



for every child

STRONG BEGINNINGS, A STRONGER CANADA:

Children's Well-Being as a National Imperative

UNICEF REPORT CARD 20
Canadian Companion

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Canadian Companion to UNICEF Report Card 20

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

The UNICEF Report Card series monitors and compares economically advanced countries' performances in securing children's rights and advancing their well-being. This Canadian Companion distills and interprets data from UNICEF Report Card 20, *Unequal Chances: Children and economic inequality*.

Visit unicef.ca/rc20 to access these reports and background papers. Data sources and full references are cited in: UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence – Innocenti, *Unequal Chances: Children and economic inequality*, Innocenti Report Card 20, UNICEF Innocenti, Florence, May 2026.

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Notice: Data and rankings herein are based on the latest available information at the time of production. Please refer to UNICEF Report Card 20 if required. Additionally, this version of the Canadian Companion contains minor editorial corrections and consistency updates to the At a Glance section since its initial publication. No substantive changes have been made.

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UNICEF Canada recognizes the traditional and ancestral territories we work on and commits to actions of reconciliation and decolonization as we advocate for children's universal human rights. We seek to respect the inherent and treaty rights of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples.

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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.

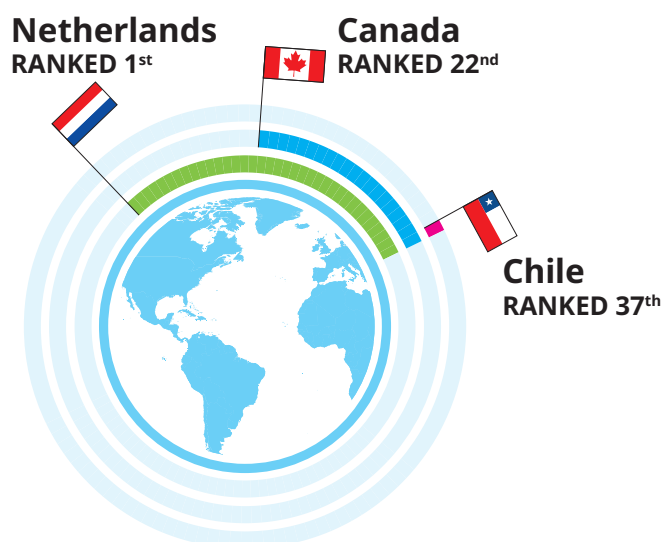
Where is Canada now?

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 well-being), 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 (2023)¹ 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 as much as 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:



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 median.² 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 one in five 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 Health

Child mortality:



Canada ranks 31st of 44 countries on child mortality.³ 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 (CRIAs) 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 reintroduction 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





A Message from UNICEF Canada President and CEO Sevaun Palvetzian

Every day, governments make choices about the future: what to invest in, what to cut, and whose needs take priority.

But the future of any country is shaped early—in the lives of its children and young people.

Whether we choose to invest in them, or allow them to fall behind, is a choice. As this report is released, Canada is facing many such choices.

Since UNICEF's last Report Card, the global context has only become more challenging. Humanitarian crises have deepened. New ones have emerged. Political alliances, trade dynamics, and economic conditions are shifting in real time.

In response, governments—including Canada's—have prioritized decisions around trade, defence, and economic resilience. These are significant choices that will shape our collective future, including the future our children inherit.

But as these decisions are made, how consistently are the needs of children and youth factored in? Too often, the answer is unclear.

If our leaders need further evidence for why children's well-being must sit at the centre of public decision-making, UNICEF Report Card 20 provides it. Once again, Canada's overall performance is disappointing: 22nd out of 37 wealthy countries. Ahead of us are peers such as the Netherlands, Denmark, France, and Ireland—countries we once matched pace with, and which are now pulling further ahead.

- One in five children in Canada continues to live in poverty, placing Canada 26th overall.

- Child mortality is increasing. At current rates, an estimated one in every 1 000 five-year-olds in Canada will not reach their 15th birthday, ranking Canada 31st.
- Canada remains among the countries with the highest adolescent suicide rates, ranking 33rd overall.

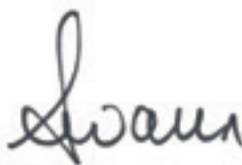
The message from Report Card 20 is clear: countries that choose to prioritize children and invest accordingly are stronger for it.

There is, however, reason for optimism. Canada has shown ambition at key moments. Effective social protection policies have made a real difference, as demonstrated by the impact of the Canada Child Benefit in lifting children out of poverty when it was first introduced. At the same time, recent regression highlights that progress is neither automatic nor permanent without sustained commitment.

We need to make more choices like this—guided by data, informed by children and youth themselves, and sustained through a truly holistic approach. That means applying a child lens across policy development and engaging meaningfully with children and young people, not as an afterthought, but as a core part of the process.

In a time of geopolitical and economic uncertainty, investing in children—through strong income supports, universal school food, accessible mental health care, and policies that uphold their rights—is one of the most effective ways to build a stable and prosperous future.

There is no credible path to long-term prosperity that does not pass through our children. The choice is ours.



Sevaun Palvetzian

President and Chief Executive Officer,
UNICEF Canada

Measuring Inequality in Wealthy Countries

UNICEF has been producing the Report Card series since the turn of the 21st century as a means of tracking wealthy countries⁴ progress on children's well-being⁵ using the best available data. Each year's report explores a different theme, from child deaths by injury to early childhood education to

climate impacts. Child poverty, inequality, and multi-dimensional well-being have been recurring topics throughout the years (see Appendix A). Report Card 20 assesses the same six core indicators (Table 1) first introduced in Report Card 16 and used in Report Card 19, based on the most

recent available data sets. As a result of data collection cycles, updated statistics are only available for two of the core indicators, so many of the figures in Report Card 20 will look familiar to readers of Report Card 19.⁶

Table 1: Overview of core indicators used for measuring child well-being

Dimension	Components	Indicators	Source
Physical health	• Child mortality	Child mortality rate, ages 5 to 14	UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (UN IGME) project, 2024
	• Overweight	% of children and young people overweight, ages 5 to 19	Noncommunicable Diseases Risk Factor Collaboration (NCD-RisC) data, World Health Organization (WHO) /Lancet 2022
Mental well-being	• Life satisfaction	% of children with high life satisfaction at 15	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022
	• Adolescent suicide	Suicide rate, ages 15 to 19	WHO Mortality Database 2023 or latest available data
Skills development	• Academic proficiency	% proficient in reading and mathematics at 15	OECD, PISA 2022
	• Social skills	% who make friends easily at school at 15	OECD, PISA 2022

NOTE: Refer to Report Card 20 for full details on the above indicators. Canadian data for the life satisfaction indicator was substituted using data from the Canadian team involved in the WHO Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study.

This is also why country rankings in the league table (Table 2) have not shifted considerably since the previous report, published in 2025.

Canada, for instance, remains in the middle of the pack on most indicators, ranking 22nd overall.⁷ This middling ranking carries

through to Canada's performance on three core dimensions: physical health (27th), mental well-being (22nd), and skills (20th)—a similar

⁴ The Report Card focuses primarily on countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and/or the European Union (EU).

⁵ In this Report Card, "children" means every person under age 18, in line with the definition of "child" in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The term "child" is used for brevity, but it includes infants, young children, and adolescent youth unless otherwise specified. In some instances, the Canadian Companion includes perspectives from young people over the age of 18 given their proximity to the experiences of those 18 and under.

⁶ However, one country that was not included in Report Card 19—Uruguay—has been added to the Report Card 20 cohort.

⁷ Further information on the league table methodology can be found in Report Card 20.

showing to Report Card 19.

Likewise, the three top-ranked countries—the Netherlands, Denmark, and France—are ranked in the top third on all three dimensions of child well-being, and four of the bottom five ranked countries—Uruguay, Türkiye, Chile, and Colombia—rank in the bottom third on each dimension. Some countries—like Greece, Iceland, and Slovenia—exhibit significant variation across dimensions, ranking in a different third on each. It is important to note that while countries are provided with rankings for dimensions where both indicators were available, they are only given an overall ranking if data was available for all six.

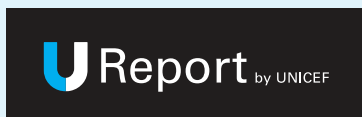
Report Card 20 aims to build on the analysis presented in Report Card 19 by analyzing how the league table countries fare on measures of inequality, and how these factors may impact their performance across the six core indicators. Recognizing that population-level data can conceal inequalities between groups, and that economic inequality is just one form of inequality among many, this companion will leverage supplementary disaggregated data specific to Canada to explore variations that exist across provinces, territories, and various socio-demographic characteristics. Additionally, the Canadian Companion includes perspectives from youth living in Canada collected through U-Report.

Table 2: A league table of child well-being

Overall rank	Country	Physical health	Mental well-being	Skills
1	Netherlands	5	1	11
2	Denmark	1	4	7
3	France	2	12	9
4	Portugal	10	3	21
5	Switzerland	8	15	6
6	Ireland	11	24	1
7	Lithuania	13	13	13
8	Spain	22	5	17
9	Romania	24	2	22
10	Hungary	29	6	14
11	Sweden	14	16	15
12	Italy	17	10	25
13	Slovenia	16	29	2
14	Finland	23	17	16
15	Croatia	34	7	4
16	Austria	20	23	8
17	Japan	3	32	12
18	Latvia	12	9	29
19	Slovakia	25	11	26
20	Iceland	6	26	27
21	Czechia	4	25	31
 22	Canada	27	22	20
23	Greece	26	8	33
24	United Kingdom	21	28	19
25	Germany	15	21	34
26	Malta	19	18	35
27	Republic of Korea	30	34	3
28	Bulgaria	32	14	32
29	Estonia	28	30	24
30	Poland	18	31	30
31	Costa Rica	37	20	39
32	New Zealand	33	37	23
33	Colombia	39	27	37
34	Uruguay	35	35	38
35	Mexico	41	19	40
36	Türkiye	36	36	36
37	Chile	40	33	41
	Australia	31	n/a	18
	Belgium	7	n/a	5
	Norway	9	n/a	10
	United States	38	n/a	28

NOTES:

See Report Card 20 Technical Appendix (Table 1) for full details. Rankings are based on z-scores of the six underlying indicators across the three dimensions. The league table ranks 37 countries with data of sufficient quality across all six indicators. Four countries (Australia, Belgium, Norway, United States) are shown separately at the bottom as they lack data for the mental well-being dimension. Cyprus, Israel, and Luxembourg are excluded due to missing data across several dimensions.



What Is U-Report?

U-Report is a polling platform developed by UNICEF for youth ages 13 to 24, offering a unique window into the lived experiences of young people across Canada. With more than 3 000 U-Reporters across every province and territory, the platform captures real-time perspectives on issues that matter most to youth. Because U-Reporters regularly share their views on challenges affecting their well-being, their contributions provide crucial insight into how inequalities are felt day by day. Incorporating these perspectives into Report Card 20 strengthens the analysis by grounding national trends in lived reality. Youth responses highlight emerging concerns, reveal gaps in policy and services, and help ensure that recommendations reflect the priorities identified by young people themselves.

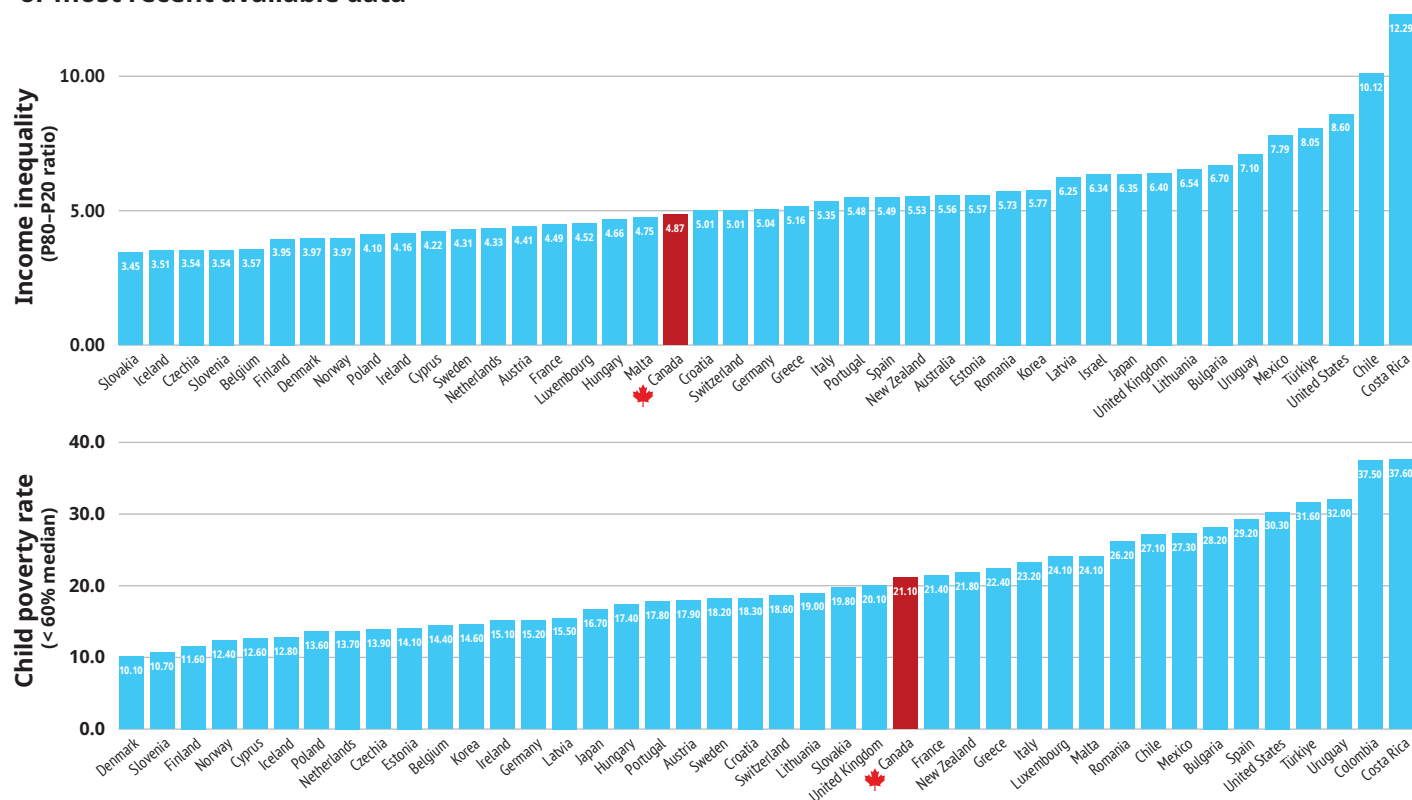
How Is Canada Doing on Inequality?

