

Government leaders urged to prioritize children during N.S.'s reopening ^[1]

New report raises concerns about food insecurity, mental health among children

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EXCERPTS

Local child advocates are calling on government leaders to prioritize children in Nova Scotia's COVID-19 reopening plan after a recent report revealed the exacerbated struggles they've faced during the pandemic.

The report, called *Top 10 Threats to Childhood in Canada*, is by Children First Canada, an organization consisting of Canada's leading children's charities, hospitals, research institutes and corporations that invest in kids.

It highlights how kids and families across the country have been struggling with things like online learning, nutrition, access to education and social services, child care, discrimination as well as other health-related issues.

Advocates like Alec Stratford, the executive director of the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers, said now is the time to start making change.

"We are certainly at a pivotal moment, as the pandemic has highlighted those deep structural inequities that exist across the board," Stratford said. "What we would hope is that governments respond with a shifting in mentality."

Sarah Austin, founder and CEO of Children First Canada, said the organization found two primary problems affecting Nova Scotia that need to be immediately addressed — food insecurity and mental health.

Austin said they observed increased rates around food insecurity in the province, and that "local food banks had to really increase the supports provided to kids and families in the community."

She also said they have great concerns about children's mental health, with "increased rates of anxiety and depression across the province of Nova Scotia."

Statistics Canada indicates that suicide is the second-leading cause of death in Canada among children and adolescents aged 10 to 19.

Fifteen-year-old Rae Steeves, a youth ambassador for Children First Canada, said she's seen first-hand how the pandemic has been affecting youth in Halifax.

"A lot of people have been struggling and many kids I know are not safe at home without the extra support of school," said Steeves. "It hasn't been easy for anybody, but it's been very, very, very difficult for some people."

Steeves said one of the hardest parts has been knowing that her friends are suffering but being unable to physically see them or comfort them.

In the report, the organization shares suggestions, outlining the ways in which government leaders could start to rectify some existing issues affecting children.

One suggestion is to create a national \$2 billion investment fund which could be drawn from by children-related programs and organizations. Another is implementing more equitable funding and services for Indigenous children.

One of the most prominent suggestions includes appointing an independent national commissioner for children and youth, someone who would work with governments to ensure they prioritize children when making policy decisions — a position Stratford said is needed both nationally and provincially.

"The absence of that office [means] that voice is not there," said Stratford. "So the issues that children face, don't find themselves in the debate."

Other than Ontario, Nova Scotia is the only province without such a role.

On Thursday, Community Services Minister Karla MacFarlane, who was sworn in this week, said Nova Scotia needs a child and youth advocate and that it is "something that I will be bringing forward and discussing."

New commitments

Austin said she hopes the data compiled in the report will encourage new government leaders to start making both immediate and long-term commitments toward improving the lives of children.

She said party campaigns in the federal election have focused on child care, "but when it comes to children's mental and physical health, there's very, very little to be said about what's needed to improve the lives of our children or what they're prepared to do."

Stratford said when it comes to policymaking like the reopening plan, children should always be a priority, but it's important to remember that the problems children are facing are not isolated issues.

"Things like moving to universal child care, having mental health supports in schools, income and food security — we need way more robust policies on these."

Austin agrees that improving the well-being of children in the province won't be a quick fix.

"This is going to take investments over many years to really address the urgent threats, but also the long-term solutions required to help your kids survive and thrive and to be able to sustain that," said Austin.

Region: Nova Scotia ^[3]

Tags: child well-being ^[4]

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