

Alternative Report on Canada's Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Submitted by



**CHILDREN
FIRST**
CANADA

**LES ENFANTS
D'ABORD**
CANADA

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1. Methodology

Children First Canada is a strong, effective and independent voice for the 8 million kids living in Canada. We have a bold and ambitious vision that together we can make Canada the best place in the world for kids to grow up.©

We are an alliance of Canada's leading children's charities and hospitals, research institutes, corporations that invest in kids, teachers, parents and kids themselves.¹ We are improving children's wellbeing by building greater awareness amongst Canadians about the urgent needs of kids in our country and mobilizing government and other key influencers to change the status quo.

Children First Canada is a national organization with staff located in Calgary and Ottawa. In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge that we live, work and play on the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksika, Kainai, Piikani), the Tsuut'ina, the Îyâxe Nakoda Nations, the Métis Nation (Region 3), and all people who make their homes in the Treaty 7 region of Southern Alberta, and on the traditional, unceded territories of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg People.

This report was drafted based on our efforts to promote the rights of children in Canada over the past 5 years since our organization was founded in 2015. The contents draw from research, programs and campaigns that our organization has launched, and all our programs have directly involved children and youth in planning, implementation and evaluation.

Several key publications from Children First Canada are cited in this report:

- [The Kids Are Not Alright](#): a landmark report on the state of Canada's children (2016)
- [The Canadian Children's Charter](#) (2018)
- [Raising Canada 2018](#): a report on children in Canada, their health and wellbeing
- [Raising Canada 2018: Economic Commentary](#) – a case for investing in children
- [Raising Canada 2019](#): a vote for children is a vote for Canada

This report was written by Children First Canada staff in consultation with our Youth Ambassadors and contains a letter and quotes written by the Youth Ambassadors.

"People like to say that 'children are our future' but we are also the present.

We are Canadian citizens. If we could vote, perhaps the issues we face would be a greater focus.

Listen to our voices and take action to support children.

We are citizens of this country, present and future, disempowered, but as important as any adult. 18 is just a number."

Roman Wolfli, 12 years old from Calgary, AB



¹ A complete list of the organizations represented on Children First Canada's Council of Champions is available on our website: <https://childrenfirstcanada.org/our-team>

2. Introduction

Canada is one of the most prosperous countries in the world. Yet we continue to fail our children. Fully one-third of Canada's children don't enjoy a safe and healthy childhood.²

Canada ranks 8th globally for prosperity yet shockingly, only 25th out of 41 OECD nations for child wellbeing. UNICEF reports that Canada ranks 21st for Child Poverty; 27th for Children's Health and Safety; 27th for Child Obesity; 21st for Bullying; and 24th for Children's Life Satisfaction.³

Children First Canada's landmark study **The Kids Are Not Alright**, which was published in 2016, found that 75% of adults believe that more children's programs and services are critical for the wellbeing of our children. The report was widely disseminated across Canada through a public relations campaign and events in Ottawa, Toronto and Calgary. Canadians were shocked and angered by the deeply concerning state of affairs for kids in our country, and the report generated significant attention by media and the general public on the need for action.

In 2018, Children First Canada partnered with the O'Brien Institute for Public Health to complete a study on the state of childhood in Canada and issued the **Raising Canada** report. The report sounded the alarm bell on the state of children's wellbeing and the lack of protection for their rights.

There are nearly 8 million children and youth below the age of 18, representing nearly a quarter of Canada's population. While many kids are doing just fine, far too many young lives are in jeopardy.

According to the Raising Canada report:

- Canada's rate of infant mortality is among the highest of OECD countries, with the rates for Nunavut being three times higher than the national average.
- Accidents continue to be the leading cause of death of children in Canada, and each year thousands of children are hospitalized due to preventable injuries.
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death for children and youth, and Canada is ranked in the top five countries for the highest child suicide rates globally.
- Hospitalizations and Emergency Department visits for mental health concerns have increased considerably over the past decade.
- Nutrition, physical activity and weight continue to need attention, with more than 25 per cent of children reportedly being obese or overweight.

² Raising Canada 2019.

³ UNICEF Report Card 14.

- Food insecurity and inadequate housing plague far too many children: one in five children live in poverty, and one in 10 experiences moderate or severe food insecurity, with poverty rates being highest amongst indigenous children.
- Child abuse represents a public health crisis for Canada, with one in three Canadians reporting some form of child abuse before the age of 16.
- One quarter of Canada's children are vulnerable in one or more areas of development prior to entering the first grade.

Following the 2018 Raising Canada report, Children First Canada subsequently published an economic analysis which put a price tag on the cost of inaction:

- Child Abuse - \$23B per year
- Childhood Obesity - \$22B per year
- Bullying - \$4B per year and growing.⁴

Clearly, there is not only a moral imperative to invest in children, but also a compelling business case for action. Canada simply cannot afford to maintain the status quo.