Canada ranks 19th out of 43 countries on income inequality (despite some improvement in this domain over the last couple of decades). While not universally the

case, countries with higher income inequality also tend to have higher child poverty rates.⁸ Canada fits this mould, ranking in the middle third of Report Card countries

(26th out of 42) on child poverty with just over one in five children affected—double the rate of top performer Denmark (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Income inequality (P80–P20 ratio), 2023 or most recent available data; child poverty rate, 2024 or most recent available data



Source: See Report Card 20 Technical Appendix (Figure 2) for full details.

⁸ Some exceptions exist, which may be partially explained by different benefit, taxation, and other policies in place specifically targeting families with children.

How has child poverty in Canada changed over the years?

Over the last several years, Canada has experienced a rise in poverty rates reflected in national indicators tracked by Statistics Canada.⁹ Poverty for the general population sat at 11.0 per cent in 2024, somewhat stable from 2023 (11.1 per cent) but the product of an upward trend begun in 2021, which reversed five years of steady progress between 2015 and 2020—a year that represented a historic low (7.0 per cent). Having followed a similar trajectory, child poverty rates in 2024 sat at 11.5 per cent—slightly higher than that of the general population.

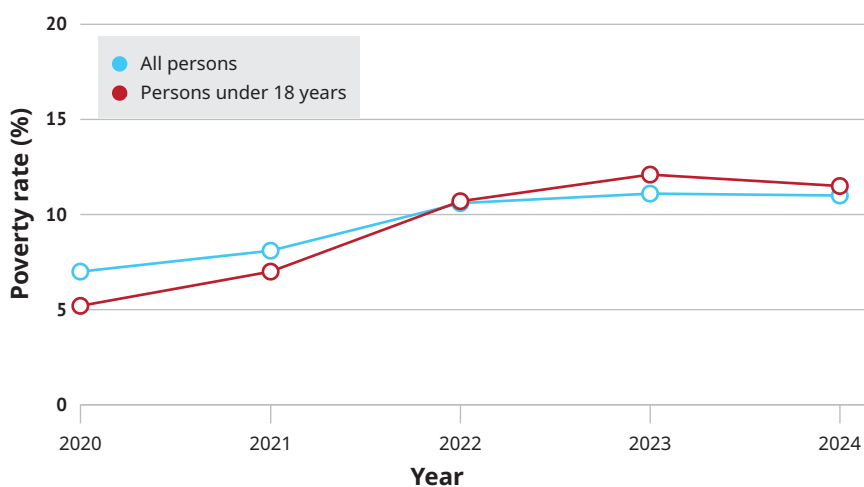
In summary, child poverty is increasing in line with that of the overall population, and Canada is not on track to meet its legislated target of a 50 per cent reduction in poverty by 2030 (Figure 2). Beyond overall rates, depth of poverty (or how far below the poverty line people are living) is another important indicator. In 2024, the share of people whose disposable family income was below 75 per cent of the official poverty line—known as deep income poverty—sat at 5.7 per cent, showing no improvement from 2023 (Statistics Canada, 2026h). People living in the bottom 40 per cent of Canada's income distribution only hold about 21 per cent of total national after-tax income (Statistics Canada, 2026h).

Inequalities behind the numbers

It is important to note that these national figures—while valuable—conceal the reality of inequalities at the population level. Significant variation exists between provinces and territories (Figure 3). For instance, the provinces with the lowest child poverty rates in 2024 were Quebec (5.8 per cent) and PEI (11.1 per cent), while those with the highest were Saskatchewan (15.1 per cent) and Manitoba (14.8 per cent). These interprovincial differences are significant and point to the impact of regional economic realities in shaping child poverty outcomes. Within provinces, regional variations also exist: major urban centres typically experience higher poverty levels relative to the national average—a potential reflection of higher cost of living. However, public policy choices also play a role. Quebec's lower rates, for instance, may be partially attributable to their unique social policy landscape, which is characterized by higher social assistance levels, extended parental leave, and a robust subsidized daycare program that predates the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care system.

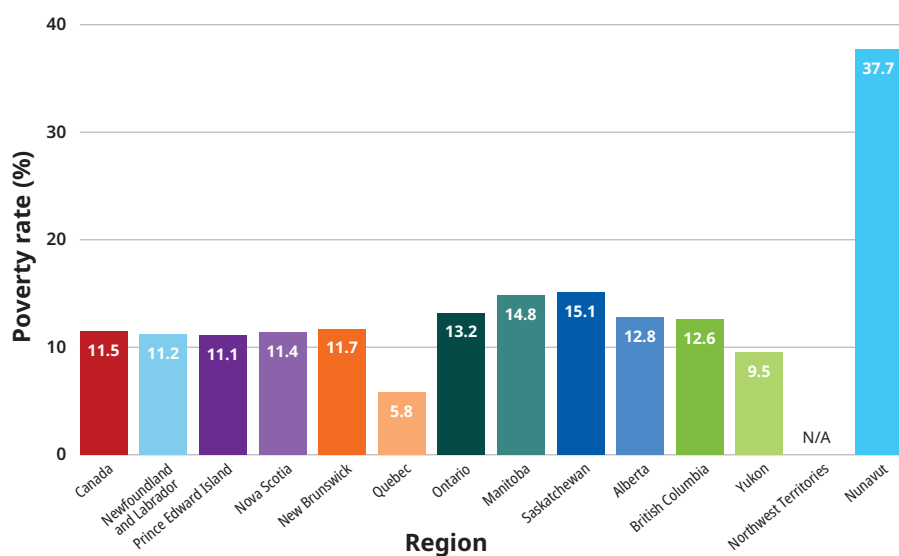
Due to factors including systemic challenges, geographic isolation, and high cost of living, poverty levels in the territories have historically tended to outpace provincial figures, with Nunavut in particular being exceptionally high. In 2024, though, Yukon's child poverty rate

Figure 2: Canada's official poverty rate, 2020–2024



Source: Statistics Canada (2026j), Table 11-10-0135-01.

9 The Market Basket Measure, which differs from the primary poverty measure used in Report Card 20.

Figure 3: Provincial and territorial poverty rates (0–18 years old), 2024

Source: Statistics Canada Table (2026j), 11-10-0135-01.

(9.5 per cent) was better than most provinces. (The child poverty rate was not available for the Northwest Territories, but the overall rate was 10.0 per cent). Meanwhile, significant inequalities persist between Nunavut and the rest of the country. In 2024, a staggering 37.7 per cent of children in the territory lived in poverty (Statistics Canada, 2026j).

Across regions, demographic disparities are also pronounced. While disaggregated breakdowns are unavailable for subpopulations under 18, the 2024 overall poverty rate among visible minorities (15.5 per cent) was about 74 per cent higher than for those not in this group (8.9 per cent) (Statistics Canada, 2026l). Immigrants (aged 15 and over) experience poverty rates about 41 per cent higher than the same age group born in Canada

(12.3 per cent versus 8.7 per cent). Among the Indigenous population, the rate jumps to 17.9 per cent—66 per cent higher than for non-Indigenous people (10.8 per cent). Those with disabilities (aged 15 and over) are roughly 50 per cent more likely than their non-disabled peers to live in poverty (12.6 per cent compared to 8.4 per cent) (Statistics Canada, 2026k). Meanwhile, children living in female lone-parent families face a staggering 29.7 per cent poverty rate—more than two and a half times the national child poverty average (Statistics Canada, 2026j). These figures are indicative of the fact that the legacies of colonialism, as well as racism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination persist, and that social and economic barriers continue to impact certain groups disproportionately.

It bears repeating that other ways of measuring poverty—including the measure used in Report Card 20, known as the LIM-60—paint an even more concerning picture than the Market Basket Measure. Campaign 2000's latest national report on child poverty, *Investing in Tomorrow* (2026), which uses the broader Census Family Low Income Measure, After Tax (CFLIM-AT),¹⁰ places Canada's child poverty rate in 2023 at 18.3 per cent, or nearly 1.4 million children. Their analysis estimates that, at the current pace, eliminating child poverty would take about 400 years. Considering that childhood lasts only 1 120 days, children do not have that long to wait.

¹⁰ Similar to the measure used in Report Card 20 (the LIM-60), except that the CFLIM-AT defines poverty as income below 50 per cent—rather than 60 per cent—of the median.

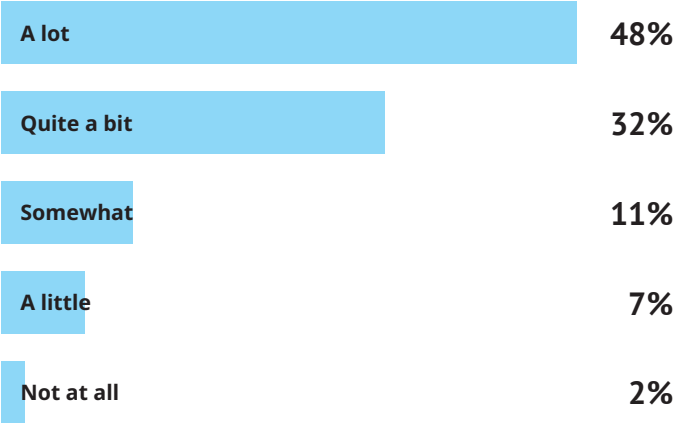


80% of youth say differences in family income create barriers to fully participating or succeeding (48% “a lot,” and 32% “quite a bit”).



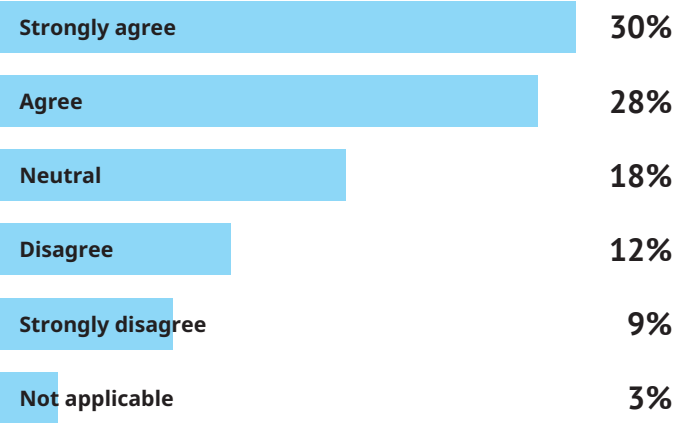
58% of respondents agree that money-related challenges affect their daily life (30% “strongly agree,” and 28% “agree”).

To what extent do you think differences in family income create barriers that make it harder for you or someone you know to fully participate or succeed?



U Report by UNICEF 201 responded out of 212 polled

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: *I often feel like money-related challenges affect my daily life.*



U Report by UNICEF 171 responded out of 176 polled

Food insecurity in Canada

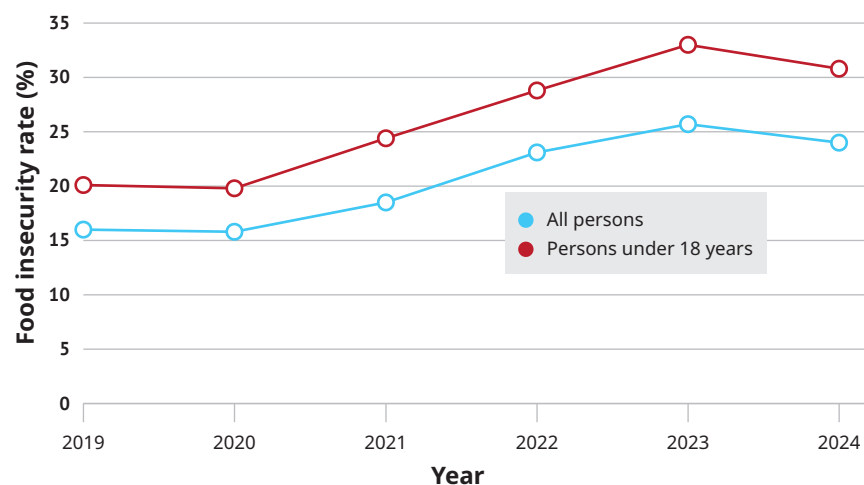
A separate but related indicator that must be addressed in a discussion of inequality in Canada is that of food insecurity, defined as inadequate access to sufficient food (or sufficient-quality food) to meet one’s basic needs. Evidence shows there are strong links between income and food insecurity, with the risk of being food insecure being much higher for those living below the poverty line. An analysis of the results of

the 2021 Canadian Income Survey shows a pronounced income gradient when it comes to food insecurity rates: 30.4 per cent for families in the bottom income quintile and only 6.6 per cent for those in the top (Uppal, 2023).

In recent years, media coverage has abounded with reports on surging food bank usage—and with good reason. Food Banks Canada’s 2025 HungerCount report notes that visits across their national network of food banks totalled over 2.1 million

in March 2025 alone—a staggering 99.4 per cent increase from 2019. Despite the political discourse on this topic—with food insecurity being mentioned over 1 000 times in the House of Commons Hansard¹¹ in the past five years—little progress has been made on this issue (Figure 4).

