finally got divorced, I was elated. I was so much happier, I gained weight and I leveraged my 'smart girl' identity to become one of the top students at my high school, graduating with numerous awards and moving onto university.

Generation 2030:

Toward the Sustainable Development Goals

Embedded across the dimensions of the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being is a 'heat map' of 46 indicators of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Like most countries, the Government of Canada committed in 2015 to achieve the 17 SDGs, underpinned with 169 policy-relevant targets, by 2030. Agenda 2030 is a bold, ambitious plan for people, prosperity and the planet. The SDGs were shaped by what people around the world, including youth, care about. They stretch across many dimensions of children's lives that are necessary to support well-being, including ecosystem sustainability, and because of their breadth the SDGs support new forms of collaboration at different scales that can benefit children.

Because childhood is decisive in preparing societies to be prosperous, sustainable and inclusive, many of the SDG targets address children and youth. No society can truly achieve the SDGs without achieving them for children, whose well-being is a sensitive indicator of the health of a society and the sustainability of the planet. Well-being indexes are increasingly recognizing the link between children and the environment, given the importance of environmental integrity and sustainability for their current and future well-being (e.g., OECD How's Life well-being framework).



The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being reports on the status of the SDG targets for children. Canada has a decade to reach these targets, and the Index will track our progress. The SDGs encompass three kinds of indicators that are embedded in the Index:

- **Specific targets and indicators for children and youth**, such as target 4.1: “By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.”
- **Societal-level targets and indicators that can be disaggregated for population groups including children**, such as target 1.2: “Proportion of the population living below the national poverty line, by sex and age.” For some targets, disaggregation by age is not explicitly required but is meaningful for children and youth, such as target 6.1: “Proportion of the population that feel safe walking around where they live.” In some cases, the application to children is a matter of interpretation.
- **Targets and indicators of common public goods affecting children**. Some of the SDG indicators do not directly measure the state of children but rather the state of the ecosystems in which children live and on which their well-being is dependent. Children and youth have the largest stake in the current and future health of the ecosystems and societies in which they live, and deprivations of its goods such as clean drinking water or degradations like air pollution take the greatest toll on children.

UNICEF is the global custodian for 17 of the most child-focused SDG targets and indicators, leading global efforts to develop new indicators and data for SDG targets that have data deficits. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being includes a subset of SDG targets that are most relevant for children in high-income countries like Canada, measured with indicators from Canadian surveys that are aligned as closely as possible to the UN Global Indicator Framework and Statistics Canada’s SDG indicators – while making some accommodations for the most relevant approaches to measure the indicators for children and for the available data in Canada.

Measuring the distance to achieve the SDG targets for children and youth in Canada is limited by a lack of available data and by some targets having less than clear thresholds for achievement (e.g., they call for substantial change rather than the full achievement or elimination of a condition or attainment of a specific benchmark). We have used our judgment to assign ‘distances’ where targets indicate full, universal achievement or ‘substantial’ change (which we define as two thirds of full or universal achievement); followed the OECD example by using internationally agreed targets where the SDG target is not specific; and identified indicators where there is no implied or clear benchmark.

Based on this, the SDG indicators appear in order from greatest to least distance to achievement to reveal where the greatest challenges and opportunities lie for progress over the next decade.

Canada has fully achieved one SDG target for children and youth (infant mortality) and at least partially achieved one target (air quality in cities). Indicators farthest from reaching the SDG targets include breastfeeding, discrimination and environmental literacy.

Measuring the SDGs locally

Fondation Grand Montreal’s Vital Signs 2017 was inspired by the SDG indicators for children in the UNICEF Index of Child Well-being and Sustainability (see www.unicef.ca/irc14). They compared community results to national averages of SDG indicators. The Fondation invited close to 40 children’s rights organizations to involve children in making meaning of the data and work on solutions.

How Equal Are We?

To measure inequalities is to measure differences. To measure inequities is to measure differences that are unfair. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being measures how evenly distributed children's opportunities and outcomes are in some aspects of their lives; whether or not the differences are inequalities or inequities is a matter of interpretation. Since many of the measures in the Index are rights-based and policy-relevant, many of the differences in child and youth well-being are likely to be inequitable.