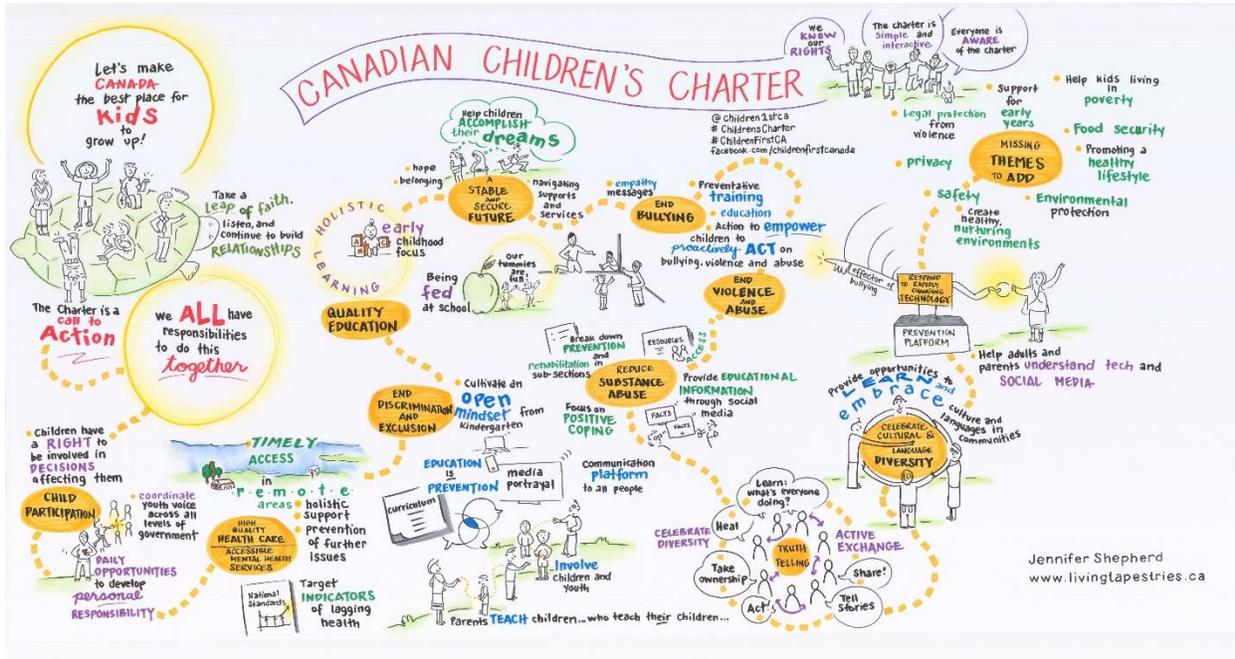
Children First Canada believes our country can become the best place in the world for kids to grow up, and that children and youth must be at the heart of any plans to improve their lives.

In 2017, as Canada was commemorating its 150th year since Confederation, Children First Canada launched an exciting project to engage thousands of kids across the country in discussions about the problems they face and the solutions they envision. The process included focus group discussions, an online survey, online townhalls, and two national summits, involving more than 2000 children and youth.

The process resulted in the creation of the **Canadian Children's Charter**: a plan by children and for children to make Canada a world-leading country for kids to grow up in. It is an urgent call to action that received support from the Prime Minister and other key government and business leaders.

A full copy of the Canadian Children's Charter is included as a reference document, and pieces of the Charter are included as examples in Section 3 of this report to demonstrate the specific violations of children's rights that children see as their most urgent priorities for action.

⁴ [Raising Canada 2018: Economic Commentary](#) – a case for investing in children.



Jennifer Shepherd
www.livingtapestries.ca

Preamble to the Canadian Children's Charter

We imagine a Canada where every child can achieve their full potential, and where the rights of every child are fully realized. Canada is legally bound to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of every child as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The current reality is that the vast majority of Canadians have never learned about children's rights, and far too many children do not enjoy the protection of their rights.

There is a huge gap between the promises made to children, and the harsh realities that millions of children face each day due to poverty, abuse, discrimination, along with threats to the physical and emotional health. These inequities experienced by Canada's children are not acceptable.

We call upon all Canadians to rise to the collective challenge to invest in Canada's children and take urgent action to close the gaps. We need to be able to realize our full rights and all Canadians need to support children in advocating for their rights. Every child can be an advocate. Every adult can be an ally. We note the following issues that require urgent action so that every child in Canada can thrive.

(See full Children's Charter for the call to action)

The children have spoken - we have listened - and together we are committed to bringing their vision into reality.

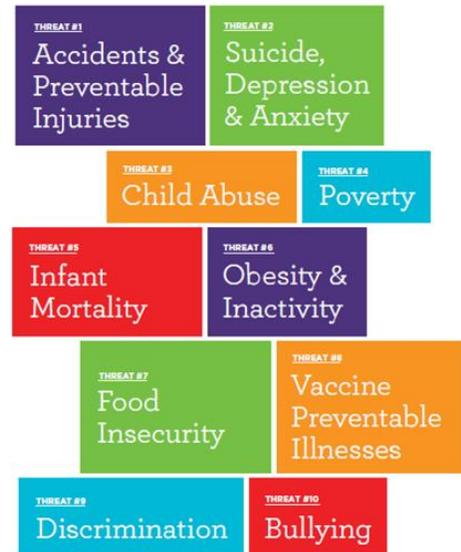
In 2019, Children First Canada focused our advocacy efforts on putting children's issues on the radar during the federal election. The Raising Canada 2019 report highlighted the top 10 threats to Canada's kids (*pictured to the right*) and called on all federal political parties and candidates to consider what would happen **#IfKidsCouldVote**.