11 The official transcript of parliamentary debates.

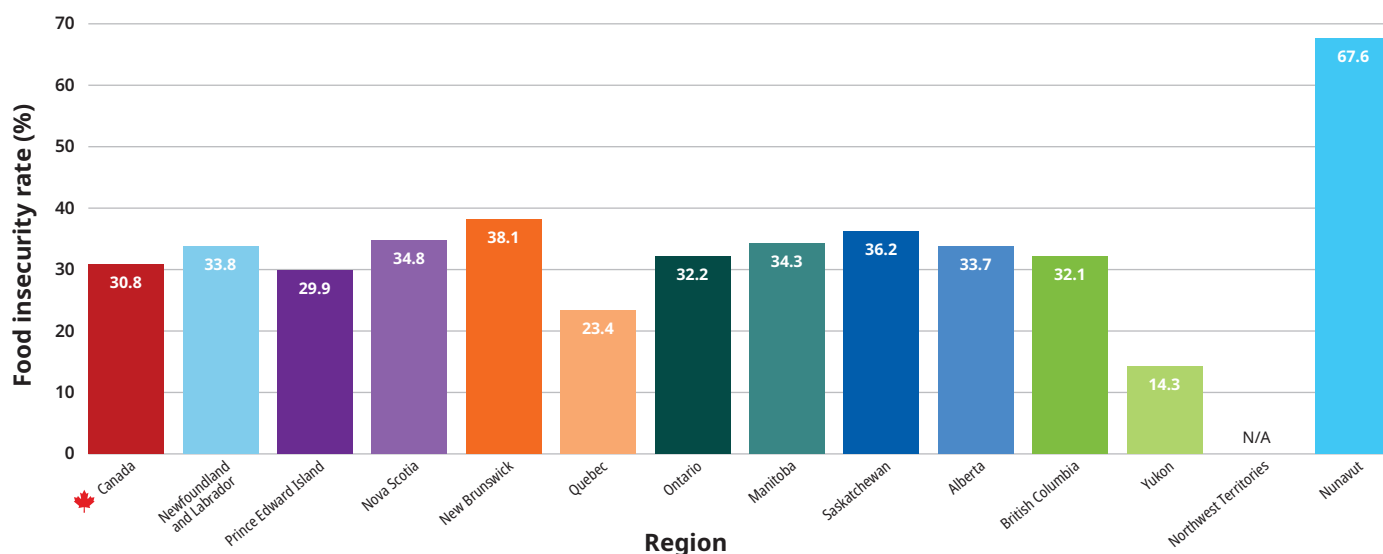
Figure 4: Food insecurity in Canada, 2019–2024

Source: Statistics Canada (2026i), Table 13-10-0835-01.

From 2019 to 2024, the percentage of people in Canada experiencing food insecurity jumped from 16.0 to 24.0 per cent (nearly one in four). For children, this number is closer to one in three (30.8 per cent). Once again,

groups that are disproportionately impacted by this issue include visible minorities (30.4 per cent), recent immigrants (30.8 per cent), and Indigenous peoples (34.7 per cent) (Statistics Canada, 2026i).

There is also, again, noticeable regional variation (Figure 5). In 2024, the provinces with the highest proportion of children living in households experiencing food insecurity were New Brunswick (38.1 per cent) and Saskatchewan (36.2 per cent). Again, Quebec performed better than other provinces, with the lowest—albeit still concerning—rate of 23.4 per cent (Statistics Canada, 2026i). Among the territories, Yukon outperformed every province at 14.3 per cent, but Nunavut sits at 67.6 per cent, meaning two-thirds of children in the region live in food insecurity (once again, child-specific data is not available for the Northwest Territories, but, for the population as a whole, food insecurity sits at 16.4 per cent). Taken as a whole, the data presented herein makes it abundantly clear that, despite some policy gains in the last decade, more action is urgently needed.

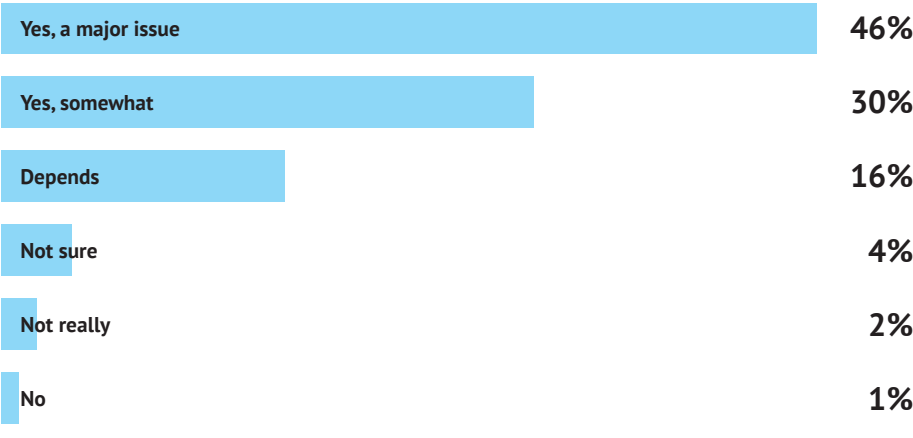
Figure 5: Provincial and territorial food insecurity rates (0–18 years old), 2024

Source: Statistics Canada (2026i), Table 13-10-0835-01.



Youth recognize food insecurity as widespread and urgent. Nearly half of respondents (46%) say food insecurity is “a major issue” for young people in Canada, with others saying it is at least “somewhat” an issue (30%).

Food insecurity means not having reliable access to enough affordable, quality, and nutritious food.
Do you think food insecurity is an issue for young people in Canada today?



 Report by UNICEF

201 responded out of 218 polled

What is causing these shifts?

A range of interconnected factors continue to drive financial precarity for children and families across Canada. Notwithstanding more recent stabilization, many households are still reeling from the cumulative effect of a prolonged period of aggressive inflation between 2021 and 2023, the highest Canada has seen since 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2025a). While 2025 saw the smallest annual average increase since 2020, prices remain elevated, having risen nearly 20 per cent since 2020 (Statistics

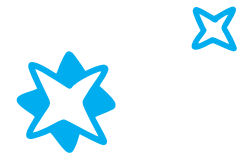
Canada, 2026d). Housing and food costs vastly outpaced wage growth during this period, and more recent gains have not been sufficient to offset the overall impact of rising prices (Statistics Canada, 2025b). The pandemic had a negative effect on income inequality as well. According to a 2024 report by the Parliamentary Budget Officer, households in the two highest quintiles saw their market incomes grow three times faster, on average, compared with those in the two lowest quintiles over the course of the pandemic. Combined with other macroeconomic trends¹²

tied to international conflicts and trade disputes, it is clear that many children are growing up in households where meeting basic needs has become increasingly difficult (Cléophat and Nicol, 2024). Ultimately, the decision to ensure that individuals and families have an adequate social safety net to fall back on when faced with economic headwinds is a policy choice. When the right policies and investments are not in place, it is often children who end up paying the greatest price.

12 Canada’s economy lost about 84 000 jobs in February 2026—among the most dramatic losses seen outside the pandemic—and the unemployment rate climbed to 6.7 per cent (Statistics Canada, 2026f).



Children's Perceptions of Inequality and Well-Being



Written by: Isabella (18), British Columbia, and Lily (17), British Columbia, UNICEF Canada Youth Advocacy Program 2025 Alumni

Economic inequality encompasses unequal distribution of wealth and income but also extends beyond conversations surrounding money as it impacts vital resources like healthcare, education, housing, and cost of living. Economic inequality is extremely prevalent in young people's lives. Without equal access to resources, it does not just hurt young people today, it shapes their physical and mental well-being, and confidence. Its impacts, both tangible and intangible, carry far into adulthood, and even affect generations afterwards. Every child should be given the opportunity to live a life of possibility and be given the opportunity to explore and learn safely. Sadly, because of economic inequality, this is not always the case in Canada, but with targeted policy we can change this.



Physical Health

Economic inequality creeps into the daily routines that shape young people's health. Across Canada, financial circumstances often determine how healthy a child can be. In lower-income families, nutritious food is more expensive and harder to access, especially in rural or northern communities where groceries can cost double compared to urban areas. Families may rely on cheaper, processed meals, increasing risks of overweight and poor nutrition.

Unequal access also shows up in recreation and healthcare. While some youth join year-round sports programs or visit private clinics, others face long waitlists for physiotherapy or mental health support. Safe spaces for physical activity, such as parks,

bike paths, or even sidewalks, are not distributed evenly across neighbourhoods. These gaps influence both physical health and a sense of belonging. Equity would mean every young person, regardless of their circumstance, could access spaces and services that keep them healthy.



Mental Well-Being

Economic inequality has a slow but insidious effect on mental health and overall well-being. When young people hear their parents worrying about bills, it can create a sense of guilt and make them feel like a burden, which no child should have to feel. Many school catchment areas, such as those in British Columbia, include students from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, which can create constant pressure to "keep up" with those who have

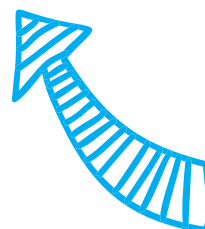
more money. Students may feel embarrassed if they cannot afford certain clothes or activities. School-based social events, like dances, where tickets can cost over \$100 and formal clothing is expected, can make this even worse. Many lower-income students may actively avoid these events, which can lead to greater social isolation.

Inequality also limits access to mental health support. School counsellors are often overworked, and outside counselling or therapy is expensive, meaning young people cannot receive the consistent support they need. All these factors combined can seriously affect a student's confidence and might lead to a cycle of pessimism as hope in the future is difficult to maintain when it feels like the system is setting them up to fail.

Skills and Development

In Canada, learning increasingly depends on factors outside of the classroom, such as reliable internet, tutoring, extracurriculars, and transportation. For some, home is a calm and stable space to wind down or study, and for others, it's where spotty Wi-Fi or booming voices limit productivity.

When extracurricular activities come with fees or costly equipment, they become barriers to development. Youth from wealthier backgrounds have easier access to explore the arts, science clubs, or leadership experiences that strengthen confidence and social skills, all opportunities that can open doors to universities and jobs later on. Meanwhile, others may feel their potential is defined by their circumstances, perpetuating a cycle of inequality. Inequality in access shapes the futures children imagine for themselves, not because of talent, but because of the resources around them.



idea!

Youth call to action

- **Recommendation #1:** Free or low-cost mental health services should be available in all schools and communities. These services should also be consistent and structured.
- **Recommendation #2:** Leaders should listen to young people in meaningful ways, not just by asking for opinions but by actually including youth in consultations on laws, policies, and decisions that affect them. This could look like including youth in actionable advisory councils (rather than creating tokenistic youth councils) as well as school-based consultations in order to include students directly affected.
- **Recommendation #3:** The decision-making process should also be more transparent and evaluative so young people can clearly see how their input was used. If youth share their experiences and ideas, they should be able to know whether their voices influenced the final decision.
- **Recommendation #4:** Governments and communities should invest more in safe spaces and youth programs where young people can spend time, build friendships, and feel supported, regardless of their financial situation. This could include affordable or free after-school activities, such as sports teams, arts programs, music programs, tutoring, and cultural clubs.

Canada must take action to ensure that all children and youth, regardless of background, have access to the resources, services, and support systems they need to maintain a healthy lifestyle and a sense of fulfilment. In creating programs and policies, governments must ensure young people are integral to the development and implementation process. When young people are given opportunities to lead, communities begin to break cycles of inequality and build towards a future where young people are not defined by their circumstances. A future where young people are given the opportunity to grow into their own definition of self is a future where young people can flourish.

Digging Deeper: How Economic Inequalities Shape Child Well-Being

Inequalities and Physical Health

There is a strong body of research supporting the relationship between economic inequality and children's physical health. Report Card 20 references studies from Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada that find that children who grow up in low-income households during their first five years often have worse health status in later childhood and adolescence (ages 6 to 18). This can include illnesses that limit daily activities, more infections, poorer parent-reported health, higher rates of overweight or obesity, and more hospital visits. Research from other countries in this report shows similar patterns. For example, an analysis conducted for Report Card 20 of the 2021/22 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study found that, across 31 countries, 39 per cent of children from wealthier families rated their health as "excellent," compared with only 27 per cent of children from less wealthy families. While these findings show correlation, not direct cause, economic status directly impacts factors such as access to healthy food, physical activity, safe housing, community support, and timely healthcare (World Health

Organization, 2023). Economic inequality thus shapes health outcomes through "upstream" pathways that are measurably uneven across groups in Canada. This section will explore some of those factors.

Child Mortality

Canada ranks:
31st out of 44
(1.09 per 1 000)



Top performer:
Iceland
(0.48 per 1 000)

Country average:
1.05 per 1 000

Report Card 20 modelling finds a strong connection between higher child poverty rates and higher rates of child mortality at the country level (Figure 6). Income inequality is also a strong predictor of child mortality. Countries such as Iceland and Denmark have low child poverty and low child mortality rates. Colombia and Costa Rica have among the highest child poverty and the highest child mortality rates.¹³ Canada falls in the bottom third of Report Card countries when it comes to 10-year child mortality, with a 2024 rate of 1.09 per 1 000 children (ages 5 to 14). This shows a concerning regression from the 0.88 per 1 000 reported

for 2022 in Report Card 19, bringing Canada back above its 2018 pre-pandemic level (0.94 per 1 000). This tracks with a 2025 UN IGME analysis of global trend data showing that progress in reducing child mortality has slowed over the past decade. While Canada's rate remains relatively low compared to global averages, such changes matter because each death is a profound policy failure when prevention is possible.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of publicly available domestic data exploring the relationship between income and child mortality rates for the 5–14 age group. What data does show is that, in 2024, accidental death was the second-leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 14 and 5 to 9, and the third-leading cause for the 10–14 age group (after suicide) (Statistics Canada, 2026c). Interpreting this through an inequality lens matters—evidence suggests that, among high-income countries, the rate of child unintentional injury mortality is higher where greater income inequality exists (Shimony-Kanat et al., 2024). This may be because deaths between ages 5 and 14 in high-income contexts are often highly preventable and thus more sensitive to social patterning (safety infrastructure, supervision burdens, access to timely care, and upstream risks like poverty or family

¹³ A more detailed analysis completed for Report Card 20 suggests that the link has more to do with inequality than with national income per capita, as one may conclude from this particular cohort of countries.