Inequitable starting points and opportunities lead to inequitable experiences and outcomes. Inequalities can touch every aspect of a child's life: an interlocking set of obstacles and missed opportunities that can be magnified as children grow, and passed from one generation to the next. Childhood inequalities cast long shadows, undermining children's sense of worth and aspiration today, and their potential for tomorrow.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child calls on states to ensure every child's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled. The goal of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda is to leave no one behind; no SDG can be achieved unless it is achieved for all. UNICEF's global research shows that closing equity gaps is critical not only in principle, but because it is necessary to achieve higher levels of well-being for all.

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being is based on national averages of different indicators of child and youth well-being. National averages provide a bird's eye view of the state of children. They are important for benchmarking, international comparison and revealing big patterns that might not be visible at smaller scales, such as regions or communities.

National averages can help define a 'normal' and achievable level of well-being, recognizing that in some indicators such as having clean water and food security, nothing short of full access is acceptable. For the measures that should be

universally achieved, the gap between the children who are included and those who are excluded measures inequity.

Every percentage point in an indicator of the whole child and youth population represents close to 80,000 children and youth.

Averages can also mask inequities. Benchmarking against a national average can identify inequalities or inequities for groups of children based on where they live, their gender or gender identity, race, legal status, family income and other dimensions. The ability to measure these inequalities depends on the availability of data, particularly data that can be disaggregated for particular groups of children. Those data are extremely patchy (see discussions about Data Gaps and Data Limitations in our corollary report, *How the Index Works*). Canada lacks sufficient and comparable data for some groups of children who experience the greatest inequities including Indigenous children, certain racialized children, children with disabilities and refugee children. Data about First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples are also subject to their data sovereignty: their collection, ownership, possession and use of their data. It is not always possible or desirable to present data about Indigenous children in comparison to non-Indigenous children.

Measuring inequalities or inequities can be done with different approaches. The Index measures some aspects of equality in child and youth well-being across the child population, between groups or sub-populations of children, and between generations. As well, some of the indicators in the Index directly measure aspects of inequality, such as child poverty, deprivation and discrimination. We also report indicators of broader social inequality that affect children's lives.



Sustainable Development Goals

Measure	Indicator	National Estimate	Distance to target (proportion)	SDG Target
Infant death	Number of infant deaths during a given year per 1,000 live births	4.5	ACHIEVED	3.2 By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-five mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births
Having polluted air	Annual average PM2.5 concentrations in urban areas, weighted by proportion of child population (0–19) living in urban areas	9.7	ACHIEVED	11.6 By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management
Breastfeeding	Percentage of mothers exclusively breastfeeding for at least 6 months	32.1	55.8%*	2.2 By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons
Discrimination	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who report experiencing discrimination or being treated unfairly by others in Canada in the past 5 years because of various traits/ characteristics	35.2	54.3%	10.3 Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard
Being environmentally aware	Percentage of 15-year-olds familiar with, or knowing something about, five or more environmental issues	71.0	40.8%	12.8 By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature
Not ready for school with the skills I need	Percentage of kindergarten students vulnerable on one or more domains of the Early Development Instrument (EDI)	27.0	37.0%	4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education
Participating in decision-making	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who feel their family listens to them when they speak	74.2	34.8%	16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels
Having places to spend free time	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report there are good places to spend free time	74.2	34.8%	11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities
Abuse at home	Percentage of 15–24 year-olds who report having experienced abuse before the age of 15	24.6	32.6%	16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children
Going hungry	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report going to school or to bed hungry because there is not enough food at home	23.3	30.4%	2.1 By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round
Bullying	Percentage of 11–15 year-olds who report experiencing bullying at least two to three times in the past couple of months	27.0	24.7%	16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere
Achieving in high school	Percentage of 15 year-olds achieving baseline competency in reading, mathematics and science	80.8	23.8%	4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes
Having clean water sources	Percentage of designated monitoring sites (rivers) in southern Canada with water quality identified as fair, good or excellent	83	20.5%	6.6 By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes
Getting health care	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds with a regular health care provider	85.6	16.8%	3.8 Achieve universal health coverage (UHC), including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health care services, and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all