Specifically, our election campaign called on all federal political parties and candidates to support three calls to action that would measurably improve the wellbeing of children and ensure the protection of children's rights:

- Establish a federal Commissioner for Children and Youth
- Create a National Strategy for Children and Youth
- Publish a Children's Budget

Raising Canada: Election 2019

Called on all federal parties and candidates to tackle the top 10 threats to kids in Canada

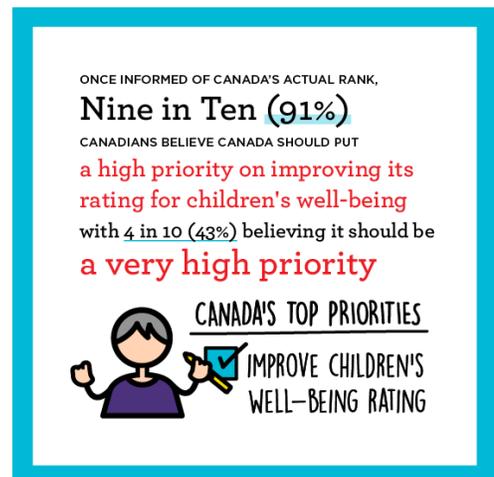


An important consideration regarding the Canadian context is that the vast majority of Canadians are unaware of the huge gaps with the protection of children's rights, and we need to bust some persistent myths about what it's like to grow up in our country.

Our most recent poll in November 2019 revealed that only 3 percent of Canadians are

aware of the harsh reality that we rank 25th out of 41 wealthy countries for children's wellbeing.

The good news is that once Canadians become aware of the harsh reality, they strongly support the need for action, with an overwhelming 91 percent believing that Canada should put a high priority on improving its rating for child wellbeing.



Going forward, Children First Canada's strategy calls for a broad multi-pronged approach, harnessing the collective impact of Canada's leading children's charities and hospitals, research centres, community and government leaders, corporations and, critically, kids and their parents. Strategies include:

- Creating a national movement to build greater awareness among Canadians about the urgent need to advance our kid's wellbeing, and ways they can help;
- Conducting research to deliver evidence-based policy solutions around children's issues including: child poverty, health care, education, obesity, food insecurity, discrimination and bullying;
- Educating and empowering children and youth, equipping them with skills and competencies, and offering them opportunities to be leaders today and in the future;
- Mobilizing key influencers in government, corporations and frontline agencies to recognize the urgency around children's issues and to take action.

Children First Canada is creating a national movement just for kids. We speak up for children, we listen to children and we empower and enable children to speak up for themselves.

Together we will make the Children's Charter a reality - a beacon that reflects their rights and secures their future - as well as ensuring our own.

“As a youth, it is essential that our government takes concrete action on the issues facing children and youth because we are not given a voice in the decisions that affect us.

It is crucial for our government to bear in mind our nation's silenced youth when making decisions on important issues such as our environment and the climate crisis.

I am hopeful for a government that listens to Canada's youth as the leaders of today and of tomorrow.”

17-year-old Lyza Ells from Antigonish, Nova Scotia

3. Evidence of Rights Violations

GENERAL MEASURES OF IMPLEMENTATION (art. 4, 42, 44(6))

There are numerous violations of the rights of children with regards to the obligations of the Government of Canada to undertake the general measures of implementation:

Law Reform: The Government of Canada does not systemically ensure that its laws and other policies comply with Canada's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Government has implemented a Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) process to "assess how diverse groups of women, men and non-binary people may experience policies, programs and initiatives"⁵, but to date this process has not been systematically used with regards to the rights of children in Canada. The use of the GBA+ process to conduct a Child Rights Impact Analysis on Canada's laws would significantly improve Canada's compliance with the duty to undertake legal reform.

Budgeting and Children: Children First Canada and other child advocacy organizations have repeatedly called upon the government to publish a children's budget and ensure greater transparency and accountability with regards to federal expenditures on children. We have provided opportunities for children and youth to meet with the Minister of Finance and other key Parliamentarians to discuss the need for a Children's Budget, and we have also undertaken our own economic analysis regarding the cost of failing to protect the rights of children.

In 2019, the Government of Canada took a first step towards budgeting for children and youth, through the publication of a booklet that accompanied the federal budget that focused on investing in young Canadians. While we welcome this first step towards budgeting for children, we have called upon the government to fulfill its duty to do more thorough child rights budgeting.

The next federal budget is due to be released in late March or early April 2020, and we will continue to monitor Canada's actions regarding children's budgeting and call for stronger transparency and accountability using a child rights framework.