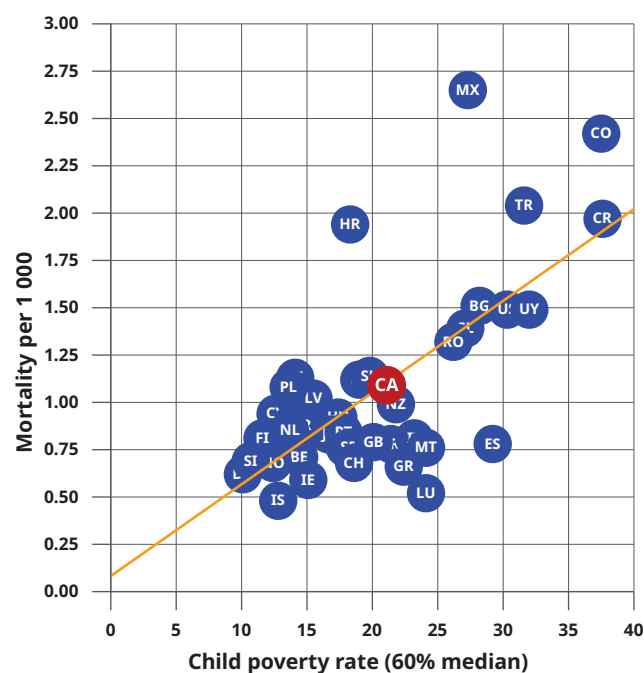
stress). Furthermore, there is international evidence that supports a connection between child mortality and income at the household level (Sidebotham et al., 2014). In a study from Norway, which included children ages 0 to 18 years, those who had mothers with the lowest education were found to have a substantially higher risk of death before age 18—a trend served across nearly all causes of death except suicide and cancer (Størdal et al., 2025). This association was strongest in households within the lowest third of the income distribution and particularly pronounced for those in the bottom 10th percentile. Although lowest among the age cohort of 5 to 17 years, a significant relationship between child mortality and parental education and income was observed across all age categories examined. Similarly, a US study that looked at outcomes from ages 1 to 24 found an inverse relationship between mothers' education levels (a proxy indicator for income) and child mortality, showing a 40 per cent higher risk of early-life mortality for children of mothers who did not complete high school compared to children of college graduates (Braudt et al., 2019).

While there is a lack of Canadian evidence specific to the mortality of school-aged children, there is data suggesting a relationship between household income and the mortality rate among infants. A 2018 Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) publication¹⁴ suggests multiple socio-economic risk factors are associated with increased infant mortality, including poverty, food insecurity, inadequate housing, unemployment, low maternal education, and lack of healthcare access (PHAC, 2018). It found that the infant mortality rate per live births among the lowest-income group (4.7 per 1 000) was 1.47 times higher than in the highest-income group (3.2 per 1 000). It further indicated about a 47 per cent higher infant mortality rate in the lowest-income areas compared with the highest-income one, with Canadians living in the most materially deprived areas experiencing infant mortality rates 1.6 times higher than those in the least deprived areas. These results demonstrate that both family and area income are significant predictors of infant survival. Moreover, areas with larger populations of Indigenous peoples were found to have higher infant mortality

rates: Inuit (3.9 times higher), First Nations (2.3 times higher), and Métis (1.9 times higher). It is possible that as children age and become less dependent on parents for having their basic needs met the linkage between child mortality rates and socio-economic risk factors is somewhat mitigated, but international evidence suggests a connection is there. Furthermore, as these rates encompass both health-related deaths and accidental injuries, the possibility that child mortality may be influenced by income inequalities fits into broader, well-documented health inequities. In Statistics Canada's *Health of Canadians* report (2025c), evidence consistently shows that, across a range of indicators, health outcomes tend to worsen along income gradients.

When these findings are taken together, it becomes clear that reducing Canada's child mortality rate will require policies that ensure both equitable access to timely, preventative care and supports for parents, to ensure they have the time, knowledge, and resources required to keep their children safe from harm.

Figure 6: Rate of child mortality, 5–14 years old, by child poverty, 2024



Source: See Report Card 20 Technical Appendix (Figure 5) for details.

14 The data set outlined in this publication is from 2008 to 2011. A more recent analysis was not available but the patterns revealed were compelling enough to include.

Overweight

Canada ranks:
24th out of 44 (28%)

Top performer:
Japan (16%)

Country average:
28%

At the country level, Report Card 20 showcases a clear relationship between economic inequality and child overweight. Although not as strong as for child mortality, there is a tendency for higher inequality to be associated with higher average rates of overweight, as seen in the chart below (Figure 7). Recent international benchmarking, including Report Card 19 and the UNICEF Child Nutrition Report *Feeding Profit* (2025), flag surging rates of childhood overweight in recent decades as a widespread challenge facing countries around the world, including Canada (where

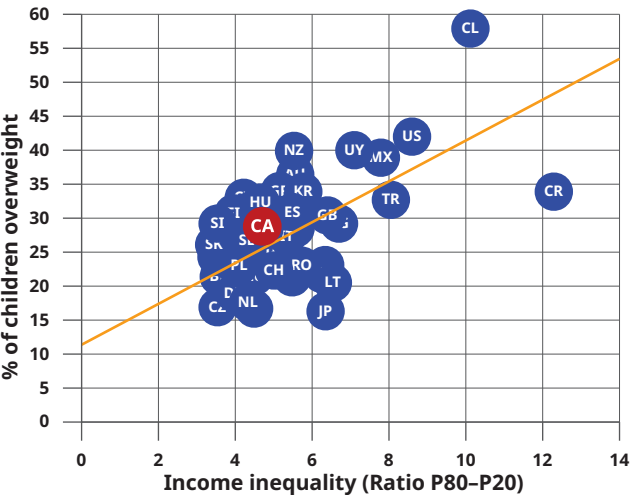
it sits at 28 per cent).¹⁵ Long-term projections from the 2026 World Obesity Atlas—Canada Scorecard suggest these numbers will remain high through 2030–2040 unless strong interventions are introduced. This issue matters, because childhood overweight is associated with a wide variety of other negative health outcomes (World Obesity Federation, 2026).

The relationship between economic inequality and overweight is also present within countries. *Feeding Profit* notes that, in high-income countries, overweight is more common among poorer children, and unhealthy diets are a marker of poverty. Poorer neighbourhoods have more convenience stores, more fast-food outlets, more unhealthy-food marketing, and less access to nutritious food. Report Card 20 analysis of the 2021 HBS survey, conducted across 29 Report Card countries, shows clear variations in

children’s nutrition consumption by family affluence (Figure 8).

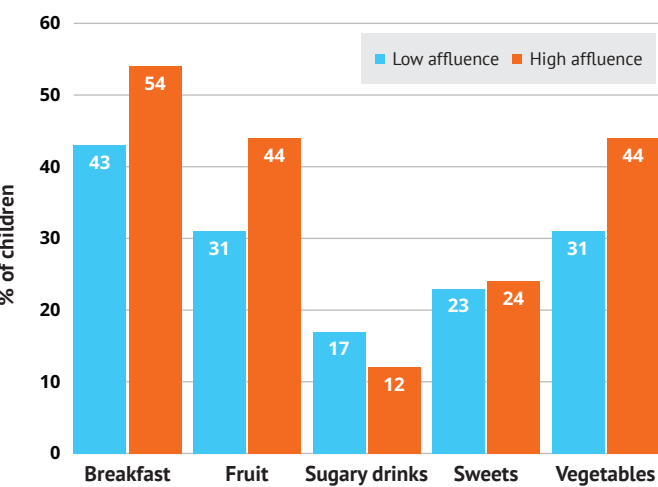
The most detailed Canadian disaggregated child and youth overweight estimates available come from a PHAC report (2024a) on obesity and overweight, which used measured Body Mass Index (BMI) from the Canadian Community Health Survey and Canadian Health Measures Survey. The figures showed a dramatic increase over the last several decades, in line with trends that have been outlined in UNICEF reports. Interestingly, while the data showed a correlation between income and childhood overweight/obesity, the relationship was not perfectly linear. Overall, the bottom three income quintiles displayed higher rates of childhood overweight/obesity (ages 5 to 17) than the higher two. However, the second quintile (rather than the first) was the highest of all. In 2015,

Figure 7: Rate of overweight, 5–19 years old, by income inequality, 2022



Source: See Report Card 20 Technical Appendix (Figure 6) for details.

Figure 8: Differences in children’s nutrition by family affluence, 11–15 years old, 2021–2022



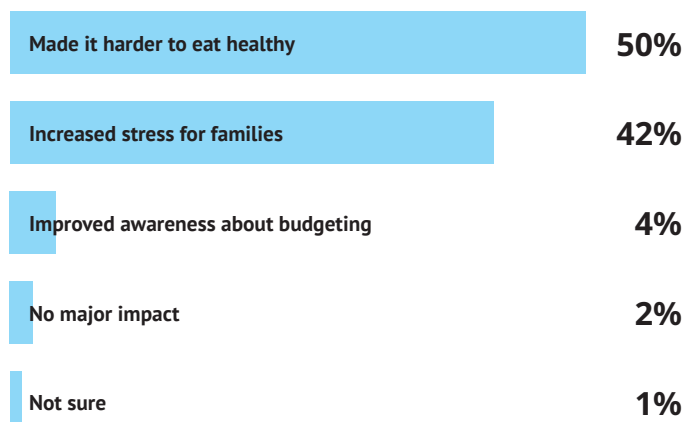
Source: See Report Card 20 Technical Appendix (Figure 24) for details.

15 In fact, *Feeding Profit* observes that obesity has overtaken underweight as the more dominant form of malnutrition among school-aged children and adolescents globally.



Most U-Reporters believe that the main effects of rising food prices for young people in Canada are that they have “made it harder to eat healthy” (50%) and “increased stress for families” (42%).

In your view, how have rising food prices affected young people in Canada the most?



U Report by UNICEF

182 responded out of 196 polled

the combined overweight/obesity rate was 31.8 per cent (lowest quintile) versus 28.5 per cent (highest quintile); the second quintile was notably high (38.6 per cent).

One possible explanation for this “non-linear” pattern is that it reflects the multiple dimensions of food insecurity, including inadequate access to both the quantity and quality of food. Perhaps those in the lowest income quintile are unable to afford adequate quantities of food, while those in the second quintile rely on cheaper, calorie-dense ultra-processed foods. This theory is bolstered in part by Report Card 20’s observation that, in high-income countries where overall resource deprivation is less acute, children in economically disadvantaged contexts are at higher risk of obesity and overweight, while the opposite pattern has been observed in low-income countries.



“Healthy food should be easier to find, taste good, and be marketed better so kids are more interested in choosing it.”
U-Reporter, March 2026



“The food industry needs to be producing food for the wellness of the population and not for profit solely.” U-Reporter, March 2026

Findings suggest that income is only one aspect of inequality, and one must consider that multiple factors may be operating simultaneously such as parental education, local environments, and behaviours or attitudes. For instance, *Feeding Profit* highlights exposure to predatory marketing practices designed to push ultra-processed food as a key driver of unhealthy behaviours. In fact, it found that three in four youth globally (75 per cent) saw ads for sugary drinks/snacks/fast food in the past week (at the time of the study), and that marketing exposure is highest in high-income countries like Canada. Moreover, studies show that ultra-processed foods and beverages account for at least half of the total energy intake of adolescents in Australia, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom (Marino et al., 2021). This may explain why, independent of income, child overweight rates in Canada are mitigated to some extent by parental education levels (PHAC, 2024a). Access to nutritious food is one part of the equation but understanding and awareness of healthy eating practices is another.

Geography is an additional factor that must be considered. The data in the PHAC report (2024a) suggests a rural/urban divide, which may be linked in part to access considerations. For instance, children in rural areas (36.5 per cent) had higher combined overweight/obesity rates than those living in population centres (30.7 per cent). Some broader regional differences could also be observed. Across provinces, combined overweight/obesity ranged from 46.1 per cent in Newfoundland and Labrador to 26.2 per cent in British Columbia. Variations in eating patterns tied to regional cultural differences may also play a role.

Indigenous identity shows one of the largest gaps in measured child overweight available in these tables, suggesting once again broader systemic inequities at play. Nearly half of the children and youth who identified as First Nations off reserve, Inuit Peoples, or Métis

were overweight/obese (48.4 per cent), compared with one in three among their non-Indigenous peers (31.2 per cent). Unfortunately, First Nations on reserve and Inuit living in Inuit Nunangat are not captured by the underlying survey cycle, limiting equity conclusions for the populations who are most affected by geographic barriers and high food costs. Moreover, there is a lack of disaggregated data on differences in childhood overweight across other identity factors such as ethnicity.

When assessing unequal outcomes in child overweight rates, another potential contributing factor is variations in physical activity behaviours, which evidence suggests could be partially affected by socio-economic status, at least among younger children. Report Card 20 highlights evidence from the 2022 PISA survey that children in the most disadvantaged families (53 per cent) were less likely to exercise regularly than those in the most advantaged families (58 per cent). In the Canadian context, the 2024 ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth noted an 11 per cent gap in the adherence to the Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines¹⁶ between children ages 5 to 11 in the lowest-income households (46 per cent) and the highest-income households (57 per cent), although no differences existed for youth ages 12 to 17. One possible explanation is that younger children require more adult supervision—for instance, through organized sports and activities or paid facilities, which can be costly—while older children may have more opportunity to engage in lower-cost recreational activities such as walking or running, hiking, or using free facilities and outdoor spaces. A lower need for supervision also means they are less dependent on parental work schedules to engage in physical activity.

Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities’ Cost and Barriers to Sports Participation Study (2025b) surveyed nearly 6 000 parents and children and found that organized sports participation was lower among children from rural Indigenous families, some racialized families, and households earning less than \$50 000 annual income. Barriers cited include cost, access, transport, and inclusion. Results from the Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities *State of Play Youth Report* (2025a) also

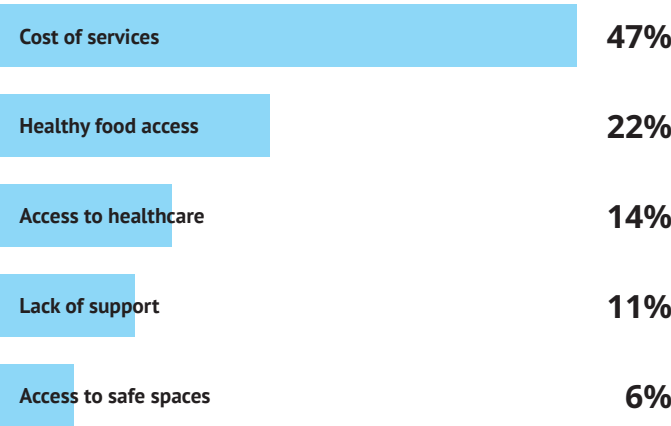
suggest that information gaps and concerns about representation and inclusion are a contributing factor for groups that are traditionally underrepresented in organized sport, particularly racialized youth. Children with disabilities face further barriers to participation.

Gender is another dynamic to consider when it comes to inclusion and physical health outcomes. The 2024 ParticipACTION study revealed consistently lower levels of adherence to physical activity guidelines among girls compared to boys. While, overall, girls tend to have lower obesity/overweight rates than their male peers (PHAC, 2024a), the benefits of physical activity stretch beyond this single metric. It is important to keep in mind that obesity/overweight is only one dimension of physical health. What the evidence makes clear, though, is that children’s physical well-being is influenced by a variety of factors, and these factors do not impact all children equally. These findings should not be interpreted as criticism of poorer children and their families, but an illustration of the ways in which inequalities and barriers manifest themselves in children’s lives.



When asked what most affects their ability to stay physically healthy, nearly half (47%) of responding U-Reporters cited cost of services as the biggest barrier.

Which barrier affects your ability to stay physically healthy the most?



16 At least 60 minutes of daily moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA).

Inequalities and Mental Well-Being

A more nuanced picture emerges when mental well-being is viewed through the lens of socio-economic inequality. Report Card 20 finds only a weak link between country-level income inequalities and mental well-being, suggesting that these outcomes are shaped by a wider mix of social, relational, and structural factors than economic measures alone can capture. As noted in Report Card 19, life satisfaction rates declined in every Report Card country except one (Japan) between 2018 and 2022. Although adolescent suicide rates have remained relatively stable over the past 15 years, significant disparities exist, ranging from one in 100 000 (Cyprus) to nearly 18 in 100 000 (Uruguay). Although the mental well-being dimension in Report Card 20 relies on the two indicators for which the strongest comparable cross-country data is currently available, these measures provide only a partial view of adolescent mental well-being. Suicide is an important marker of serious distress, but it captures only one part of the broader mental health picture. Likewise, life satisfaction reflects one dimension of positive well-being, without fully capturing the range of experiences that shape how young people are doing. As the core report notes, internationally comparable data in this area remains limited, making mental well-being one of the more difficult dimensions of child well-being to assess comprehensively across countries. However,

available evidence does suggest that while economic inequality may not align with mental well-being indicators as strongly at the national level as it does for some physical health or skills measures, socio-economic disadvantage still plays a meaningful role in shaping children's daily well-being. This will be explored further below.

Adolescent Suicide

Canada ranks:

33rd out of 44
(8.4 per 100 000)



Top performer:

Cyprus
(1.0 per 100 000)

Country average:

6.5 per 100 000

Every single life lost to suicide is a tragedy, and statistics can never fully capture the weight carried by those affected by suicide loss. Yet understanding the data is essential to help identify patterns, target interventions, and ultimately prevent future harm. At 8.4 per 100 000 (a three-year average), Canada has one of the highest adolescent suicide rates among Report Card countries. While Report Card 20 finds limited evidence linking adolescent suicide to economic inequalities either between or within countries, a closer examination of suicide prevalence among economically disadvantaged groups in Canada reveals important patterns. These patterns suggest that economic factors—like the psychosocial impacts of financial stress, or

financial barriers such as the cost of treatment or inability to take time off work—can play a role in mental health outcomes. To better understand these dynamics, the following section examines a range of distinct but related indicators drawn from multiple national data sets. While not all available data is specific to adolescents, the evidence nonetheless points to an unequal distribution of key suicide risk factors that align with broader economic and structural inequities. At the same time, it underscores the complexity of the issue and the need for a multi-faceted policy response.

A Statistics Canada analysis (Yang et al., 2022) of data from the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) and the Canadian Census Health and Environment Cohort (CanCHEC) suggests that household income is a significant predictor of past-year suicidal ideation for Canadian-born individuals. In fact, Canadian-born people in the lowest income quintile had more than double the rate (6.2 per cent) of those not in the lowest quintile (2.5 per cent). This correlation remained intact even after accounting for other socio-demographic characteristics. On suicide mortality, which is a different measure, the income effect was even stronger. Those in the lowest income quintile had a suicide mortality rate of 23 per 100 000 person-years, nearly double the rate of those not in the lowest quintile (12 per 100 000). Overall, low family income significantly increased risk of suicide mortality for the Canadian-born population. Interestingly, the association between lower income and suicide mortality rates among

Canadian immigrants was more modest, and for ideation the connection disappeared almost completely. These findings underscore the need for further exploration of the issue, and the importance of suicide-prevention strategies that reflect how socio-economic disadvantage impacts different demographic groups in distinct ways.

However, across both groups, one trend remains evident: age is a key factor. The analysis found that, although overall rates differ, youth (ages 15 to 24 years) reported having had the highest proportion of suicidal thoughts in the last year among both immigrant (4.4 per cent) and Canadian-born persons (6.5 per cent). This is supported by more recent data, which identifies suicide as the second-leading cause of death for Canadians ages 15 to 34 (PHAC, 2026). When looking at a younger age demographic, the income correlation persists. The 2023 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth (CHSCY) found that, among youth ages 12 to 17, reported suicidal ideation and attempts were two percentage points higher for those in the lowest income tertile (9.3 per cent) compared to those in the highest income tertile (7.3 per cent) (Liu et al., 2025).

Other differences are also evident in population-level suicidal ideation patterns. In the 2019 Canadian Community Health Survey, roughly 25 per cent of Indigenous peoples living off reserve reported lifetime suicidal thoughts versus 12 per cent among non-Indigenous people (Statistics Canada, 2020).

While estimates vary, suicide rates overall for Indigenous youth are significantly higher than for non-Indigenous youth (Kumar and Tjepkema, 2019)—a sobering reminder of the ongoing harmful legacies of colonialism. In Jack.org's 2025 *Be There* report, Indigenous youth reported the lowest confidence in finding appropriate mental health resources for a friend (65 per cent), an eight-percentage-point difference compared with white youth. While averages are strong overall, resource confidence is unevenly distributed, potentially reflecting unequal access, trust, or cultural relevance of services rather than individual capability.

Much public discourse has been centred around sex differences in suicide rates. Indeed, the suicide rate among males is almost three times the rate among females, with males accounting for nearly three-quarters of suicide deaths (PHAC, 2026). However, expanding the scope of analysis to other related mental health indicators signals that both sexes face significant suffering. For instance, the rate of self-harm hospitalization is nearly two times higher for females (86.2 per 100 000) than for males (44.6 per 100 000). Another Canadian survey, the longitudinal component of the 2023 CHSCY, also found that teenage girls were more likely to experience declines in their self-reported mental health since 2019 (Statistics Canada, 2024). Other identity factors, such as gender and sexual orientation, also play a role. Compared to heterosexual and cisgender populations, people who identify as 2SLGBTQI+ are more

likely to make suicide attempts, make suicide plans, or have thoughts of suicide (PHAC, 2026). Indeed, the 2022 HBSC study found that, when compared with cisgender girls and gender-diverse youth, cisgender boys reported relatively high levels of positive mental health outcomes and relatively low levels of negative mental health outcomes (Craig et al., 2025). In Jack.org's 2025 *Be There* report, non-binary youth reported the lowest comfort with seeking help if they were struggling with their mental health (47 per cent). This gap persists despite similar or higher reported confidence in supporting others, indicating potential structural and identity-based barriers. The data suggests that inequalities in mental health outcomes are multifaceted and that a gender-inclusive approach to ensuring mental health access for all is critical.

Finally, service access and geography shape whether risks escalate to severe outcomes. Self-harm hospitalizations—an indicator capturing severe episodes requiring inpatient care—show stark geographic differences. The same PHAC database (2026) highlights that rates are 6.5 times higher in very remote areas than in urban areas, which is consistent with inequality pathways through service scarcity, travel barriers, and crisis response delays.

In conclusion, different socio-demographic patterns emerge when examining indicators such as suicidal ideation, suicide mortality, and self-harm hospitalizations. Because each metric reflects a

distinct aspect of mental health risk and experience, relying on any single indicator can obscure important disparities. A holistic perspective—one that considers

multiple dimensions of mental well-being together and how multiple aspects of identity and life experience can shape that well-being—is essential for

designing effective, equitable policy responses to address Canada's unacceptably high adolescent suicide rate.

Help is available

9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline: Call or text 988

Kids Help Phone: Call 1 800 668 6868 or text CONNECT to 686868

Hope for Wellness Helpline for Indigenous peoples: Call 1 855 242 3310

Life Satisfaction

Canada ranks:

13th out of 37 (76%) 

Top performer:

The Netherlands (87%)

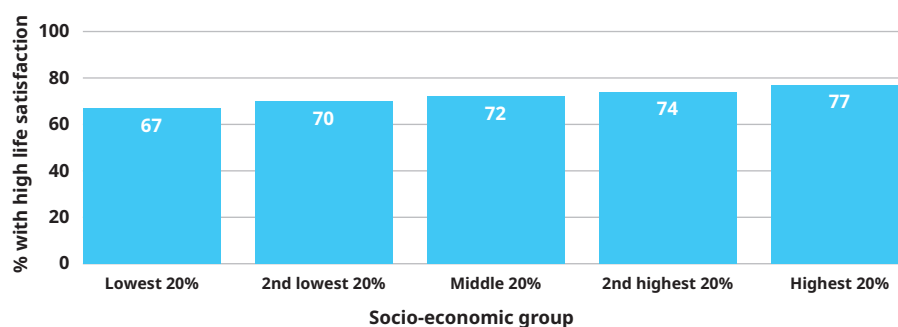
Country average:

72%

Report Card 20 finds only a weak link between country-level income inequalities and average adolescent life satisfaction rates, noting that other studies on this topic reveal contrasting findings. However, this does not mean that there are no differences in mental well-being between different socio-economic groups within countries. The 2022 OECD PISA data reveals that, on average, children from disadvantaged backgrounds report lower life satisfaction, as illustrated in the following chart (Figure 9). Indeed, the difference between the lowest income quintile and the highest income quintile is 10 percentage points.

However, other research notes that these links vary in strength

Figure 9: High life satisfaction by socio-economic group, 15 years old, 2022



Source: See Report Card 20 Technical Appendix (Figure 10) for full details.

and can depend on the way that both socio-economic status and mental well-being are assessed. It is possible that lower life satisfaction among lower-income families depends on the level of material deprivation experienced. Evidence suggests that the resource scarcity associated with experiencing poverty can increase chronic stress, anxiety, and depression (Ridley et al., 2020). At the same time, having mental health challenges can make it harder to work, stay in school, or earn enough money, which can keep people in poverty. This cycle can be reinforced by

limited access to material resources and social opportunities, stigma and discrimination, and systemic inequality. Contributing factors could include, for instance, reduced access to early intervention and mental health services, and potential for higher exposure to trauma due to factors such as housing instability. A 2024 PHAC trend analysis of results from the Canadian Community Health Survey (among ages 12 and over) assessing life satisfaction and household food insecurity rates showed an unequivocal correlation between the two (PHAC, 2024b). During the

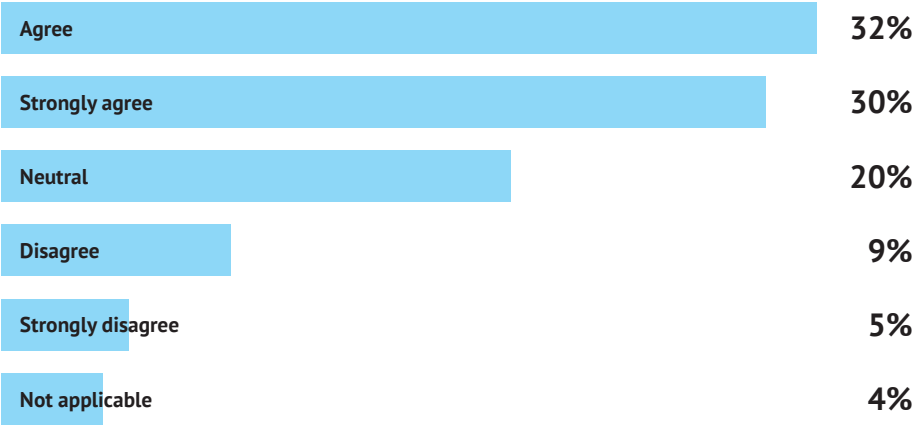
COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), the prevalence of high self-rated mental health among males was roughly 32 percentage points lower for those experiencing severe food insecurity than for those who were food secure; for females, the corresponding difference was 36 percentage points.