Measure	Indicator	National Estimate	Distance to target (proportion)	SDG Target
Having emotional challenges in the early years	Percentage of kindergarten students who are vulnerable on the 'Emotional maturity' domain of the Early Development Instrument (EDI)	12.7	14.5%	4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education
Having safe and secure housing	Percentage of children under 18 who have a core housing need	12.6	14.4%	11.1 By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums
Violent crime	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who have not been victims of violent crime (robbery, physical assault and/or sexual abuse)	88.7	12.7%	16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children
Having safe drinking water	Percentage of dwellings with children under 18 informed of a boil advisory	11.1	12.5%	6.1 By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all
Obesity	Percentage of 5–17 year-olds who are obese	10.6	11.9%	2.2 By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons
Living in poverty	Percentage of children under 18 living in a household with income lower than 60% of the median (LIM)	20.0	11.1%**	(1) 10.2 By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status; (2) 1.2 By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions
Getting vaccinated	Percentage of 2 year-olds receiving at least one dose of measles vaccination	90.2	10.9%	3.8 Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential healthcare services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all; 3.b Support the research and development of vaccines and medicines for the communicable and non-communicable diseases that primarily affect developing countries, provide access to affordable essential medicines and vaccines, in accordance with the Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health, which affirms the right of developing countries to use to the full the provisions in the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights regarding flexibilities to protect public health and, in particular, provide access to medicines for all
Getting child benefits	Percentage of economic families with children receiving a child benefit	90.3	10.7%	1.3 Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable
Abuse in an intimate relationship	Percentage of 15–24 year-olds who have experienced abuse in an intimate partner relationship in the past 5 years	7.6	8.2%	16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children
Having parks and open space	Percentage of dwellings with children under 18 with a park and/or public green space close to home	93.8	6.6%	11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities
Graduating from high school	Percentage of 20–24 year-olds in the labour force who completed high school	93.9	6.5%	4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes



Measure	Indicator	National Estimate	Distance to target (proportion)	SDG Target
Feeling safe in my neighbourhood	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who report being satisfied with their personal safety from crime	92.6	5.3%	16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere
Disengaged from learning and employment	Percentage of 15–19 year-olds not in employment, education or training (NEET)	6.3	4.5%	8.6 By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training; 8.6.1 Proportion of youth (aged 15–24 years) not in education, employment or training
Reading well in primary school	Percentage of students in Grade 4 achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in reading	96	4.2%	4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes
My basic needs are not affordable	Percentage of children under 18 living in low income based on the Market Basket Measure	9.0	3.8%**	1.2 By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions
Homeless	Percentage of 15- to 17-year-olds who have ever been homeless and/or have ever experienced hidden homelessness	3.0	3.1%	11.1 By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums
Participating in preschool	Percentage of children participating in organized learning one year before official age to enter primary school	97	3.1%	4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education
Living in severe poverty	Percentage of children under 18 living in deep income poverty (below 75% of Canada's Official Poverty Line)	3.5	1.8%	1.2 By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions
Getting injured at work	Number of lost time claims for 15–19 year-old workers per 1,000 population	9.4	0.9%	8.8 Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment
Being affected by a disaster	Number of evacuated persons attributed to disasters per 100,000 population	44	0.03%	11.5 By 2030, significantly reduce the number of deaths and the number of people affected and substantially decrease the direct economic losses relative to global gross domestic product caused by disasters, including water-related disasters, with a focus on protecting the poor and people in vulnerable situations
Suicide	Suicide rate of 15–19 year-olds per 100,000 population	9.0	0.003%	3.4 By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being
Homicide	Number of deaths of 0–19 year-olds by intentional assault, per 100,000 population	0.7	0.0005%	16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere
Teen births	Live births to 15–19 year-old females per 1,000 population	7.9	N/A	3.7 By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes
Taking risks	Percentage of 14–15 year-olds often taking risks with alcohol, cannabis and smoking	7.2	N/A	3.5 Strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol
Feeling satisfied with my health care	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who are satisfied with any health care services received in the past 12 months	Limited data	N/A	3.8 Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential healthcare services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all