National Plans of Action (NPAs): In 2002, Canada played an active role in the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children and the creation of the global plan of action "A World Fit for Children." In accordance with the global goals, Canada subsequently developed and adopted a National Plan of Action for Children in 2004, called "A Canada Fit for Children." The process of creating the National Plan of Action was led by former Senator Landon Pearson and entailed extensive consultation with the federal and provincial levels of government, civil society, and children and youth.

There was a change of government in 2006, and the National Plan of Action was subsequently set aside. More than a decade has since passed and the government has changed several times over, yet no plans have been put in place to establish a new National Plan of Action. This policy void has contributed to a marked decline in the implementation of children's rights, and specifically a decline in key indicators for child health that have resulted in a deterioration in Canada's global ranking. Between 2007-2017, Canada fell from 12th to 25th place among OECD countries for child wellbeing.

⁵ Source: Status of Women Canada, <https://cfc-swc.gc.ca/gba-acis/index-en.html>

Children First Canada has held high level talks with all federal political parties in an effort to build consensus on the need for a national strategy and plan of action. We actively campaigned during the most recent federal election, calling upon all political parties to commit to the creation of a National Strategy for Children and Youth, and we are committed to holding the government accountable to its obligations to put such a plan in place without further delay.

Monitoring Mechanisms: Canada has established an Inter-Departmental Working Group for Children's Rights as a means of monitoring the implementation of the CRC. While Children First Canada appreciates the efforts of the Working Group, we also recognize that this mechanism is not functioning as effectively as it should be, and that greater effort is required on the part of the government to ensure that there is full transparency and accountability.

Children First Canada has consistently called upon the government to establish a federal Commissioner for Children and Youth as an independent office of government, reporting to Parliament, and accountable to all Canadians, with a robust mandate that follows the Paris Principles for Independent Human Rights Institutions. The Commissioner's mandate must include the responsibility for monitoring Canada's compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and ensure greater coordination between all levels of government to fully implement the CRC.

Child rights education, awareness raising and training: Thirty years into the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is both surprising and deeply disappointing that the vast majority of Canadians have never heard of the treaty and are not aware of the government's obligations to respect, protect and fulfill the rights of kids in Canada. There is no clear ownership within the government regarding its responsibility for ensuring child rights education, awareness raising and training, and efforts to promote the rights of children largely fall to civil society.

When Children First Canada hosts programs and events, it is common for children to share that their participation in our programs is the very first time that they have learned about their rights. It is rare that children learn about their rights in their homes or schools, and they often express deep frustration with the lack of meaningful effort by the government or other duty bearers to uphold their responsibility for making children's rights widely known or understood.

We continue to urge the federal government to fulfill its obligations to promote child rights education, awareness raising and training and to ensure that these functions are clearly defined within the mandate of a federal Minister's mandate and supported through the allocation of adequate resources to execute this responsibility.

Independent human rights institutions for children: As previously noted, Canada has not fulfilled its obligation to establish an independent human rights institution for children. Some provinces and territories have children's advocates, but their mandates vary significantly, and their mandates are at times in jeopardy such as was recently demonstrated through the closure of the office of the Child and Youth Advocate for Ontario.

There have been extensive studies and attempts to establish an independent federal Commissioner for Children and Youth, including recommendations by the Senate Committee on

Human Rights and several Private Members' Bills, but to date but the government has not fulfilled its obligations.

Most recently Children First Canada worked in partnership with Children's Healthcare Canada, the Canadian Paediatric Society, the Pediatric Chairs of Canada, and UNICEF to prepare a pre-budget submission calling on the Government of Canada to take the long-awaited and much needed step of investing in the creation of the Commissioner for Children and Youth, with a proposed budget of \$8 million annually. The budget submission is available [here](#).

Coordination efforts and mechanisms for child rights: As previously noted, there are no robust mechanisms in place to ensure the coordination of efforts for children's rights in Canada. There is a significant gap with regards to coordination between the federal and provincial levels of government, and between government, civil society and children.

The establishment of a federal Commissioner for Children and Youth would make a significant contribution towards ensuring that the gaps in coordination are closed, and that all key stakeholders are working in concert to fulfill their duties under the UN CRC.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES:

Children First Canada has grave concerns regarding Canada's failure to uphold the general principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Most notably, based on the priorities that children and youth have articulated in the Canadian Children's Charter and the research findings of our Raising Canada reports, we wish to note the following:

Non-discrimination (art. 2):

While many Canadians pride themselves on being part of a multi-cultural and richly diverse society, racism and discrimination are an ever-present reality. The legacy of colonialism continues to impact the health and wellbeing of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples and the realization of their rights as enshrined in the UN CRC and UNDRIP.

The rate of death due to injury for Indigenous children is four times higher than non-Indigenous children, and Indigenous children are more than two times more likely to grow up in poverty. These conditions are the result of discrimination on the part of society and on the part of government policy, racialized beliefs and systems that have been the norm for generations.

