

Canada lags on childhood well-being, UNICEF says ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

A new report from UNICEF suggests the well-being of children living in Canada is lower than those growing up in many other wealthy countries.

Canada ranked 17th of 29 countries in an overall ranking compiled by the child-focused international humanitarian organization.

The report shows Canada's standing hasn't improved since a prior report in 2007. The first report was based on data from 2001-03, while the current one contains data from 2009-10.

"As a Canadian, I'm ashamed," says David Morley, president of UNICEF Canada. He says Canada is "stuck in the middle of the pack against other wealthy countries, and that's just not good enough."

The overall ranking was based on five broad categories:

Material well-being.

Health and safety.

Education.

Behaviours and risk.

Housing and environment.

Each broad category includes data on detailed subcategories that measure specific areas.

Netherlands topped the overall ranking, followed by Norway, Iceland, Finland and Sweden, which rounded out the top five.

Greece, the United States, Lithuania, Latvia and Romania were at the bottom of the overall ranking. The survey excluded some wealthy countries, including Japan, Mexico and Australia, due to a lack of data.

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27 of 29 on health and safety

Canada's worst showing in a category overall was in health and safety, which includes rankings on infant mortality, vaccination rates and child mortality rates. Canada placed 27th out of 29 countries - only Latvia and Romania ranked lower.

On infant mortality, which UNICEF counts as deaths under 12 months old per 1,000 live births, Canada ranked 22nd out of the 29 countries.

Iris Taylor, who runs a pre-natal program for First Nations women in Toronto, says the infant mortality rate is higher in Canada's First Nations communities, where poverty, isolation and poor access to health care are often problems.

"We know what the issues are," Taylor says. "Now that we know, what can we do to address that?"

Morley cautioned that methods of reporting infant deaths may affect the figures in this particular measurement, saying that not all countries tally their numbers in the same way. For example, the report notes that numbers in the U.S., which ranked poorly on infant mortality, may be affected by the death of extremely premature babies, or babies born with extremely low birth weights. Some other countries might not classify those cases as live births, the report says.

The report does note that infant mortality rate in all developed countries has dropped to less than 10 per 1,000 live births. The UNICEF data put Canada's rate around five per 1,000. Of the countries included in the report, only the U.S., Slovakia, Latvia and Romania had rates higher than six per 1,000.

Canada ranked even lower on vaccination rates - 28th out of 29. The report defined the vaccination rates as "average coverage for measles, polio, DPT3 for children age 12 to 23 months."

Make children a priority, UNICEF says

A report from UNICEF Canada noted that Canada has "made progress over the past 10 years" in most indicators, but the improvements weren't enough to lift Canada out of the middle ranks.

The UNICEF Canada president says that he was particularly concerned about the results of a survey that asked children about their own

well-being.

Canada ranked only 24th out of 29 on children's reported level of satisfaction. UNICEF says the information in the self-reported data from children is a measure of "how children feel about their own lives according to their own priorities in the here and now." It says the overall ranking and the children's satisfaction survey measure "slightly different concepts."

"I can't speak for the other countries, but I think when the myth, or the aspirations and the reality are so far apart, children don't have that same feeling of well-being," Morley says. "They feel that they are being thwarted in their hopes and dreams."

UNICEF Canada is calling for more detailed information on how much money from municipal, provincial and federal governments actually benefits children.

The organization also wants a national children's commissioner and regular "state of the children" reports to help identify priority areas.

Morley says there is no question that Canadians want what is best for their kids, but he notes that policy also has an influence on well-being.

Canada has to think about more than growing the economy and having individual families earn more income, Morley says. The country must also think about child-specific policy changes that could improve outcomes.

"Some takes money, some takes attitude, and I think we have to look at both of those."

-reprinted from CBC News

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