Measure	Indicator	National Estimate	Distance to target (proportion)	SDG Target
Participating in quality early learning and child care	Ratio of qualified to unqualified staff in preschool groups in licensed child care centres	No data	N/A	4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education
Getting support for disabilities	MODEL INDICATOR: Percentage of families with children under 18 with disabilities receiving disability benefits	No data	N/A	1.3 Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable
Not getting enough healthy food	Percentage of children under 18 living in households affected by some level of food insecurity	Limited data	N/A	2.1 By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round
Physical punishment	Percentage of 15–17 year-olds who report being slapped on the hand or spanked before age 15	No data	N/A	16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children
Having access to public transit	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who report having a transit stop less than a 15 minute walk away	Limited data	N/A	11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons
Living in a sustainable ecosystem	Percentage increase or decrease in the Canadian Species Index from baseline (1970)	-10	N/A	15.5 Take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and, by 2020, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species
Knowing my human rights	Percentage of 12–17 year-olds who report having knowledge about children's rights in Canada	No data	N/A	4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development

*World Health Assembly Target

**Targets are based on data from 2014/2015, when SDG targets were established



We Can't Monitor What We Can't Measure:

Data to Improve Outcomes for Children with Disabilities

JENNIFER ZWICKER AND KEIKO SHIKAKO THOMAS

"The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children and youth, including their health, safety, material security, education and socialization and their sense of being loved, valued and included in the families and societies into which they are born."

UNICEF, INNOCENTI REPORT CARD¹

For children and youth born with disabilities in Canada, the UNICEF aspiration is not yet a reality. As a signatory to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and on the Rights of the Children, Canada has made advances in human rights for children and for persons with disabilities. However, the UN Human Rights Secretariat recently highlighted a need for Canada to collect better data about the situation of children with disabilities and develop a monitoring system by which citizens and policy-makers can understand what advances are being made and what still needs to be done for children with disabilities to enjoy their human rights.² *Access to services and supports and opportunities for full participation* were identified as critical gaps across provinces for Canadian children with disabilities and their families.³

Let's take developmental disability as an example. Neurodevelopmental disabilities

(NDD) are a group of conditions with onset in the first five years of life, characterized by impairments in personal, social, academic and occupational functioning.⁴⁻⁸ The prevalence of NDD is estimated to be as high as between 5 and 9 per cent of children and youth in Canada.⁹⁻¹¹ However, 75 per cent of Canadian youth with a disability have an NDD¹² and more than 90 per cent of these youth experience limitations in activities throughout their lifespan that impact their quality of life.^{12:13} Youth with NDD use more health services^{11:14} and are more prone to mental health problems.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ We know this from research studies in Canada and demographic studies from other countries, but we don't know much else due to a lack of population-level survey data.

Every child with a disability has unique needs and requires unique combinations of targeted supports. These needs can be individual supports to participate in school, adapted equipment to play and engage in physical activities, or specialized health rehabilitation services to maintain good physical and mental health. The families of these children also need supports such as respite care, house adaptations and accommodations in their work schedule to care for their children. Yet the lack of data means that we know very little about how

adequately existing services and supports are meeting – or failing to meet – the diverse needs of these children and their families.

The data available in Canada about children with disabilities is out of date. The most recent national, longitudinal, population data about Canadian children with disabilities is almost a decade old, so we lack critical information on the diverse and often unmet needs of this group, as well as what families spend to attend to the basic health, education and social needs of their children. Better information on the nature and needs of children and youth with disability is essential for policy-makers at all levels of government to predict and plan for improved provision of efficient, equitable and inclusive services and supports. Inefficient delivery of health, education and social services have major impacts on youth and family health and quality of life.¹⁹⁻²¹ For example, analysis of population data for youth and adults with disability over the age of 15 revealed that the disability tax credit has utilization rates of only 30 to 40 per cent among people who are eligible. Unfortunately, we lack the population data to estimate utilization rates for children under age 15 and their families.

Information from provincial data sets about services received and

used by youth and families, and disaggregated data by type of disability and across well-being indicators, are essential to address needs and realize rights. Linkage of education, tax and employment data is an important next step to get a more complete picture, but federal investment in national, longitudinal data on children and youth with disabilities is needed.