Racism is also a reality for many other members of Canadian society. The impact of racism on the health status of children, adolescents, emerging adults, and their families is profound, impacting both physical and mental health in childhood and throughout their lifespan.

A recent position paper issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics notes that "failure to address racism will continue to undermine health equity for all children, adolescents, emerging adults, and their families," which is equally relevant to the situation of children in Canada.

Best interest of the child (art. 3)

A country that respects the best interests of its children ensures that policies and resources are dedicated to advancing the rights of its youngest citizens. As is abundantly clear from the contents of this report, Canada has fallen short of its obligations to protect the rights of child.

Over the course of the past decade, Canada's global ranking for the wellbeing of children has fallen from 12th to 25th place and has backtracked on key indicators for the health and safety of children.

Children First Canada continues to call upon the Government of Canada to fulfill its obligations under the UN CRC and to ensure that the best interests of children are protected through the establishment of key national policies such as an independent federal Commissioner for Children and Youth, a National Strategy for Children and Youth, and a Children's Budget.

Right to life, survival and development (art. 6)

The Raising Canada research has demonstrated that fully one third of Canada's kids do not enjoy a safe and healthy childhood, and many experience threats to their very survival. The most recent Raising Canada report in September 2019 highlighted the top 10 threats to childhood, each of which undermines the rights of every child to life, survival and development.

With regards to Article 6, we wish to note the following threats to child survival, but also wish to urge the Committee to consider the full top 10 threats to childhood as they each undermine children's rights to life, survival and development:

Threat #1: Accidents and Preventable Injuries

Accidents and preventable injuries are the leading cause of death for children in Canada. The Canadian Pediatric Society reports that the three leading causes of injury-related deaths for children (age 0-19) are motor-vehicle collisions (17%), drowning (15%), and threats to breathing (11%).

The risk of death due to injury is far greater for First Nations children than non-Indigenous children (26% of deaths amongst First Nations' children are due to injuries, compared to 6% of the non-Indigenous Canadian population).

Injuries also account for a high number of hospitalizations among children. In 2013-14, 17,500 hospitalizations of children and youth were for injuries, with approximately 700 of these for serious bike injuries. A total of 3,000 of these hospitalizations were for injuries intentionally caused by others. Falls were the leading cause of hospitalization (37%).

Threat #2: Suicide, Anxiety and Depression

Suicide is the second leading cause of death of children, and in 2015, Canada was one of the five countries with the highest teenage suicide rates, at a rate of over 10 per 100,000 teens.

A 2016 survey conducted by Kids Help Phone found that one in five children aged 13-18 reported seriously considering suicide in the past 12 months; 46% of those youth reported having a plan. Girls are two times more likely to seriously consider suicide compared to boys (girls - 67%, boys - 33%).

Over the last decade (2007-08 to 2016-17) there has been a 66% increase in emergency department visits, and a 55% increase in hospitalizations of children and youth (age 5-24 years) due to mental health concerns. Approximately 2,500 children (10-17 years of age) are hospitalized every year due to self-harm injuries, with girls making up 80% of those children. Self-harm hospitalizations increased 90% between 2009-2014.



Threat #5: Infant Mortality

Canada ranks 30th amongst 44 OECD countries for infant mortality rates (deaths per 1,000 live births and age at time of death <1 year of age). All European OECD countries have a lower infant mortality rate than Canada's, ranging from Finland at 1.9, to Greece at 4.2 deaths per 1,000 live births. Canada's infant mortality rate has remained at approximately five deaths per 1,000 live births since 2006. In 2016, the rate was 4.5 deaths per 1,000 live births; for males this rate was 4.6 and for females 4.4. This rate varies considerably across the country. The lowest rate was in B.C., at 3.4 deaths per 1,000 live births, and the highest was in Nunavut at 17.7.

Canada's infant mortality rate has remained at approximately five deaths per 1,000 live births since 2006. In 2016, the rate was 4.5 deaths per 1,000 live births; for males this rate was 4.6 and for females 4.4. This rate varies considerably across the country. The lowest rate was in B.C., at 3.4 deaths per 1,000 live births, and the highest was in Nunavut at 17.7. While Canada's overall infant mortality rate is concerning, there is a huge disparity for children in the North who face a far greater risk of death than their peers across the country. In the North, babies are more likely to be born premature, to live far from medical care, and to be exposed to other threats to their wellbeing such as inadequate housing and food insecurity.

Respect for the views of the child (art. 12):

Children First Canada acknowledges the efforts of the federal government to establish more formal mechanisms to consult and engage youth through the establishment of a National Youth Policy, the Youth Secretariat, and the Prime Minister's Youth Advisory Council. While these efforts to engage youth are important, we have continued to draw the government's attention to the lack of measures to respect the views of children and adolescents under the age of 16.

Article 12 protects the rights of every child to participate in decisions that affect their lives in accordance with their evolving capacity, and we urge the government to establish formal mechanisms to respect the views of children of all ages.

The creation of an independent Commissioner for Children and Youth would provide a meaningful way of ensuring that the views of children are respected, as the Commissioner's mandate would require them to consult and actively engage children and youth.