It is important to note that, while affluence is often associated with better outcomes, children’s life satisfaction is also strongly shaped by social relationships and supports, which can mitigate the effects of socio-economic disadvantage—with things like strong family and school relationships serving as protective factors. The 2022 HBSC study, while it does not directly analyze the relationship between children’s life satisfaction and family income, identifies the relative strength of association between various aspects of a child’s life and their life satisfaction, broken down by age, gender, and affluence (Craig et al., 2025). In short, it measures how strongly different conditions or experiences correlate with children’s life satisfaction across demographic factors. The findings show that, while important for all children, non-material factors in some cases (such as happy home life, family support, positive school climate, community support, and family meals) become especially salient for disadvantaged children when it comes to influencing life satisfaction. On the other side, the study found that material deprivation factors (such as



62% of youth say the barriers they face affect their mental health or well-being (30% “strongly agree,” and 32% “agree”).

“I find that the barriers I face affect my mental health or well-being.”



 **Report** by UNICEF

167 responded out of 171 polled

hunger) also had a greater impact on less-affluent students. While experiencing hunger was consistently negatively associated with life satisfaction and well-being, and positively associated with loneliness and health complaints for all students, those who were less affluent had the strongest associations between mental health indicators and hunger. Additional inequalities are revealed in the HBSC data, which suggests that other factors are also at play. For instance, girls and gender-diverse youth repeatedly reported lower life satisfaction than boys. Moreover, as noted in Report Card 19, life satisfaction for young people in Canada overall has been trending downward for decades—something that should concern all of us.

Inequalities and Skills Development

Skills development is assessed using two key indicators that are foundational to children’s overall growth: social skills and academic skills.¹⁷ Report Card 20 finds that, across all measured countries, around two-thirds of children feel confident in their social skills, although there is variation between countries. As shown in Report Card 19, these trends changed very little in the period from 2018 to 2022 and vary less among countries than academic skills do. With a ranking of 26th out of 41 countries, Canada (75 per cent) falls within the middle group, situated between Chile at the low end (63 per cent) and Croatia at the high end (84 per cent) on social skills. On academic

17 Social skills is measured by the percentage of 15-year-olds who report confidence in making friends easily. Academic skills is measured by the percentage of 15-year-olds who are still in school and have reached basic proficiency in both reading and mathematics (i.e., functional skills for daily life).

skills, Canada ranks sixth out of 43 countries, with a proficiency rate (in terms of basic reading and math skills) of 67 per cent in 2022. This places it near top performers like the Republic of Korea (79 per cent) and Ireland (78 per cent), and well ahead of countries such as Colombia (19 per cent), Costa Rica (20 per cent), and Mexico (20 per cent). Despite this ranking, trends indicate that academic skills in Canada are declining. Between 2018 and 2022, proficiency fell by one percentage point, and the gap in mean math scores between children in the highest and lowest socio-economic status groups widened by 13 percentage points, as discussed in Report Card 19. This mirrors a broader downward trend observed across 21 measured countries, suggesting a more persistent, long-term challenge. Shockingly, this has resulted in

roughly a third of children in Report Card countries not reaching basic proficiency in reading and math.

Academic Skills (Reading and Math Proficiency)

Canada ranks:

6th out of 43 (67%)



Top performer:

The Republic of Korea (79%)

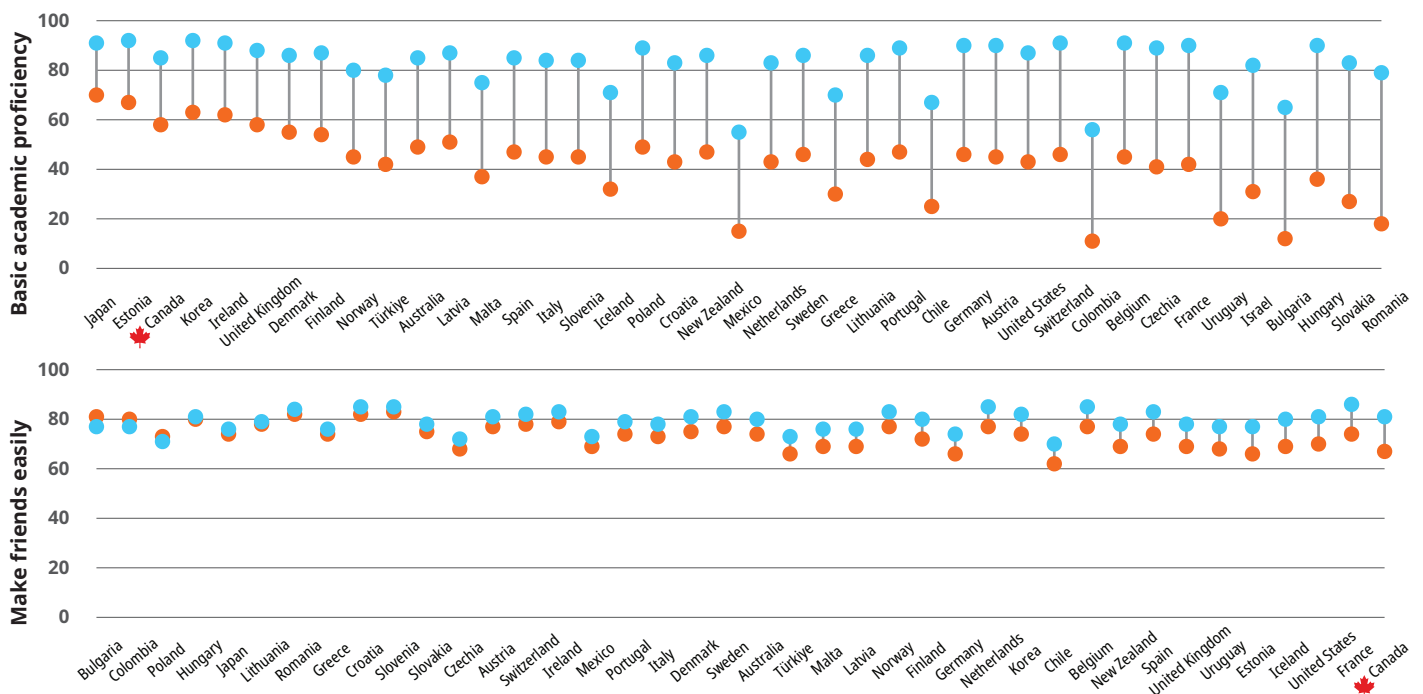
Country average:

55%

A clearer picture of skill development emerges when viewed through the lens of socio-economic inequality. The scale and impact of these disparities reveal a strong association: in countries with higher income inequality, children tend

to report lower levels of academic proficiency. The relationship is more pronounced when it comes to countries with high child poverty rates. Across all measured countries, Report Card 20 highlights a substantial socio-economic proficiency gap in academic skills, ranging from a 21-percentage-point difference between the lowest and highest income quintiles in Japan—Canada's gap is 27—to as much as 61 percentage points in Romania (Figure 10). On average, children in the highest 20 per cent of the socio-economic group are almost twice as likely (83 per cent) to have basic academic proficiency in reading and mathematics than children in the lowest 20 per cent (42 per cent) (Figure 11). Low income can, therefore, be considered a risk factor for poorer academic outcomes.

Figure 10: Academic proficiency and social skills by socio-economic group, by country, 2022

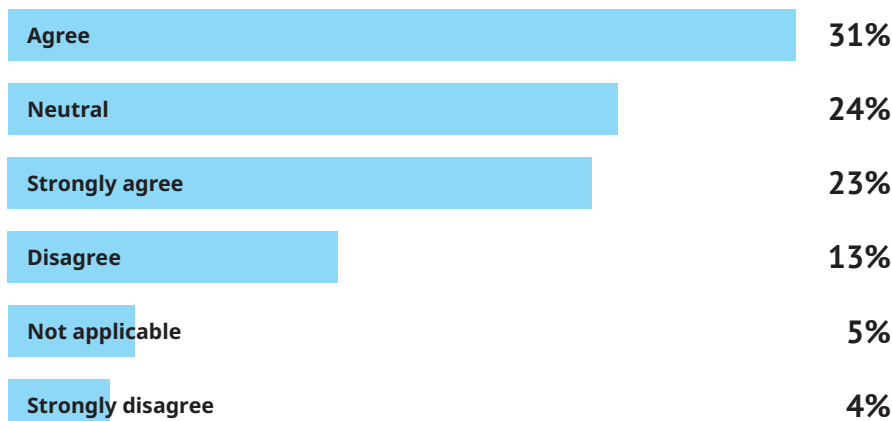


Source: See Report Card 20 Technical Appendix (Figure 15) for full details.



54% of U-Reporters say barriers interfere with their learning or skill development.

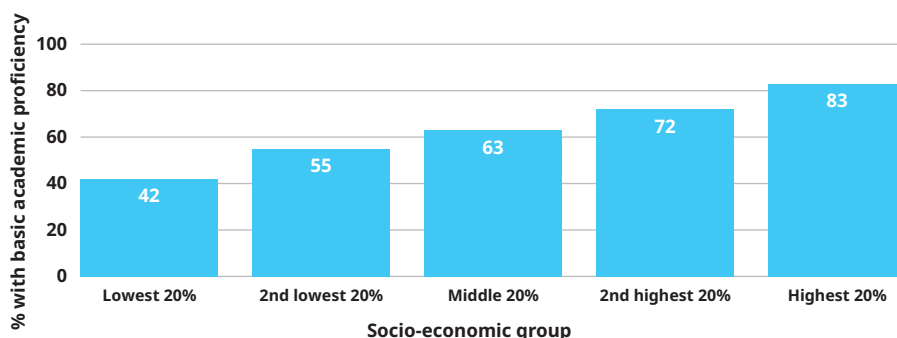
“I find that the barriers I face get in the way of my learning in school or skill development.”



U Report by UNICEF

167 responded out of 169 polled

Figure 11: Academic proficiency by socio-economic group, average across countries, 2022



Source: See Report Card 20 Technical Appendix (Figure 16) for full details.

(72 per cent). This gap was largest in Canada (nearly 15 percentage points), followed by France and the United States. By comparison, less pronounced gaps were observed in other countries. In Bulgaria, Colombia, and Poland, children from less advantaged backgrounds even reported slightly higher levels of social confidence, suggesting the potential existence of mitigating or protective factors that shape children's self-belief and social development. Generally, however, evidence suggests an inverse relationship. The 2021-2022 HBSC survey undertaken in many Report Card countries found that children living in less affluent families had poorer-quality peer relationships, and Report Card 20 notes evidence from PISA surveys suggesting such children are more likely to report feeling lonely at school.

Potential drivers

The family stress and investment models explained in Report Card 20 provide insight into the ways socio-economic status might influence disparities in skills outcomes (Figure 12). The stress model suggests that family income can influence family dynamics, often increasing stress and depression and contributing to lower self-esteem in both parents and children due to social stigma and isolation. Existing literature suggests that income inequality can negatively impact psychosocial well-being through feelings of inferiority, contempt, humiliation, social isolation, and subordination, among others (Benny et al., 2021).

Social Skills (Making Friends)

Canada ranks:

26th out of 41 (75%)



Top performer:

Croatia (84%)

Country average:

76%

The link between socio-economic differences and children's social skills is less strong than for children's academic skills, but a pattern is nonetheless evident in most countries (Figure 10). On average, the most advantaged children tend to be a little more confident in their social skills (77 per cent) than the least advantaged children

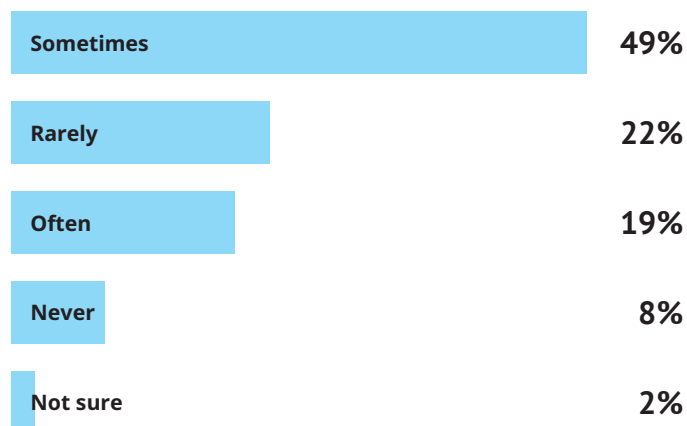


68% of U-Reporters feel that social anxiety can get in the way of their school, work, or daily life.



Nearly two-thirds (64%) feel between “somewhat” and “not at all” connected to their school.

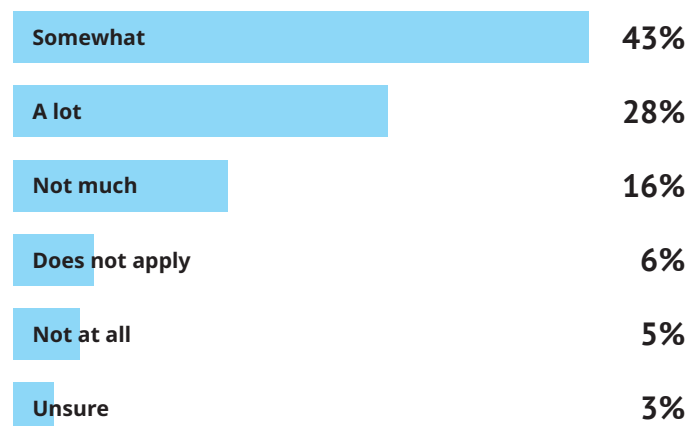
Does your social anxiety ever get in the way of your school, work, or daily life?



U Report by UNICEF

459 responded out of 467 polled

How much do you feel like you belong at your school or learning space



U Report by UNICEF

174 responded out of 174 polled

It is plausible that such feelings may impact a young person's motivation or confidence in the classroom, as well as their confidence in their ability to make friends or form positive social connections. This is supported by research demonstrating that youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods are less likely to benefit from positive relationships and more likely to engage in higher-risk behaviours (Sloss et al., 2025; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Visser et al., 2021).

