

STRONG BEGINNINGS, A STRONGER CANADA: Children's Well-Being as a National Imperative

UNICEF Report Card 20 at a Glance

Children's well-being as a strategic imperative

The conditions children experience today shape not only their futures, but the long-term stability and prosperity of the countries in which they grow up. At a time when the world is navigating a moment of global rupture, countries like Canada are seeking to build strategic strength at home. This strategy can only be successful by investing in the fundamentals of human development and societal resilience. Children's well-being is one of those fundamentals: a core determinant of future economic productivity, social cohesion, and national capacity. Thriving children create strong communities and a strong economy, making child well-being an essential nation-building strategy.

Since 2000, the UNICEF Report Card series has assessed how well primarily high-income countries support those foundations by measuring children's well-being outcomes across a number of themes and indicators. Published in 2025, Report Card 19 focused on the dimensions of children's health,

mental well-being, and skills development, using six core indicators first explored in 2020's Report Card 16. Report Card 19 showed that Canada is underperforming—with a rank of only 19th among 36 wealthy nations. Report Card 20 deepens this analysis by examining how economic inequalities undermine children's well-being across these three dimensions—echoing previous UNICEF findings that disadvantaged children faced the steepest drops in academic skills and well-being during recent years.

The insights in Report Card 20 point to a clear conclusion: a country's future strength depends on its willingness to uphold children's rights and invest ambitiously in their well-being. In an era of geopolitical and economic instability, when countries like Canada are looking to build durable domestic resilience, investing in children—through income supports, universal school food programs, mental health systems, and policies that guarantee their rights—is Canada's most powerful strategy for ensuring a stable, prosperous future. Canada's strength begins in childhood.

Children’s rights are non-negotiable

The importance of investing in children’s well-being extends far beyond strategic considerations—it is a moral and legal imperative. As a signatory to the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC), Canada has a binding obligation to ensure that every child’s rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled. Among other things, the UNCRC requires states to guarantee children’s rights to health, education, protection from violence, and an adequate standard of living. These commitments extend across all levels of government and all policy domains, and must shape how countries design laws, deliver services, and allocate resources.

Canada’s commitment to upholding these rights is a direct reflection of its international standing. As a wealthy nation, Canada has an opportunity to set the global standard by embedding children’s rights into domestic policy, investing in equitable supports, and ensuring that every child can thrive. In fulfilling these obligations, Canada strengthens its social fabric, reinforces its democratic values, and affirms that the well-being of children is foundational to the country’s future strength and prosperity.

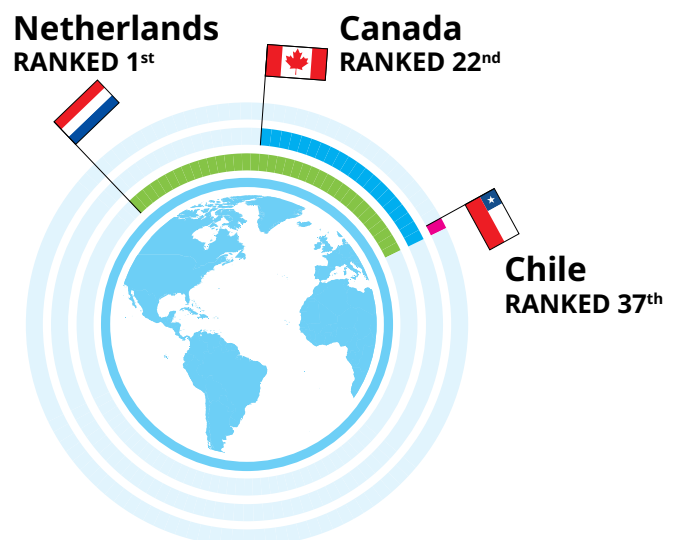
Where is Canada now?

In 1989, the same year that the UNCRC was adopted, Canada’s House of Commons passed a resolution to end child poverty by the start of the new millennium. Twenty-six years later, hard-won progress is being lost as child poverty gains made in recent years erode—a trend that mirrors broader post-pandemic societal trends.

Canada’s official child poverty rate has been trending upward in recent years and currently sits at nearly 12 per cent—almost double what it was in 2020. According to Report Card 20, which uses a standard international low-income measure, the results are yet more dire, with one in five children in Canada living in poverty.

This puts Canada in 26th place out of 42 high-income countries when it comes to child poverty. It is unsurprising then that Canada’s results are similarly middling on core dimensions of child well-being: 27th (physical health), 22nd (mental health), and 20th (skills). Overall, Canada placed 22nd of 37 countries, in the middle of the UNICEF league table comparing the state of children. The Netherlands, Denmark and France occupy the top three places—despite also being middle powers like Canada.