Children First Canada has also recommended that the Prime Minister lower the age requirement for his Youth Advisory Council, and we have proposed other mechanisms such as the establishment of a Young Canadians' Parliament (or a "Children's Parliament"), which would serve as a means for children and youth to learn about their rights, participate in the development of laws and other policies to protect their rights, and provide a means by which the government could consult children and youth.

Violence against children:

Children First Canada calls upon the federal government to address the grave violations of children's rights to protection from all forms of violence, citing violations of articles 19, 39, 37(a), 28(2) and 34.

In particular, we draw the Committee's attention to the issue of child abuse, which our 2019 Raising Canada report named as the #3 threat to childhood.

One third of Canadians has experienced some form of child abuse before the age of 16; 26% experienced physical abuse, 10% experienced sexual abuse, and 8% had exposure to intimate partner violence. Research has shown that child abuse costs Canadians an estimated \$23 billion annually.

The majority (65%) of victims of childhood physical and/or sexual abuse reported having been abused between one and six times, while 20% reported between seven and 21 instances. One in seven victims (15%) reported having been abused at least 22 times. More than nine in 10 (93%) victims of childhood physical and/or sexual abuse did not report the abuse to either police or child protection services before they turned 15, and 67% did not speak to anyone, including friends or family.

In 2016, there were approximately 54,900 child victims (under the age of 17) of violence reported to police. Children and youth represent one out of six victims (16%) of violent crimes, and three out of 10 of child and youth victims were abused by a family member. Child abuse is also a considerable factor in the hospitalization of children. In 2013-2014 500 children (0 to 18 years) were hospitalized per year as a result of assault, with two-thirds of these historically being boys. Between 2009 and 2014, however, the rate has decreased for boys and increased for girls. Bodily force and other abuse make up the majority of hospitalizations due to assault.

DISABILITY, HEALTH AND WELFARE

As noted in the Raising Canada reports and the Canadian Children's Charter, kids in Canada experience numerous violations of their rights to health and welfare. In particular we note the follow violations:

Measures taken to ensure dignity, self-reliance and active participation in the community for children with disabilities (art. 23)

A quarter of children with disabilities live in poverty, though the costs associated with raising a child with a disability can be up to three times that of raising a child without a disability, which can be overwhelming for many families.

Survival and development (art. 6(2))

Children First Canada once again underscores the grave violations of a child's right to life, survival and development, as evidenced by the top 10 threats to childhood, and calls on the federal government to put in place a National Strategy for children to address these issues and ensure the full implementation of children's rights.

Health and health services, in particular primary health care (art. 24)

While most Canadians pride themselves on our publicly funded healthcare system, our Raising Canada reports and the Children's Charter have clearly brought to life grave violations of children's rights to health and health services.

The marked decline in Canada's global ranking for child wellbeing over the course of the past decade is largely due to lack of progress on key child health indicators, namely the following:⁶

⁶ Source: UNICEF Report Card 14.

HEALTH (Sustainable Development / SDG GOAL 3) — Canada ranks 29

- Infant mortality
- Teen suicide
- Teen drunkenness
- Teen births

POVERTY (SDG GOAL 1) — Canada ranks 32

- Child poverty
- Social transfers for children

FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION (GOAL 2) — Canada ranks 37

- Child food security
- Unhealthy weight
- Breastfeeding

PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS (GOAL 16) — Canada ranks 37

- Child homicide
- Bullying

We once again urge the Committee to consider the top 10 threats to childhood highlighted in the 2019 Raising Canada report, and we call upon the government to address these issues with a sense of urgency.

Standard of living and measures, including material assistance and support programmes with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing, to ensure the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development and reduce poverty and inequality (art. 27, 1–3)

Children First Canada notes the persistent violations of children's rights to grow up free from poverty. While Canada ranks as the 8th most prosperous country in the world, far too many children experience poverty that not only diminishes their ability to enjoy a safe and healthy childhood, but also impacts their ability to enjoy lifelong health.

Child poverty is a persistent threat to childhood in Canada and is the single largest determinant of health according to the World Health Organization. Kids who grow up in poverty are more likely to experience "poor health, be overweight or obese, suffer from asthma, have poorly managed diabetes, experience mental health problems, and die early."

According to Statistics Canada, the number of kids living in poverty dropped in 2017, and is estimated to be between 9.0% (MBM) and 12.1% (LIM). Progress was marked in all provinces with the exception of Nova Scotia where the number of children in poverty jumped from 15.7% in 2015 to 17.1% (MBM) in 2017.

While it is encouraging to see progress, far too many children continue to grow up below the poverty line, and we note that particular groups of children are especially vulnerable. As previously noted, a quarter of children with disabilities live in poverty, though the costs associated with raising a child with a disability can be up to three times that of raising a child without a disability, which can be overwhelming for many families.