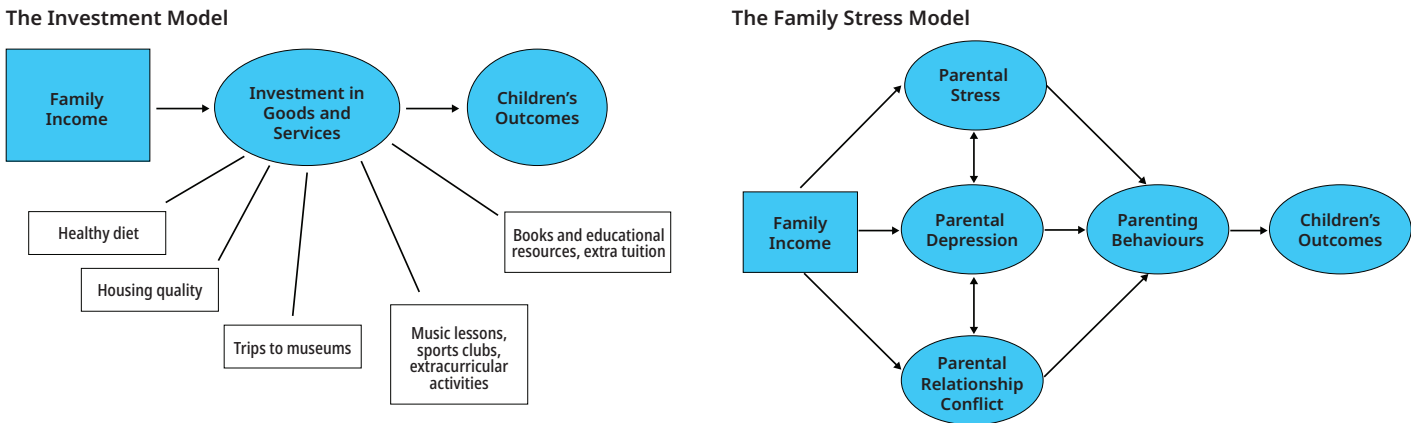
On the other hand, the investment model explains how family income shapes the resources available to children, and how

deprivation in these resources can directly harm a wide range of children's outcomes. A lack of adequate resources restricts a child's ability to engage in play, access academic support such as tutoring, books, and enrichment, and fully participate in social and extracurricular activities (Sloss et al., 2025). According to a Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities *State of Play Youth Report* (2025a), 56 per cent of youth said that “playing with friends” was their main reason for enjoying sports. At the same time, nearly half of respondents (48 per cent) cited the high cost of sports as a major barrier to participation. This financial barrier can limit opportunities for social connection

and skill development, ultimately constraining children's ability to thrive in social and academic contexts. Free time is another resource that is not distributed equally. Report Card 20 analysis of the PISA 2022 survey found that on average across participating countries, a higher proportion of adolescents from lower socio-economic status backgrounds reported working for pay than their more advantaged peers.

In today's digital world, existing stress pathways may be further intensified by exposure to online harms. Although the internet comes with benefits, risks also abound. Canadian data indicates that young

Figure 12: Two models of the relationship between family income and child well-being



Source: Reproduced from Cooper & Stewart, 2013.

people frequently encounter harms such as cyberbullying, harmful content, and online harassment, all of which are associated with poorer mental health outcomes (Hango, 2023). These risks are further compounded by the amount of time youth spend online. Research suggests that adherence to screen time guidelines is associated with better well-being outcomes. One in three (37 per cent) Canadian youth reported exceeding screen time guidelines (two to three hours per day depending on age) in both 2019 and 2023 (Statistics Canada, 2026g). Youth who met these recommendations were more likely to report that most of their days were not at all stressful (37 per cent, compared to 25 per cent among those who exceeded guidelines). This group also reported excellent or very good mental health (58 per cent versus 38 per cent), and excellent or very good general health (76 per cent versus 63 per cent) (Statistics Canada, 2026g). For children in

lower-income households, these risks may be further exacerbated by unequal access to digital literacy support, safe online environments, parental resources, and mental health supports, reinforcing existing inequities in well-being.

As highlighted in Report Card 16, the environments in which children grow, including digital environments, play a critical role in shaping well-being outcomes. Without adequate safeguards, online spaces can reinforce existing



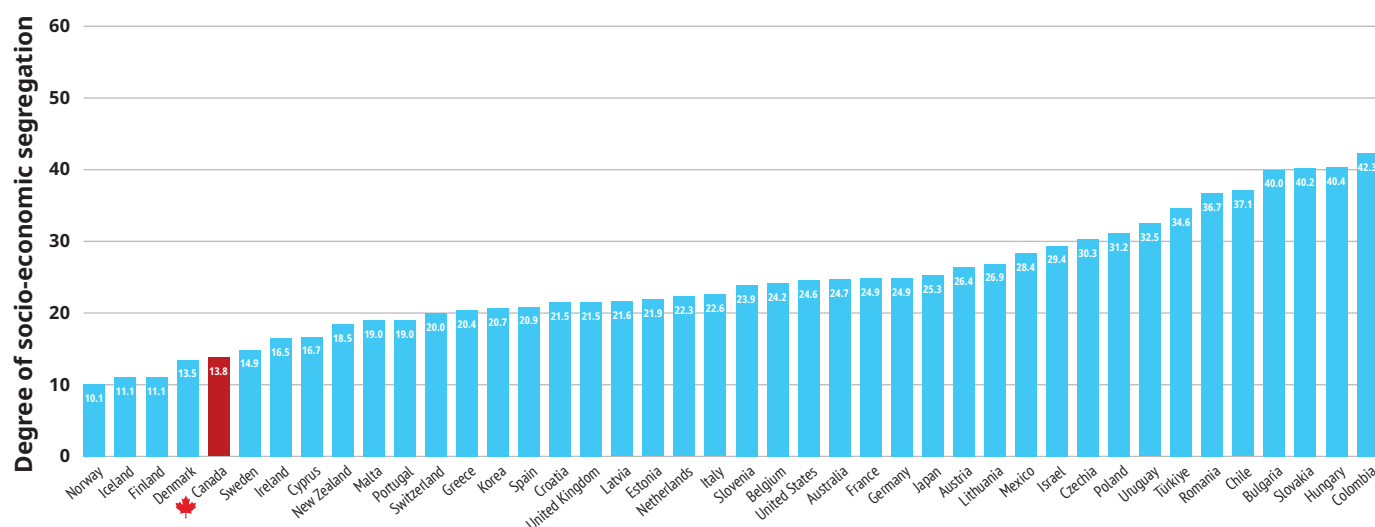
More than three-quarters of U-Reporters believe the government and online platforms should do more to keep young people safe online.

Do you think government and platforms should do more to regulate digital safety and AI to protect young people?

Yes	77%
Somewhat	12%
No	5%
Not really	3%
Not sure	3%



119 responded out of 120 polled

Figure 13: Socio-economic segregation between schools, 15 years old, 2022

Source: See Report Card 20 Technical Appendix (Figure 21) for full details.

socio-economic inequalities by amplifying social comparison, deepening exclusion, and weakening protective relationships. Reports like UNICEF's *From Children's Voices to Action* (2026) present roadmaps informed by direct consultation with young people to realize their best interest in the digital environment.

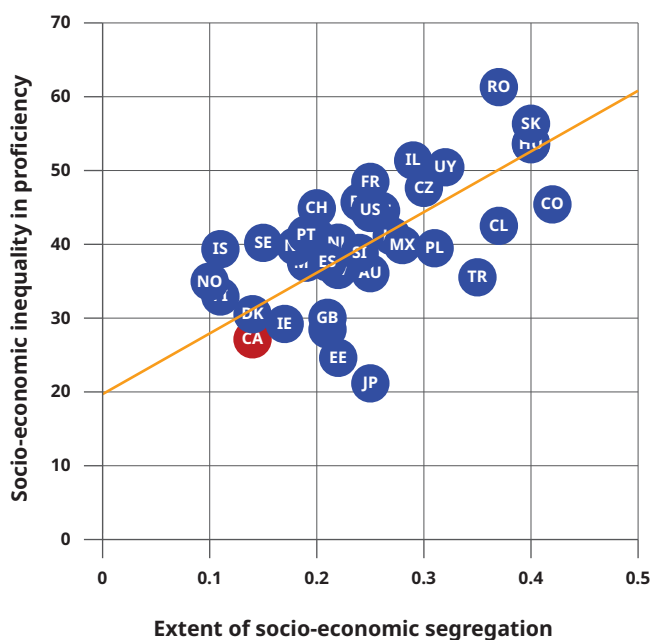
Beyond individual household income, another factor that may contribute to socio-economic skill gaps is the influence of school environments, which can be shaped by broader socio-economic disparities at the community level. This could help to explain research from the Children and Youth Planning Table of Waterloo Region, which finds that individuals from lower socio-economic status (SES) neighbourhoods tend to experience lower levels of well-being and academic achievement (Sloss et al., 2025; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Visser et al., 2021).

Report Card 20 explores the concept of socio-economic segregation between schools (Figure 13), which adds additional context in relation to academic skill disparities. Segregation in this context refers to how strongly students from similar economic family backgrounds are concentrated within schools (whereas less segregated schools would be those with a diverse mix of students from different backgrounds). This is important because it speaks to how well schools function as shared public institutions for students from all backgrounds, as opposed to simply reflecting and reinforcing broader social divisions. PISA results show that countries with a lower degree of segregation are associated with both greater socio-economic equality in academic proficiency (Figure 14) and higher academic proficiency (Figure 15), which—depending on school funding models—could be linked in part to resource distribution. Leaders of

more economically disadvantaged schools were more likely to report staff shortages, inadequacy of educational materials, and physical infrastructure issues that impeded teaching. Meanwhile, teachers in schools with more economically advantaged student populations typically had higher levels of qualification.

Although Canada performs fairly well on socio-economic segregation compared to other countries, a trend exists of variation between provinces. In an analysis of PISA averages between 2012 and 2018 (Chmielewski and Maharaj, 2022), Quebec exhibits the highest levels of segregation in Canada, comparable to moderately segregated countries such as England, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, while Manitoba follows with medium-low segregation levels similar to those observed in New Zealand and Ireland. In contrast, Maritime provinces (Prince Edward

Figure 14: Socio-economic segregation between schools and socio-economic gaps in academic proficiency, 15 years old, 2022



Source: See Report Card 20 Technical Appendix (Figure 22) for full details.

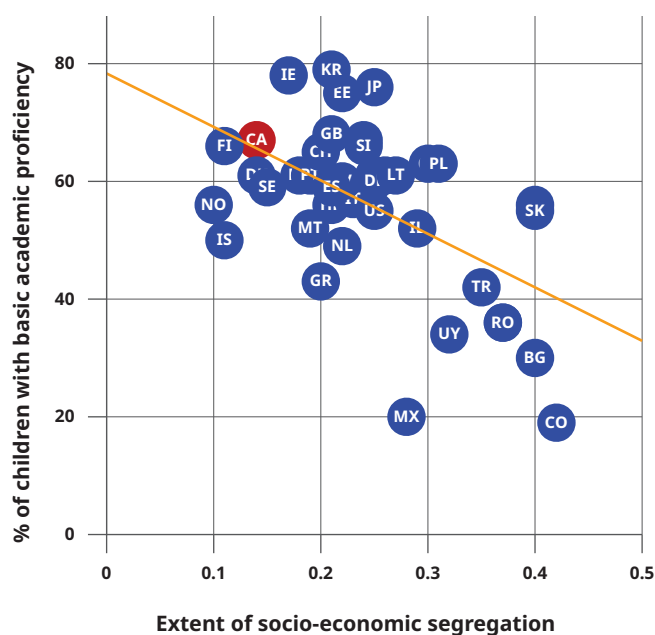
Island, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia) display the lowest levels of segregation, which are similar to the least segregated country, Norway.

Saskatchewan, Ontario, British Columbia, and Newfoundland and Labrador fall in the middle, with low-to-medium levels by international standards, comparable to Sweden and Scotland. Notably, segregation of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds is particularly high in Manitoba and British Columbia. Among other factors, these patterns can be strongly associated with differences in provincial income inequality and levels of urbanization, with residential segregation also playing a contributing role (Chmielewski and Maharaj, 2022).

These provinces also have a relatively high number of First Nations reserves, which may reflect broader structural and geographic inequities—including historical patterns of Indigenous marginalization, residential separation, and rural or remote schooling contexts—that shape how students are distributed across schools.

The combination of these frameworks, along with their contributing factors, strengthens the case for investments that can help bridge socio-economic gaps across the environments in which children live, play, and learn, whether at home, at school, or in their communities. Interventions that address family stress, through income support and targeted social

Figure 15: Socio-economic segregation between schools and levels of academic proficiency, 15 years old, 2022



Source: See Report Card 20 Technical Appendix (Figure 23) for full details.

protection measures, alongside efforts to reduce social isolation through accessible and inclusive mental health services and in-school programs are particularly critical.



"While access to... supports is important, what truly fosters inclusion is forming genuine relationships with peers, mentors, and community members who consistently show up and choose to engage with them. Feeling valued... helps build confidence, as does having safe, non-judgmental spaces to ask questions and make mistakes while learning."
U-Reporter, February 2026



Regional Spotlight: Nunavut

Background

The mandate of the Representative for Children and Youth's Office (RCYO) focuses on helping all Nunavummiut know about child rights and ensuring that the Government of Nunavut provides ethical, equitable, and consistent services that support and protect the rights of young people across the territory. The Representative for Children and Youth (Representative) is an independent officer who reports to the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut and the public. The office serves children, youth, and their families throughout the vast territory—over 2.04 million square kilometres spanning three regions and 25 fly-in communities across three time zones. With a population of more than 41 000, predominantly Inuit—and nearly 40 per cent of residents under the age of 19—Nunavut is the youngest jurisdiction in Canada, underscoring the importance of accurate, territory-wide reporting on the well-being of young Nunavummiut.

