

Coronavirus pandemic taking its toll on children's overall safety and health: report ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A troubling report released Tuesday shows Canadian children are much less safe and healthy than before the pandemic began.

"Raising Canada 2020" opens by acknowledging child wellness in Canada has been on the decline ever since the high watermark in 2007, when UNICEF ranked the country 12th out of 41 affluent nations.

That has since dropped to 25th.

"I think what really comes out loud and clear in this report is children have really suffered in recent months and in many ways have bore the brunt of the policies that have been put in place to keep all Canadians — particularly the vulnerable — safe," says Sara Austin, founder and CEO of Children First Canada, which issued the report.

While the report focuses on how issues have been compounded by the pandemic, it notes many were already progressively becoming worse.

In particular, it highlights the top 10 threats to children: unintentional injuries, poor mental health, child abuse, poverty, infant mortality, physical inactivity, food insecurity, racism, preventable illnesses and bullying.

"One of the things that I find particularly troubling as a mother myself is that the leading cause of death in children between the ages of 10 and 14 is suicide," says Kelsey Beson with Children First Canada.

"As a mother of an 11-year-old and an 8-year-old, that is absolutely terrifying."

Further, the report found 57 per cent of participants aged 15 to 17 said their mental health was "somewhat worse" or "much worse" than before physical distancing began.

Parents also largely overestimated their children's mental well-being: half of the time parents and children didn't share the same opinion of the child's mental health, and where there was a difference, two-thirds (65 per cent) of youth rated their mental health less positively than their parents did.

"That signals to me and to child health experts that there's not that open dialogue that's happening in the home where parents may be not as aware or perhaps there's issues of stigma around mental health," Austin says.

Food insecurity in the country has also nearly doubled in the past three years, according to Statistics Canada, climbing from 8.7 per cent of households in 2017/2018 to 15 per cent in the past 30 days.

It's a figure which disproportionately affects children, Austin notes.

"All across the board, but particularly for children in the north, food insecurity is as high as 70 per cent in Nunavut, and far too many kids go to school every day without breakfast," Austin says.

"Canada is the only G7 country that does not have a national school nutrition program. There's really a patchwork of approaches across the country ... we need to see a much more consistent approach to ensure kids start their day with a healthy, nutritious meal."

While food insecurity climbs, physical activity has plummeted. In 2018, ParticipACTION reported 35 per cent of five to 17-year-olds were meeting the suggested 60 minutes of daily physical activity.

That has since dropped to 4.8 per cent of children between five and 11-years-old and a measly 0.8 per cent of those aged 12 to 17.

The group is also anticipating a spike in suspected abuse reports after schools reopen in the coming weeks.

It notes that while organizations have noticed an overall drop in child abuse reports, others such as Kids Help Phone have reported an increase in conversations surrounding physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, suggesting that as people remain bunkered down due to the

pandemic, children have fewer opportunities to seek help from caring adults.

The overall lack of race-based data in Canadian health makes it challenging to properly understand the ways racism and discrimination affect children, the report says, but there is enough evidence to show Black and Indigenous children experience more adverse health outcomes when compared to white children.

“In addition, given our COVID reality, Chinese families are also saying they’re concerned about racism their children will experience as they start to come back out into the world due to the pandemic,” Beson says.

Indeed, the report points to an Angus Reid survey of more than 500 Canadian adults of Chinese ethnicity, in which exactly half said they had already been called names or insulted as a result of COVID-19, while 43 per cent said they had been threatened or intimidated.

Beson is encouraging people to take the report to heart and act by going to their website and signing their call to action.

“We are urging the Canadian government to appoint a national child commissioner to take care of the well-being of children here in Canada,” Beson says, adding there is already such a bill in front of the senate, so this petition is in support of that.

“And with that an urgent cry to put \$250-million into recovery for children after the pandemic, as well as creating a policy that is just for children in Canada. Right now policies for children are in all sorts of different departments.”

“Together we can really push for some change to make Canada the leading place for children to grow up.”

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