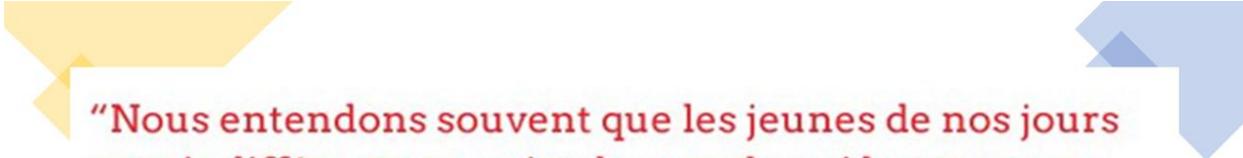
Disturbingly, the rate of poverty for Indigenous children is significantly higher than other children in Canada, with little improvement over the last decade. Just under half of First Nation children, both on- and off-reserve, live in poverty; rising to more than 50% when looking at First Nations children living on-reserve.

SPECIAL PROTECTION MEASURES

Children First Canada notes the violations of the rights of children to special measures of protection, and specifically draws the Committee's attention to the rights of children belonging to a minority or an indigenous group (art. 30).

On January 16, 2106, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal found the Government of Canada guilty of discriminating against First Nations children in its provision of the First Nations Child and Family Services Program and by failing to implement Jordan's Principle.⁷ The CHRT has since issued nine non-compliance orders concerning the government's failure to comply with the original decision.

Children First Canada commends the First Nations Caring Society for its efforts to persistently advocate for the rights of First Nations children and we call upon the federal government to implement the Spirit Bear Plan and ensure the full protection of the rights of First Nations, Métis and Inuit children as enshrined in the UN CRC and UNDRIP.



“Nous entendons souvent que les jeunes de nos jours sont indifférents au sujet du monde qui les entoure: mais cette apathie perçue est plutôt un découragement, car ils savent que leur voix n'est pas valorisée. Nous ne pouvons pas tourner le dos à 8 millions d'enfants qui ont besoin de plus de soutien du gouvernement et qui veulent voir un changement. Chaque enfant a un rêve: c'est aux dirigeants de leur donner les outils pour le réaliser.”

Amina Sanogo, 17 ans, Ottawa



⁷ Source: <https://fncaringsociety.com/i-am-witness>

4. Children's Views and Experiences

A Letter to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child from Youth Ambassadors of Children First Canada:

Dear UN Committee for the Rights of the Child,

As young people, we are greatly troubled by the current conditions that face our nation's children and youth. We live in a prosperous country that is reinforced with complex, developed systems, yet vast gaps continue to exist in the fabric of Canada's support structure for children and youth. Indigenous youth, students struggling with mental health, and children growing up in poverty, among countless other vulnerable groups in Canada's 8 million young people, are falling through the cracks. Taking care of our future is a concern that, above all, needs to be addressed with urgency. We need action.

We have been active participants and youth ambassadors with Children First Canada for the past three years. Recently, we were invited to attend several meetings with Children First Canada on Parliament Hill, where we contributed to discussions on the importance of youth voice in decision making. We have also been able to take part in planning and hosting several events working to empower young people, including the 2017 and 2018 National Summits to create the Canadian Children's Charter and the 2019 National Child Day event and campaign.

The Children's Charter is a document drafted for young people by young people. The charter, for one, outlines the criteria that young people feel they need in order to maintain wellbeing. Additionally, the document touches on the importance of maintaining sustainable prosperity for our future generations. Interacting, collaborating, and learning alongside these intelligent young leaders revealed to me just how important a youth perspective can be. Serious concerns were also brought forward that highlighted the urgent need for an increase in support and encouragement for the voices of young people across Canada.

The amount of energy, drive, and lived experience that the children and youth brought to the table throughout these events was astounding, a force that could create widespread change.

From the powerful inspiration of the Children's Charter, an idea blossomed for a Children's Parliament. A Children's Parliament, at its core, educates and engages young people on democracy at a federal level. The idea is that children and youth learn about the way our nation functions, locally and globally, in order to take charge of Canada's future in a way that builds a better world. A Children's Parliament is beautiful in that it hands down respect and responsibility to our nation's future leaders and demands that a youth perspective is recognized in decision-making at a federal level.

Education is a powerful tool - education translates to empowerment. When people know their rights, they are better able to advocate for themselves; can the same not be said for children? Youth are entitled to rights, but what use do these rights serve if children don't know about them?

At our National Child Day event this year, it was disheartening to see the number of children who admitted to not knowing about the Children's Charter or the Convention on the Rights of the Child. While adult citizens are arguably more apt to seek out their entitlements under the law, children are not. Most wouldn't know how or wouldn't feel that it's in their power to do. In

this sense, children are vulnerable. They are vulnerable to manipulation, to misguidance, and to a simple lack of awareness.

The onus of this naivety should fall on government. Government is responsible for public education, government is responsible for ensuring the safety and security of children, and thus government should be teaching youth about the rights bestowed unto them.

When a society's government invests in the education and empowerment of its youth, what they're really doing is investing in the future - a future in which individuals are infrequently taken advantage of, infrequently misinformed, and more prepared to stand up for themselves. Is that not the premise of democracy?