Canada’s place across these dimensions, and in the league table as a whole, has shifted little since the previous year’s rankings. It is important to note that updated data is not yet available for four of the six core indicators explored in this report—life satisfaction, childhood overweight, academic proficiency, and social skills—since the publication of Report Card 19, which used data from 2022. In Report Card 20, the only updated data available is for adolescent suicide (2023¹) and child mortality (2024). The primary goal of Report Card 20 and this Companion report is to explore in greater detail how economic inequalities and child well-being are interconnected, using these core indicators and other available evidence.



1 Note that updated Canadian data for this indicator is not yet available, so 2022 data is used.

A snapshot of Canada's performance in Report Card 20

Measures of Inequality

Although not the only measure, monetary inequality is a common way to assess economic disparities. Report Card 20 examines inequalities between countries and within countries, and how economic conditions relate to child outcomes. While a connection between the two does not mean that economic inequality alone causes differences in child well-being, understanding this relationship is important because economic inequality often reflects broader conditions that shape children's lives. Report Card 20 focuses on two key measures of monetary inequality:

- Income distribution using the P80-P20 ratio, which measures the gap between lower earners and higher earners by comparing the incomes of households at the 20th percentile (or cutoff point for those in the bottom fifth of the income scale), with those at the 80th percentile (the cutoff point for those in the top fifth).
- The rate of child poverty, which can be considered a measure of 'bottom-end' inequality, using a threshold of 60 per cent of the median after-tax income.

Income distribution:



Top-income earners make nearly five times more than lower-income earners

Canada's P80-P20 ratio is 4.87, meaning the top fifth of earners make nearly five times as much as the bottom fifth. Canada ranks 19th out of 43 countries, trailing the five Nordic countries and many European nations. Even in the most equal countries—Slovakia, Iceland, Czechia, Slovenia and Belgium—higher earners still make 3.5 times more than those nearer the bottom. In the four least equal countries—Costa Rica, Chile, the United States of America and Türkiye—they make at least eight times more.

Poverty rates:



1 in 5 children live in poverty

Child poverty can be assessed in several ways. In Report Card countries, the most common measure is the share of children living in households with incomes below 60 per cent of the national median². In general, countries with higher levels of income inequality tend to have higher levels of child poverty as well.

Canada ranks 26th out of 42 countries on child poverty, with just over 1 in 5 children affected—double the rate of Denmark, the top performer. The highest poverty rates appear in the United States, Türkiye, Uruguay, Colombia, and Costa Rica. National wealth does not guarantee lower child poverty. Of the G7 group of countries, five are in the lower half of the rankings, while only Germany and Japan outperform the average.

Physical Well-Being

Child mortality:



Canada ranks 31st of 44 countries on child mortality³. Its rate rose from 0.88 to 1.09 per 1 000, surpassing 2018 levels (0.94 per 1 000) in a concerning reversal of progress. The link between child mortality and economic

inequality is strong—countries like Bulgaria, Chile, Costa Rica and the United States have high economic inequality and high mortality rates, while countries such as Iceland and Denmark have both low inequality and low child mortality. In total, seven of the 10 worst performers on income equality—and nine of the 10 worst performers on child poverty—are also in the bottom 10 for child mortality. Four of the top 10 best performers on child poverty and six of the top 10 on income inequality are also in the top 10 for child mortality.

² Note that this differs from Canada's official national poverty measure, the Market Basket Measure, which is also discussed in this report.

³ The child mortality indicator used in Report Card 20 is not an annual rate, but a 10-year measure (i.e. the rate of children aged 5 who do not live to 15 years old)—a standard UN indicator.

Overweight:

Over 1 in 4 children are overweight

Canada ranks 24th out of 44 countries with respect to children who are overweight (28 per cent). In wealthier countries, children in disadvantaged families face higher overweight risk, and between countries a similar pattern emerges. Four of the bottom 10 performers on income inequality and five of the bottom 10 performers on child poverty are also in the bottom 10 for overweight children—the same amount as income inequality. This correlation is slightly weaker when assessing top performers, with three of the top 10 performers on child poverty also top 10 on childhood overweight, and the same amount top 10 on both overweight and income inequality. This suggests that while poorer economic circumstances may exacerbate factors relating to childhood overweight, children in better-off families are not immune from these risks.

Mental Well-Being**Adolescent suicide:**

With a three-year average rate of 8.4 per 100 000, Canada ranks 33rd of 44 countries on adolescent suicide (ages 15-19)—its single worst ranking and a stark reflection of a tragic reality for many Canadian families. At the country-level the link between adolescent suicide and income inequality appears somewhat tenuous, with only two of the 10 worst-performing countries also in the bottom 10 on income inequality (Japan and the United States). A similar result occurs when assessing the relationship between countries' adolescent suicide and child poverty rates (Japan, the United States, and Uruguay). The connection is even more tenuous when comparing top performers across these metrics. Nonetheless, Canada's high rates of adolescent suicide point to a serious issue that must be urgently addressed—and significant disparities exist within the country as to which groups are most affected. This will be examined in Report Card 20.

