

New findings on pandemic kids. and what they really tell us ^[1]

The subtext: If we don't rescue this generation, they can't save us.

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EXCERPTS

A new report by Children First Canada takes a long and detailed look at the state of our kids in this second year of pandemic. Even if you don't have children, but hope for a decent and dignified old age, you'd better take note the findings of Raising Canada 2021 — and take appropriate action in this and future elections.

The report finds that COVID-19 has aggravated ten major threats to our children. Those threats have been still more aggravated by “cross-cutting themes”: access to education and child care, access to health care and social services, inequity and inequality, and climate change.

The report points to a host of threats to children that are also threats to us all. And those threats are unlikely to be blunted short of the kind of social transformation we usually call a revolution.

Let's look at the threats first. Some are simply intensified forms of the pre-pandemic status quo. Kids are coming into emergency departments with opioid and other poisonings, and cannabis ingestions. Their parents' attempts to cope with stress don't work with the kids either.

Pre-pandemic Canada was stressful enough, but the report finds that “the effects of school closures have accelerated this threat,” leading to more eating disorders, substance misuse and suicide attempts among adolescents.

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Systemic racism and discrimination stress racialized families, and the pandemic has only stressed them more. So it should be no surprise that “status First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Black children are disproportionately overrepresented in the child welfare system.”

So stressed parents with no support are taking it out on their kids: “In some jurisdictions, clinicians have seen twice as many infants for maltreatment-related concerns, specifically fractures and head trauma.”

More work for the health-care system

Meanwhile, even less-stressed parents have skipped routine childhood vaccinations, ensuring more work for our health-care system when kids start coming down with measles and other preventable diseases. While many Canadian and U.S. states try to vaccinate their kids from age 12 and up, the report says, for those under 12 “vaccines may not be available until 2022.” Cuba is already testing its homegrown vaccines on kids as young as three.

The pandemic has worsened childhood poverty, notably in a third of female lone-parent families, and “households with children are more likely to face food insecurity compared to households without children.” In other words, kids aren't getting enough to eat. We are “ranked 37th out of 41 countries when it comes to providing healthy food for children.” Failing to nourish our children today will have consequences for the rest of the century.

Well, not for those who die in infancy. The report says, “Canada's infant mortality rate has increased. It is now the second highest among 17 OECD countries, at approximately 4.4 infant deaths per 1,000 live births. This is a marked change from 1960, when Canada ranked fifth lowest.”

Most kids will survive, of course, but they may well face bullying for their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion or disability. And their pandemic-imposed physical inactivity will keep them indoors and sedentary when they're genetically programmed to be constantly in motion, climbing trees, turning cartwheels and training themselves to be healthy, fit adults.

The report finds issues that makes these problems even worse. Without access to education and child care, kids are still more vulnerable to malnutrition, exposure to violence and sheer lack of education — in-class or online. Lack of regular health care and social services means not only needless infections, but missed diagnoses for Type 1 diabetes and other medical conditions. And both inequity and inequality and climate change add still more stress to the lives of children and their families, with health and economic consequences that are already

killing millions of poor children and adults around the world.

If anything, the Raising Canada 2021 report understates the problem. We have focused on the adult response to the pandemic, not the impact on children. We quibble with the responses of Justin Trudeau, Doug Ford, Jason Kenney and John Horgan, and fret over the death rates in our long-term care homes.

But these are short-term concerns. Every politician in Canada will be off the stage in a few short years, and the old folks will be gone even sooner. Most of our kids, and most of our adults, will remain.

‘Big and bold’ enough?

The report calls for “a big, bold plan to improve the lives of children and make Canada the best place in the world for kids to grow up.” The plan would include a commissioner for children and youth, a national strategy for children, an investment fund, and so on. That’s nowhere near enough.

The kids born since the economic crisis of 2008 will have to carry Canada through the most dangerous decades humanity has faced in its 300,000-year history. That means it will have to carry its parents and grandparents, and other elders, while also feeding, sheltering and educating its own children and grandchildren amid climate catastrophes and political upheaval from riots to water wars and migrants by the millions arriving at our borders.

A StatsCan chart gives us a sense of who those kids will be, and whom they will soon have to take care of. This year, 6,119,000 Canadians are 14 or younger. Canadians over 65 currently number 7,082,000. By 2030, it will be 6,378,000 kids and 9.4 million seniors. And by 2040, we will have 10,745,000 seniors over 65 and 6,776,000 kids under 14. For the foreseeable future, we will have far fewer productive adults and far more declining seniors to be cared for.

Those 2040 seniors will have been born in 1975 or earlier. Many will have the routine problems of age, aggravated by the predictable miseries of the next 20 years. Some, mostly the more prosperous, will be functioning fairly well.

But no one will function adequately in a society whose adults were maltreated and neglected as children in the early 2020s. If those kids go back to school at all, it will be under brutal disadvantages and learning an obsolete curriculum. Remedies will be hard to find when the kids’ governments are more concerned about Sept. 20, 2021 than any time farther in the future. Given their disadvantages, the kids we are neglecting today will be unable to save us tomorrow.

If they’re not part of the solution...

As they grow older, those kids will be problems, not solutions. They’ll provide work for cops and other first responders, not to mention the dwindling numbers of health-care workers and the growing numbers of prison guards. At least until the overwhelmed system breaks down.

Stress reveals true character, and the stress of this pandemic has exposed the character of whole nations. Canada’s character has not been something to be proud of. We have exploited our “essential” workers, grabbed vaccines needed by poorer countries, and opened schools more to free up parents to go back to work than to teach kids how to function in a world that will never be 2019 again.

Of course we should keep those schools open as safely as we can. But we should also be assigning our best educators to develop new forms of instruction that can adapt to future pandemics, or social disruption — and curriculums that will help the kids adapt as well. They won’t look much like today’s courses in tourism and business management.

Since at least the end of the Second World War, education promised the hope of social mobility to a few working class and racialized children, while ensuring that white kids would have a far better chance to remain at least near the top of the social order. The kids who thrived under this system got us where we are today and are now among those seeking to be the next government of Canada.

But they are too few, and too untalented, and too trapped in the past, to get us out of this mess. We need literally all hands on deck, and each pair of hands linked to a healthy, well-educated brain — whether it’s the brain of a Black kid, an Indigenous kid, or a kid who arrived from Afghanistan this week.

Every last child will be either a stumbling block or a stepping stone. If we don’t give all our children resources now to help us, we will have to give them resources later just to minimize the damage they will cause.

We pay a lot of lip service to everything we do for our kids, and we say we work hard to get them a better start in life than we had.

But if we really loved them, we’d work to enable them to take care of us in our wretched old age while they were also saving the planet we’ve ruined. Maybe they’d love us back enough to do so.

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