Failure to know and failure to act will continue to leave some Canadian children behind, which is costly for them and for society. It is time for Canada to step up and reach for the UNICEF vision. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being is a good way for Canada to start by including data to measure the progress of children with disabilities.

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Stand With Kids:

How to Use the Index

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being is not a data project – it is a change project. As Canadians, we want to understand our challenges, protect the good things we are doing and find new ways to do better. The Index is a tool to measure things differently to help do things differently. We can move the needle if we stand with Canada's children and set courageous goals to be – measurably – better.

Statistical data have limitations, but define many of our national conversations and influence decisions that affect children's lives. We can make better use of it to support better childhoods. One of the advantages of a composite index is the overview it provides of a complex concept and the trends and patterns it reveals. The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being tells us about:

- important aspects of children's lives that are, and are not, getting better over time ('progress gaps')
- where there are smaller, and wider, gaps between children ('equity gaps')
- where Canada does better than, and lags farthest behind, peer countries ('possibility gaps')
- the extent to which rights and policy commitments are realized, and those that remain unfulfilled

The information is for:

- influencers who want to ignite a conversation about the state of children and what supports their rights and well-being
- decision-makers who are not afraid of evidence, accountability or bold goals
- everyone who wants to create a more equitable and sustainable society

Seven ways to use the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being:

- Promote understanding of what life is like for children and youth in Canada through research and dialogue
- Develop better data for and with children
- Set bolder goals and benchmarks for community, regional and national progress for children

- Advocate for children – create public and political will to make Canada among the best places to grow up
- Use the well-being framework to pay attention to more aspects of children's lives in designing and measuring the impacts of programs, services and policies; use the data to focus on the greatest challenges facing children
- Track progress toward commitments, including the 2030 SDGs
- Take these steps with engaging children and youth

Data are seeds of understanding – questions to be asked as much as answers about how kids are doing. For this reason, a number of efforts are underway to deepen understanding about the lives of Canada's children and youth.

Where We Stand:

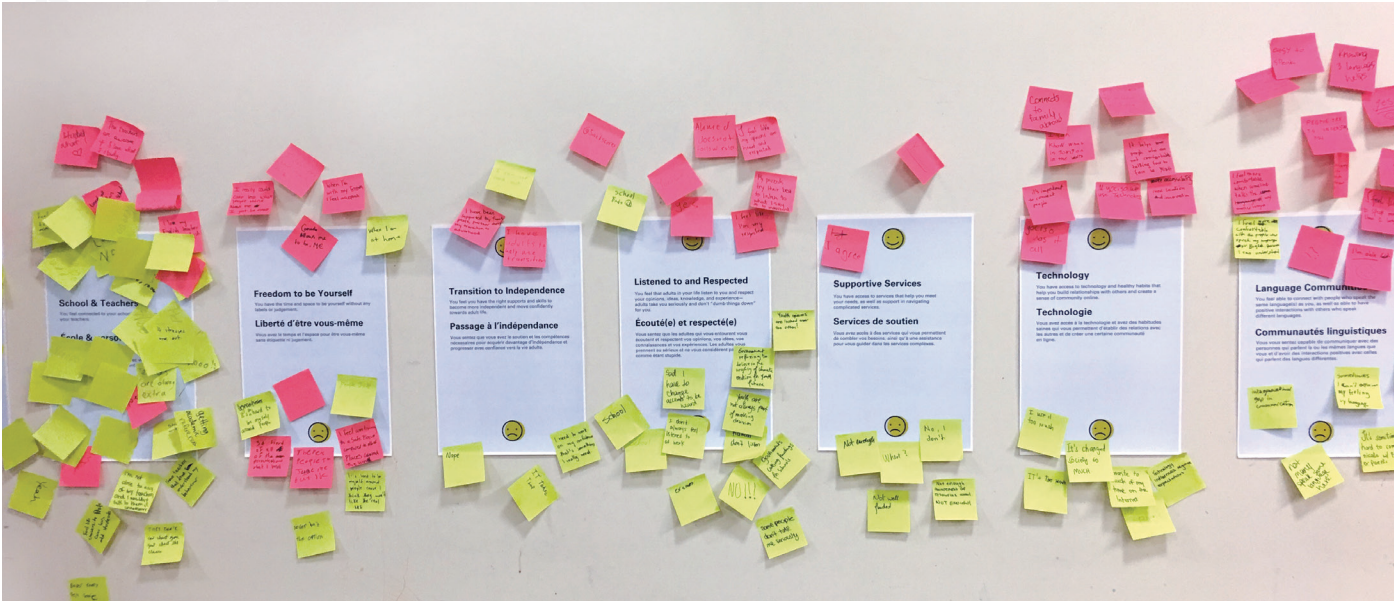
The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being