Children should know they have rights. They should know that they can lobby and write letters for a cause, and they should know that they have power over elected officials. They should know that their political representatives fear them - not because of wealthy parents, status, or private affiliations, but because they are future constituents. One day, they will be at that ballot station. One day, they will influence who gets to sit in government.

When youth know that they have that kind of influence, when they truly have an understanding of what it means to be a citizen of democracy - that is empowerment.

People like to say that 'children are our future' but we are also the present. We are Canadian citizens. If we could vote, perhaps the issues we face would be a greater focus. Listen to our voices and take action to support children. We are citizens of this country, present and future, disempowered, but as important as any adult. 18 is just a number.

As a last point, we want to speak on the importance of inclusivity in empowerment. The Children's Parliament must work alongside other systems of support, especially through education, to ensure that it allows for representation everywhere. From our experience, all of the incredible opportunities for empowerment that we have received arose from support and encouragement at home, something that we are privileged to have access to.

It deeply concerns us that, primarily because of this privilege, we were able to become leaders in our community. A counter observation, that gave us great passion for this issue, arose when we saw the empathy and openness in the young people we have worked with. What was often considered in discussion with children and youth, firstly, was who was being left behind.

We hope that this contribution allows for the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child to consider the proposition. It is essential to ask us, the future generation, what we need. If all initiatives and ideas are attained through adult speculation, rather than lived experience, then no progress will be made on children's rights in Canada.

The leaders of tomorrow are waiting to be considered in our world's decision making, with creative, sustainable propositions on how a wholesome wellbeing for our children and youth can exist.

Sincerely,

Kiah Heneke-Flindall, age 17, Ottawa

Sagni Kuma, age 17, Ottawa

Roman Wolfli, age 12, Calgary

5. Recommendations to the Government of Canada

Children First Canada urges our federal government to swiftly take action on the following:

- Appoint an independent federal **Commissioner for Children and Youth** to serve as an independent office of government with a mandate to raise the profile of children in Canada, promote rights of children, hold government accountable, and speak with and on behalf of children. In order for the Commission to address the rights of First Nations, Métis and Inuit children, we encourage the federal government to work nation to nation, respecting and including the self-governance rights of Indigenous peoples, when considering this proposal.
- Put in place a **National Strategy for Children and Youth**, led by the federal government in consultation with the provinces and territories and First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. The aim of the strategy would be to urgently tackle the top 10 threats to children's health and wellbeing, and to ensure the full implementation of the Canadian Children's Charter and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Publish a **Children's Budget** so that there is full transparency on the federal expenditures on Canada's children. A children's budget will help ensure that adequate resources are being directed towards the top 10 threats to childhood along with the full implementation of the Canadian Children's Charter and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Promote **child rights education, awareness raising and training**, and fulfill the government's duty to ensure that the UN Convention on the Rights is widely known and understood by Canadian society, and in particular by children and youth and those with duties to protect the rights of children.
- Ensure the **right of children and youth to participate** in decision making, including ensuring that there are mechanisms in place to support their participation in policy making that affects their lives such as the creation of a Young Canadians' Parliament ("Children's Parliament").
- **Ratify the 3rd Optional Protocol to the UN CRC for the Communications Procedure** and enable children and youth access to international justice when their rights are denied.

6. Conclusion

Every child has rights, and every Canadian has a role to play in fulfilling the rights of children. More than 30 years have passed since the creation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and while some progress has been made, far too many gaps remain.

It may take a village to raise a child, but it takes a nation to raise a nation. Achieving the vision of the Canadian Children's Charter and the fulfillment of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child will require a concerted effort on the part of all Canadians, at a individual and societal level, including: all levels of government; parents and guardians; child and youth serving organizations such as charities, schools, and children's hospitals; research institutes; the private sector; and of course children themselves.

Canadians strongly support the need for action to improve the lives of all 8 million kids living in Canada. Not only do they believe we have a moral imperative, they also believe that it makes good economic sense. Nearly 9 in 10 Canadians say that investing in children will pay off and save the need for additional expenditures in the future.

Efforts to protect the rights of children in Canada must occur within the context of a nation to nation framework, respecting the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination and the enjoyment of their unique rights enshrined in UNDRIP.

Together, all Canadians must rise to the collective challenge to invest in Canada's children and take urgent action to close the gaps.

Children First Canada urges the federal government to seize the opportunity of the periodic review by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to closely consider the recommendations contained within this report and the views of other civil society organizations participating in this process, and most importantly, to listen to children themselves. The views of children and youth laid out in the Canadian Children's Charter are a platform for action. The children have spoken, and we urge you to listen and to act.

7. References

[Canadian Children's Charter](#) (available in English and French)
If Kids Could Vote: Election [Handout](#) and [Toolkit](#)
[Raising Canada 2018](#)
[Raising Canada 2018: Economic Commentary](#)
[Raising Canada 2019: a vote for children is a vote for Canada](#)
[Stand Up For Kids: Federal Pre-Budget Consultations 2020](#)