Life satisfaction:

Roughly 3 in 4 children report high life satisfaction

Canada ranks 13th of 37 countries with 76 per cent of young people reporting high life satisfaction. Notably, the top-ranking country—the Netherlands—also outperforms Canada on child poverty and income inequality. Overall, though, cross-country correlations are relatively weak. Of the top 10 highest performers for life satisfaction, only two are also in the top 10 for income inequality. Three of the 10 countries with the lowest poverty rates are also in the top 10 for life satisfaction. Three of the bottom 10 countries for income inequality are also bottom 10 on life satisfaction, and this drops to two when assessing bottom performers on poverty. However, as Report Card 20 notes, a different story emerges within countries: children from the most disadvantaged families report life satisfaction levels that are, on average, 10 percentage points lower.

Skills Development**Social skills:**

3 in 4 children make friends easily

Canada ranks 26th out of 41 countries, with three in four children confident in their social skills. There are notable links between social skills and both income inequality and child poverty across countries. Four countries appear in the top 10 for both social skills and child poverty, and the same pattern holds for countries that rank at the bottom on these two measures. A similar pattern emerges when looking at social skills and income inequality: four of the 10 countries with the lowest social skills scores also rank in the bottom 10 on income equality. At the upper end of the distribution, five countries are top 10 on both social skills and income inequality. Notably, Canada exhibits the largest socio-economic gap on social skills within its population (nearly 15 percentage points between the bottom and top income quintiles), followed by France and the United States.

Academic skills:



Roughly 2 in 3 children achieve academic proficiency

Canada ranks sixth of 43 countries—its best showing across all six indicators—with approximately two-thirds (67 per cent) of children reaching basic proficiency in math and reading. However, as noted in Report Card 19, academic skills in Canada are also becoming more unequal: the gap in mean math scores between children in the highest and lowest socio-economic status groups widened by 13

percentage points in Canada since 2018. Across countries, there is a strong relationship between economic inequalities and academic skills: eight countries in the bottom 10 for child poverty are also in the bottom 10 on academic skills. Six of the bottom 10 for income inequality are also in the bottom 10 academically. The pattern seems less distinctive in the opposite direction—three academic top performers are also top 10 on child poverty, one less than for income inequality.

Can Canada rise to the challenge and make progress for children?

A country's resilience and the well-being of its children go hand in hand. At a time when Canada is focused on solidifying its place in the world and its strength at home, Canada can and should aim higher than a middle ranking among peer countries for child well-being. Investing in children is an investment in Canada's future.

Young people should not have to pay the price for adult decisions that fail to take them into account. Although Canada already has some of the right policy ingredients to rise above its lacklustre ranking for child well-being, the current economic climate requires greater attention to how children are impacted, or progress on child poverty will continue to be lost and children will continue to fall further behind.

Much ink has been spilt on the tumultuous period facing Canada and the world. But this so-called “hinge moment” also offers opportunity—an opportunity to redefine how children and young people are considered when it comes to policy making. Not only is it Canada's obligation to ensure that every child has their needs and rights fulfilled, but policies that reduce inequalities and create a fairer playing field will help young people to thrive and take full advantage of their potential, yielding dividends across the country for generations to come. All levels of government in Canada have a shared responsibility to make this a reality, and it can only be achieved through ambitious, strategic policies such as:

- Prioritizing children on the policy agenda by giving them the first call on the nation's resources through the implementation of a national children's strategy, the universal application of a child policy lens and the systematic tracking of child-focused public expenditures in fulfilment of children's rights.
- Sustained and targeted investment in core social protection programs, including family income benefits and in-kind supports like affordable early childhood education, to preserve and enhance their effectiveness in reducing and ultimately eliminating child poverty.
- Sustained expansion towards truly universal school food programming nationally, including through increased federal investment levels to match provincial and territorial contributions.
- A robust, multi-level regulatory framework to limit predatory marketing practices targeting children.
- Increased earmarked investments in child and youth mental health supports and services, while ensuring that eligibility criteria are gender-inclusive, equity-based and extended to children under the age of 12.
- Mandated Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) across the design, development, deployment and regulation of digital products, services and artificial intelligence systems that impact children, with attention to associated mental health effects.

- Prioritizing reconciliation by accelerating the completion and implementation of the national framework for the Inuit Child First Initiative, co-developed in meaningful consultation with Inuit partners. This should include the re-introduction of the food vouchers program to address persistent food insecurity across Inuit Nunangat. In parallel, work collaboratively with First Nations partners to address systemic backlogs under Jordan's Principle, strengthen service delivery capacity, and prevent service delays for First Nations children."

In all actions concerning children... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