Is a Framework To:

Communicate to Canadians what Canada is like for kids from birth to age 18

Track progress for their rights and well-being

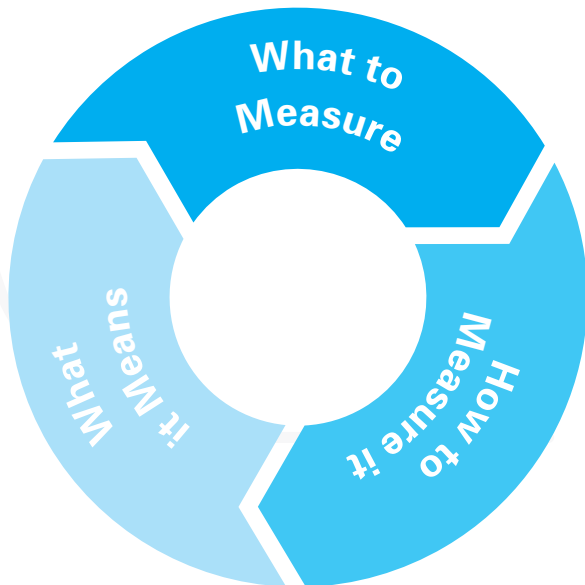
Guide action to address the greatest challenges



This is data, too: what 'Belonging' looks like to kids at the June 2019 Change Summit in Ottawa, Ontario, co-hosted by UNICEF Canada and YMCA Ottawa.

Kids in the Data Cycle

UNICEF is committed to developing and using data with children, not just about them. We support the participation of children and youth in all stages of the data cycle, from deciding what to measure, to collecting data, to interpreting, using and sharing data and analysis. Gathering and using data about children better supports their rights and well-being when they have a say in how it is decided, collected and used.



Resources

Resources created for and with young people to help interpret the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being are available at <https://oneyouth.unicef.ca/en/child-and-youth-well-being-index>.

U-Report

U-Report polls report on young people's experiences, insights and priorities in relation to the findings of the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being.

#KidsOfCanada

Blogs by diverse young people tell stories and explain how they are experiencing life beyond the data in the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being, from bullying to learning Indigenous languages.

Partnerships

Research and other partnerships can support secondary analysis and use of the data in the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being. In partnership with the Region of Waterloo, the Canadian Index of Wellbeing/University of Waterloo and the Ontario Trillium Foundation are developing a community survey based on the Index, for any community in Canada to use to gather data with and about their kids. A collaboration with PolicyWise for Children and Youth in Alberta will develop videos to explore each dimension of well-being in the Index.



Zooming In:

Child and Youth Well-being at a Regional Level

JAYNE MORRISH, BROCK HEALTHY YOUTH PROJECT

The Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being provides a pan-Canadian view of the state of children and youth in Canada with national data. National averages are ideal for taking the pulse of the country and for comparisons and impact assessments. However, it is also important to complement these big-picture data with information about children in particular places. Having regional data can provide a more in-depth understanding of issues, reveal how children's lives may be different than the 'average,' highlight areas of relative strength and weakness and support evidence-informed decision-making at a local level.

One such opportunity for comparison exists with the Brock Healthy Youth Project (BHYP). BHYP is a research project led by a transdisciplinary team of researchers dedicated to longitudinally examining health-risk behaviours and well-being across adolescence. BHYP involves 1,500 youth in the Niagara Region of Ontario (participants were 8 to 13 years old in the first year of the study).

