

THE FUTURE IS NOW

The environment and children's well-being in Canada

Canadian Summary of UNICEF Report Card 17

UNICEF Report Card 17 measures the impacts of environmental damage on the well-being of children and youth under age 18 in the world's richest countries. Some countries are doing better than others at protecting and creating environments that sustain children's well-being. How does Canada compare to its peer countries, and what will it take for Canada to get to the top of the UNICEF rankings?

Canada ranks 28th among 39 rich countries in the overall environmental well-being of children and youth.

- Canada has an even distribution of good, fair and poor rankings across the indicators measured in the Report Card. 
- About half of the indicators are better than the rich-country median and half are worse. 
- Canada achieves the best ranking in one indicator (households in overcrowded housing) and the bottom ranking in one indicator (production of municipal solid waste). 

Spain
RANKED 1ST




Canada
RANKED 28TH



Romania
RANKED 39TH



A League Table of children’s environmental conditions and well-being

Overall rank	Country	World of the child	World around the child	World at large
1	Spain	8	13	13
2	Ireland	6	4	20
3	Portugal	25	9	9
4	Cyprus	15	17	10
5	Finland	1	2	30
6	Italy	7	16	14
7	Iceland	3	1	32
8	Slovenia	19	14	16
9	Germany	13	6	22
10	Sweden	4	10	26
11	United Kingdom	11	12	23
12	Netherlands	12	8	27
13	Japan	2	21	25
14	Norway	5	5	35
15	New Zealand	24	15	17
16	France	14	27	18
17	Switzerland	21	3	33
18	Hungary	34	22	6
19	Austria	9	19	29
20	Czech Republic	26	23	21
21	Estonia	27	11	28
22	Lithuania	32	24	15
23	Croatia	29	33	5
24	Denmark	18	26	34
25	Slovakia	31	29	11
26	Greece	22	35	8
27	Poland	30	31	7
 28	Canada	17	7	38
29	Malta	33	18	24
30	Australia	10	20	37
31	Latvia	36	30	12
32	Republic of Korea	16	32	31
33	Chile	35	37	3
34	Israel	23	36	19
35	Bulgaria	37	34	4
36	Belgium	28	25	36
37	United States	20	28	39
38	Costa Rica	38	38	1
39	Romania	39	39	2

NOTES:

- The ranking is calculated as follows:
 1. A z-score for each indicator was calculated (reversed where necessary so that a higher score represents a more positive condition);
 2. The mean of the two z-scores within each dimension was calculated;
 3. The z-score for each mean was calculated and served as a basis for ranking a given dimension;
 4. The mean of the four ranks was calculated and served as a basis for the final ranking. If two countries had the same average of four ranks, the average of four z-scores was used to determine their position.
- Countries are ranked on a dimension if they have data for at least two of the three indicators.
- Four OECD/EU country are not included in the ranking: Colombia is excluded due to missing data on the ‘world around the child’ dimension, while Turkey, Mexico and Luxembourg are excluded as they are extreme outliers (z-scores below -4.0)

RANKING:

TOP THIRD

MIDDLE THIRD

BOTTOM THIRD

It's getting hot

Environmental damage is affecting our children and youth. Despite Canada's abundant natural and economic wealth, it has not succeeded in guaranteeing every child a healthy environment. Even the basics, like clean water, are still out of reach for some. And some risks such as air pollution affect many young people, costing them healthy years of life. Children are uniquely vulnerable to the risks of environmental degradation, from the widespread and insidious impacts of pollution to localized extreme weather events, yet they have the least responsibility for it. The impacts can start in the prenatal period and continue throughout their lives, and may include infections, asthma, heat stress, poor mental health, diminished academic performance, cancers, injury and death. For children, the future is not just getting closer; their future is now.

Worlds apart

Children in Canada are more exposed to some environmental risks, such as pesticide pollution and traffic injury, than many of their rich-country peers:

- Canada ranks 29th for the percentage of children living in areas with high pesticide pollution risk: 6.3%.
- Canada ranks 23rd for the rate of child traffic injuries and deaths: 119.9 DALY¹ per 1,000.

