

# Child-friendly public policies good for economy, says study <sup>[1]</sup>

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**EXCERPTS:**

If governments want to put the economy at the top of their agendas, actions that focus on improving the well-being of children and youth should be prioritized, according to a report released Tuesday.

The Canadian Paediatric Society said in this report that child care, mental health and poverty are some of the key areas related to kids for which there are clear economic benefits to be had by taking action.

"Investments in the early years pay big dividends . . . in the future in terms of (minimizing the amount of) people who can't be gainfully employed or have mental-health issues or contact with the criminal justice system," said Dr. Andrew Lynk, a Nova Scotia pediatrician and vice-president of this group, which represents children's health-care professionals across the country.

Instead, he said the opposite has happened in recent years as youth issues have been pushed aside by governments in order to deal with matters such as the economy and Canada's aging population.

The report cited a study from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives showing British Columbia alone loses between \$8 billion and \$9 billion a year in economic activity from child poverty through things such as increased health-care costs and lost productivity, yet a "comprehensive program to reduce poverty would cost between \$3 billion and \$4 billion per year."

The report noted how federal Parliament unanimously voted in 1989 to eradicate child poverty by 2000. Instead, the child poverty rate was reduced from 11.8 per cent then to 9.5 per cent as of 2009, it said.

"We would think that child poverty rates would be as important as the rates of inflation, unemployment, GDP, interest rates when the economists and the politicians are talking," Lynk said.

Payoffs in terms of child care and early-educations programs are largely immediate, the report says. For example, it says provincial funding for child care and early-learning programs in Quebec boosted economic activity by such a degree in 2008 - by allowing more women to work - that the provincial government got back \$1.05 in taxes for every dollar it spent on such programs. Another 44 cents went to the federal government, which didn't contribute at all, it added.

The report calls on the federal government to create a national childcare strategy that includes services that are universal and publicly funded across the country.

In terms of mental health, Lynk said one in seven children in Canada experience some kind of mental-health issue, though less than half are diagnosed. Considering the effect mental illness has on people's economic contributions and their demands on health care, other social services and the criminal justice system, the report said this costs the national economy somewhere between \$14 billion and \$51 billion a year.

"Early intervention and prevention are way more cost-effective for everyone, including the taxpayers, than letting it go," Lynk said.

Asked about using economic arguments to advocate for policies that benefit children and youth, Lynk said: "For a lot of people, it might be (enough to discuss) just the intrinsic issue or the moral issue of doing all we can do for our children and youth in the country.

"But we're also realistic, and we know that there's huge competing interests over the scarce resources that governments have. So to get people's attention, be it the NDP, Liberal, Green or Conservative, we want to appeal to all political stripes, realizing that these are good investments for the country and for the individuals (affected by such issues) and for the taxpayers."

Reprinted from the Montreal Gazette

**Region:** Quebec <sup>[2]</sup>

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