Comparing the Index to regional BHYP data*, some indicators are similar across the two data sets. For instance, the Index reports that about 36 per cent of 15 to 17 year olds report high levels of time

pressure. In comparison, 35 per cent of the BHYP sample reported often feeling bothered/stressed by not having enough time (this was the second-most reported daily stressor among BHYP participants). The Index reports that about 69 per cent of 11 to 15 year olds are involved in groups and activities. BHYP data indicated that 96 per cent of our sample report being involved in at least one organized sport activity and 75 per cent report being involved in at least one organized non-sport activity. The Index reports that close to 84 per cent of 12 to 17 year olds have a strong sense of belonging to local community. Comparably, BHYP data finds that 73 per cent of our sample report often or almost always feeling like they belong to their neighbourhoods.

Similarities and differences between national and regional data may exist for various reasons, such as regionally specific factors that influence well-being (e.g., unemployment rates and access to education, housing, arts and culture). For example, according to Statistics Canada, the unemployment rate in Niagara is roughly 6.6 per cent compared to a national rate of 5.8 per cent – a factor that could influence well-being among youth in the region.

Using both national and regional

data supports comparisons between national averages and local realities – helping communities highlight priority areas, plan more effectively, track improvements and develop strong cases for support around local needs. Although projects like BHYP do not exist within every region in Canada, local universities, research institutes, community foundations and public health organizations offer ideal opportunities for partnerships around data comparisons.

To learn more about BHYP please visit us online at www.brocku.ca/bhyp, or email us at: bhyp@brocku.ca.

**Please note that these numbers represent year two, self-reported data from BHYP, and that BHYP measures may not be exactly comparable with the indicators in the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being.*

The Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children Survey:

A Wealth of Information

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Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) is a cross-national research study aimed at increasing understanding of young people's health in their social and environmental contexts. HBSC was initiated in 1982 by researchers from three countries, and now some 50 countries and regions participate in Europe, North America and Israel. Canada has participated since 1990. Every four years, HBSC Canada conducts a school-based adolescent health survey, typically with over 20,000 students in grades 6 to 10 from across our country participating.

Internationally, HBSC is sponsored by the World Health Organization and coordinated out of Glasgow University (Scotland) and the University of Bergen (Norway). Funded nationally by the Public Health Agency of Canada, HBSC in Canada is supported extensively by the Pan Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health. The HBSC Canada research team is coordinated out of Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and consists of applied health researchers located at Queen's, McGill University, McMaster University, the University of British Columbia, the University of Prince Edward Island, the University of Waterloo, the Université de Montréal and the Public Health Agency of Canada.

HBSC study items cover a range of health behaviours, outcomes and their possible determinants. The study also uses a population health framework, recognizing that the health of young people is determined at individual and 'ecological' levels, including families, schools, peer groups and communities. In accordance with the World Health Organization perspective, health is acknowledged as a resource for everyday living and not just the absence of disease. As such, the HBSC regards young people's health in its broadest sense, encompassing physical, social and emotional well-being.

Findings from the HBSC are increasingly used to inform and influence health promotion, education and policy initiatives at national and international levels. Examples include the provision of evidence to support national physical activity report cards, anti-bullying and anti-violence campaigns, and legislative changes such as the recent cannabis laws implemented in Canada. The survey also provides an important source of data for health surveillance and monitoring. The current report provides an excellent example of such an effort.

HBSC, in Canada and many other countries, is one of the leading adolescent health promotion

surveys in the world. In recent years, UNICEF (both internationally and in Canada) has drawn upon the HBSC study to provide contemporary information on the health and well-being of young people. HBSC is an important ongoing survey that provides foundational data for high profile reports. In the past, this has included several of the UNICEF 'Report Card Series,' in which the health of young people is compared and contrasted between developed countries.

In this report, the most recent cycle of HBSC has contributed to the development of the Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being. The Index provides an excellent example of how HBSC is being applied to the 'benchmarking' of population health indicators for children and young people in Canada. Such evidence is essential for the planning of child and youth health interventions, and ultimately the health of such populations globally.

More information on HBSC can be found on its international website (<http://www.euro.who.int/en/home>). National reports are archived by the Public Health Agency of Canada (<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/childhood-adolescence/programs-initiatives/school-health/health-behaviour-school-aged-children.html>).



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