Despite progress to limit children's exposure to certain toxicants, they are still exposed to unsafe levels of lead and air pollution:

- Canada ranks 8th in children's exposure to ambient air pollution: 7.1 µg/m³.
- Canada ranks 29th in the rate of child illness from air pollution: 0.644 DALY per 1,000.
- Canada ranks 11th in children's exposure to lead poisoning: 1.6%.

Exposure to Pesticide Pollution



Child Traffic Injuries and Deaths



Exposure to Air Pollution



Exposure to Lead Poisoning



Canada has the third-largest freshwater reserve in the world, but water insecurity causes child sickness and death at rates higher than in many rich countries. Although the absolute risk is low, any child death due to water quality in a rich country is unacceptable:

- Canada ranks 24th in the rate of child illness from unsafe water: 0.135 DALY per 1,000.
- Canada ranks 20th in the rate of child death from unsafe water: almost two deaths per 100,000.

Child Illness from Unsafe Water



Child Deaths from Unsafe Water



Canada is a rich country but a poor global citizen.

Canada's lowest rankings are for its levels of resource consumption and related emissions and waste production.

Of the countries in the Report Card, Canada has the worst rate of waste production, the second-worst rate of resource consumption and the third-worst rate of greenhouse gas emissions. The environmental impacts not only affect children in Canada today, but also spread to children beyond our borders and to future generations:

- Exploiting its land of plenty and the planet far beyond its borders, Canada would require five Earths to sustain its current resource consumption, ranking 40th.
- Canada is the highest generator of municipal waste, ranking last among 36 rich countries: 695.4 kg per person every year.
- Canada ranks 41st in CO₂ emissions: 15.4 tonnes per person every year.
- Children's access to local green space in Canada ranks 15th on the Urban Green Space Index.

Resource Consumption



Municipal Waste



CO₂ Emissions



Access to Green Space



¹ One DALY represents the loss of one year of full health. Disability-adjusted life years or DALY is a time-based measure that combines years of life lost due to premature mortality, and years of life lost due to time lived in states of less than full health or years of healthy life lost due to disability. Retrieved from: <https://www.who.int/data/gho/indicator-metadata-registry/imr-details/158>.

Environmental risks are unequal

Children's exposure to environmental risks and impacts are substantially unequal, within and between countries. These risks are difficult for children to avoid or escape, particularly those children most marginalized by income, race and disability:

- Children in neighbourhoods composed mostly of low-income, immigrant and racialized populations typically have higher exposure to traffic injury and death, yet they tend to have fewer traffic safety measures.
- Despite progress to end long-term water advisories in First Nations communities, 37 advisories remained in early 2022.
- Predominantly Indigenous communities accounted for 48% of the communities evacuated due to wildfires between 1980 and 2021.

"It affects the way I think about what I eat, what I wear and buy, my transportation, my future career and family and housing, and how I spend my leisure time. I think about it at least once a day."

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Spending to protect the environment and children

Government spending to protect the environment indicates how committed countries are to ensuring a healthy, safe and sustainable world for all children, today and tomorrow. Failure to protect the environment today defers the rising costs of environmental damage to future generations.

Canada's spending on environmental protection does not match its environmental impact:

- Canada ranks 15th in spending on environmental protection: 0.7% of GDP.

Canada is a leader in providing environmental education. Young people have knowledge capital, but they are rarely provided the opportunity to use it:

- Canada ranks 2nd in the percentage of young people with environmental knowledge: 87%.



AN ENVIRONMENT FIT FOR CHILDREN

Rich countries including Canada must take more responsibility for the world they give to children today and the world they leave for future generations. This Report Card points to the need for urgent progress in a range of environmental policies that limit waste and greenhouse gas emissions leading to climate change, reduce exposure to pollution, ensure universal clean drinking water and decent housing, and provide every child with safe mobility and access to quality green spaces in their communities. To ensure policy fairness, governments at all levels must:

- 1 Apply a distinct child and youth impact lens to environmental policies, giving them priority consideration and including child-specific targets and accountability.
- 2 Improve the protection of children and youth afforded by the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act*, ensuring their right to a healthy environment and requiring impacts on diverse young people to be considered in every risk assessment.
- 3 Review every sustainable development strategy, disaster risk reduction plan and disaster mitigation and emergency management strategy from a child impact and equity perspective.

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