Under the *Representative for Children and Youth Act* (RCYA), the Representative produces an Annual Report with a section dedicated to the status of young Nunavummiut consisting of data provided by the Government of Nunavut. The RCYO also published its first systemic review in May 2019 titled *Our Minds Matter: A youth-informed review of mental health services for young Nunavummiut*. Together, these informative reports provide valuable evidence-based perspectives on the experiences of young Nunavummiut.

Economic context

Children and youth outcomes in Nunavut reflect a pattern in which economic inequality shapes mental health, physical health, and social development. Income indicators show that many families living in Nunavut face substantial financial pressure. As outlined earlier in this report, Nunavut consistently faces the highest rates of poverty and food insecurity in the country. Due to geographic isolation, the cost of living is significantly higher than in the rest of the country, while employment opportunities are scarcer. A Government of Nunavut (2026b) food price report found that Nunavummiut



pay on average 1.5 times more for the same grocery items than people living in Ottawa, and a separate Government of Nunavut statistical brief (2026a) found that Nunavut's unemployment rate was about 1.6 times higher than the national average at the end of 2025.

Mental well-being and access to care

Mental health outcomes among children and youth reflect further structural challenges in Nunavut, including limited access to youth-specific mental health services. These challenges are also shaped in part by the ongoing impact of colonial policies, including the disruptive legacy of residential schools and relocation practices that have resulted in inter-generational trauma and undermined traditional kinship structures and ways of life (RCYO, 2019). Service gaps are widespread. In 2019, only 5 per cent of the mental health workforce specialized in children and youth (RCYO, 2019). As of 2026, Nunavut did not have an in-territory residential mental health treatment facility, which means that receiving necessary support often requires a long and costly journey far from one's community. As in other places, societal attitudes towards mental health can

also be a barrier—survey findings indicate that 45 per cent of youth reported feeling uncomfortable seeking help, often due to concerns about stigma, privacy, or embarrassment (RCYO, 2019). These barriers can delay access to care and worsen mental health outcomes. In 2024, there were 11 suicides among youth under 19 living in Nunavut (RCYO, 2025).

Physical health and living conditions

The right to a safe environment in which to live and work is affirmed in international law, but economic pressures in Nunavut are closely linked with disparities in living conditions. Housing access is affected by documented challenges such as high construction, operation, and maintenance costs, as well as broader socio-economic barriers including cost of living and precarious employment. According to the 2021 Population Census (Statistics Canada, 2022), 60 per cent of Inuit residents of Nunavut were living in overcrowded housing, meaning they did not have enough bedrooms to suitably accommodate the size and composition of the household under the National Occupancy Standard.

Such conditions increase risks for illness, stress, and injury, especially among children (Anisman et al., 2025). In 2023, there were 35 deaths reported among children and youth aged 0 to 19, including 15 infant deaths; five of those infant deaths were classified as undetermined but associated with unsafe sleep environments (RCYO, 2025; Statistics Canada, 2026a, 2026b). This is consistent with data for 2024, indicating an infant mortality rate of 21.2 per 1 000 live births in Nunavut for infants under one year, compared to a national average of 4.5 per 1 000 live births (Statistics Canada, 2026b). In the 2023-2024 fiscal year, children and youth accounted for 34 per cent of all medical visits, and 30 per cent of all medical travel patients, which is when people are sent out of their home community for a medical procedure/treatment, highlighting ongoing structural barriers to accessing care (RCYO, 2025).

Skill development and opportunity gaps

Indicators related to education and skills development reflect similar structural challenges. School attendance in the 2023-2024 academic year was 68.51 per cent, and the gross graduation rate was 44.8 per cent in the same year (RCYO, 2025). Access to early childhood care is also constrained. In the 2024-2025 fiscal year, Nunavut had 1 364 licensed childcare spaces, while 1 615 children remained on waitlists, indicating persistent shortages (RCYO, 2025). Children and youth infrastructure is uneven across the territory, with only 10 of 25 communities reporting dedicated space or centres for children and youth (RCYO, 2019). Limited educational resources, childcare, and youth programming can restrict opportunities for skill development and social support.

Looking ahead

Despite these challenges, culturally grounded community programs demonstrate promising outcomes. Participation in land-based initiatives, such as the Young Hunters Program, has been associated with stronger cultural connection, improved mental well-being, and the absence of suicides among participants since 2012 (RCYO, 2019). These programs highlight the protective role of cultural identity, land-based learning, and community engagement in supporting children and youth resilience.

Overall, the available evidence suggests that economic inequality and the high cost of living are central drivers shaping children and youth well-being in Nunavut. Income constraints influence housing conditions, food security, and access to services, which in turn affect mental health, physical health, and skill development outcomes. These outcomes should also be understood within a broader context of structural and historical factors, including discriminatory colonial-era policies that caused trauma, disrupted traditional livelihoods, and contributed to persistent economic and social inequities in the present day. Addressing these issues requires solutions that reduce economic disparities while strengthening culturally grounded support and community infrastructure for young Nunavummiut.¹⁸

18 In this spotlight, the terms “children” and “youth” refer to individuals ages 0 to 19, following the definition used by the Representative for Children and Youth’s Office. Within this framework, “children” are defined as ages 0 to 11, and “youth” as ages 12 to 19.

Children's Rights and Well-Being Go Hand in Hand

Canada's consistent middling performance on child well-being indicators underscores both the urgency of action and the opportunity for progress. Behind each data point are real children who deserve the very best that duty bearers can provide. Canada is well positioned to strengthen child well-being through targeted and sustained policy action, and there remains significant potential for improvement if policy levers are effectively designed, coordinated, and implemented.

To “bridge the gap” in socio-economic inequalities, lift more children and families out of poverty, and achieve equitable outcomes for all children, a coordinated, whole-of-government approach is essential—one that aligns action across federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal levels. As this analysis demonstrates, poverty and child well-being are deeply interconnected, with socio-economic disadvantage shaping outcomes across health, education, and overall quality of life. Failing to ensure children have what they need to succeed has consequences, not just for children but for society as a whole. An OECD study (2022b) undertaken in Europe found that childhood disadvantage costs countries an average of 3.4 per cent of GDP annually in weaker health, reduced employment, and lower earnings. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides a foundational framework to guide Canada in strengthening these conditions and advancing child well-being. Building on this foundation, the following recommendations outline key policy actions to operationalize a coordinated, rights-based approach and drive measurable improvements in child well-being across Canada.

Improving Canada's Performance Through Strategic, Child-Centred Policies

1. **Prioritize 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.

Children account for nearly one-fifth of Canada's population, yet they are too often overlooked in government decision-making (UNICEF Canada, 2025b). As a signatory to the UNCRC, Canada has a responsibility to give children the “first call” on public resources and to prioritize investments that support their well-being. While the federal government has taken some steps in this direction, developing a national children's strategy in 2000 and publishing *A Canada Fit for Children* in 2004, the outcomes outlined in this report suggest that this commitment has not been fully realized, even as Canada's national wealth has grown. Compared to peer countries, Canada is now lagging in multiple dimensions of children's well-being, while more than half of OECD countries have implemented integrated children's strategies that provide ambition and direction of policy coherence across government.¹⁹

Implementing a national children's strategy can help bring children into sharper focus on the federal agenda and ensure that their interests and voices are central to Canada's future. Such a strategy would support outcomes comparable to those in other high-income countries, particularly given the growing evidence that early public investment in childhood leads to better outcomes for children (OECD, 2025). It would also strengthen Canada's ability to assess and respond to the state of childhood through robust, evidence-based data collection and analysis, especially as it relates to socio-economic gaps and children most disproportionately impacted. Furthermore, equitable approaches, such as the use of Jordan's Principle and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, should be prioritized. Although legislation is currently under way through Bill S-212, the *National Strategy for Children and Youth Act*, this

¹⁹ As of 2023.

framework must now be fully supported, passed, and implemented to achieve meaningful impact.²⁰ A comprehensive strategy would also establish systems for the universal application of a child rights policy lens, including Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs), and enable systematic tracking of child-focused public expenditures in fulfilment of children's rights.

2. Sustain targeted investment in core social protection programs, particularly income benefits and supplements, to preserve and enhance their effectiveness in reducing and ultimately eliminating child poverty.

As shown in Report Card 20, one in five children in Canada is living in poverty. Evidence consistently shows that income supports, particularly child benefits, are among the most effective policy tools to reduce poverty (UNICEF and Overseas Development Institute, 2020). This is reinforced by the experience of the Canada Child Benefit (CCB), which contributed to significant reductions in child poverty following its introduction in 2016 (Baker et al., 2021). It was further solidified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when enhanced income supports contributed to a historic decline in poverty in 2020 (Dionne and Raymond-Brousseau, 2025). However, as this report has shown, as these temporary measures have been withdrawn and the cost of living has increased, poverty rates have rebounded dramatically. Meanwhile, the impact of the CCB has diminished over time as the real value of the benefit has been eroded by rising inflation and rapidly increasing costs of living—especially for housing, food, and childcare—which have outpaced annual CCB indexation (Campaign 2000, 2026). This disproportionately impacts those living in deep income poverty.

Together, these trends demonstrate that, while income benefits are effective when adequately funded, current investment levels are insufficient to meet the principles of universality, inclusivity, and accessibility needed to protect the most vulnerable children. Furthermore, sustained enhancements of existing income benefit systems would better reflect the cost of living, providing more adequate and stable support.

3. Ensure healthy school food environments for children by:

a) Sustaining expansion toward a truly universal school food program, including through increased federal investment levels that match those already made by provinces and territories.

Consistent with findings from this report, the impacts of socio-economic disparities shape children's experiences across many areas of their lives. These effects are particularly pronounced within the school environment, where children spend much of their time. In 2019, 33.2 per cent of children in Canada reported feeling hungry when arriving at school every day or almost every day, which is higher than the OECD average of 27.4 per cent (OECD, n.d.). Globally, school food programs have been shown to reduce disparities, improve child health, and support learning outcomes. In Report Card 20, Canada ranks 17th out of 31 countries for the proportion of children who reported missing meals due to lack of money.²¹

In Canada, progress has been made in recent years with the creation of the National School Food Program. As of March 2025, the Government of Canada completed the signing of bilateral agreements with all provinces and territories. More recently, additional investments of \$216.6 million per year were committed to make the program permanent (Coalition for Healthy School Food, 2025). Nonetheless, current funding—which reaches about 400 000 children by the government's own estimate—remains insufficient to achieve the longer-term objective of universal access outlined in the 2024 National School Food Policy. Achieving a truly universal school food program requires sustained federal investment that matches existing provincial and territorial contributions, ensuring that no child is excluded due to funding gaps. In line with calls from the Coalition for Healthy School Food, the federal government should increase its annual contribution to a minimum of \$400 million per year in subsequent years to align with the combined annual investment from provinces, territories, and municipalities.

²⁰ At the time of writing, Bill S-212, *National Strategy for Children and Youth Act*, has passed third reading in the Senate of Canada and is in the House of Commons.

²¹ Based on an analysis of data from PISA 2022.



Youth strongly support school food programs and affordability policies.

Three in four U-Reporters believe a National School Food Program is very important, and majorities agree that healthy food should be more affordable (94% agree/strongly agree) and that food-price policies must consider youth and families (99% agree/strongly agree).

b) Fulfilling the final pillar of Canada's Healthy Eating Strategy through the development of a regulatory framework to limit predatory marketing practices targeting children.

In tandem with a National School Food Program, food environments must enable children to make healthy eating choices without undue influence from profit-seeking entities. While restricting food advertising to children has been a federal commitment since 2015, progress remains incomplete. As part of its multi-faceted *Healthy Eating Strategy* announced in 2016, the federal government committed to limiting the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children, drawing on approaches such as Quebec's *Consumer Protection Act* ban on advertising to children (Health Canada, 2016). Three of the strategy's four pillars have been achieved; protecting children from marketing is outstanding.

With nearly three in 10 Canadian children living with overweight or obesity, and with those in economically disadvantaged contexts in high-income countries at heightened risk, strong, enforceable regulations are needed to curb predatory marketing practices. Previous legislative efforts, including Bill C-252, *An Act to amend the Food and Drugs Act*, did not become law. As a result, exposure to unhealthy food marketing remains pervasive. In a 2023 U-Report poll, 77 per cent of U-Reporters in Canada agreed that they see a lot of advertisements for unhealthy food and drinks in stores, and 52 per cent reported that "advertisements for unhealthy food and drinks tempt [them] to buy unhealthy products." Evidence consistently shows that increased exposure to food and beverage marketing raises the likelihood that children will request and consume advertised products.

A child rights-based approach to marketing policy must ensure that children's health and well-being are prioritized over commercial interests. To uphold these rights, a regulation framework should be implemented that specifies:

- Who children are
- What food marketing is
- What types of marketing should be restricted and in what circumstances (settings, times, media, and content)
- Which media will be covered
- What foods are to be restricted from marketing
- The objectives of the restrictions
- How they will be enforced and monitored, and what the time-bound implementation schedule will be
- The broad powers and resources an independent authority will have to address implementation
- The evaluation time frames

4. Increase earmarked investments in child and youth mental health supports and services—through bilateral transfers as well as federally funded initiatives such as the Youth Mental Health Fund—to ensure eligibility criteria are gender inclusive, equity based, and extended to children under the age of 12.

Canada's children are facing a growing mental health crisis. With an adolescent suicide ranking of 33 out of 44 countries, declining levels of life satisfaction among children, and one of the widest socio-economic gaps in social skills, the need for accessible, equitable mental health support is urgent. As highlighted in this report, structural factors, particularly income-related stress, disproportionately impact children, compounding risks to their mental health and well-being. Addressing these challenges requires a dual approach: strengthening upstream social protections, such as income support, while also expanding direct, accessible mental health services for children and youth.

Canada should commit to scaling the Youth Mental Health Fund to ensure equitable access to culturally appropriate, community-based, and youth-friendly mental health services. Such programs must be age inclusive, acknowledging that children under the age

of 12 are in critical stages of emotional and cognitive development, and gender inclusive, recognizing that gender disparities affect young people in diverse and non-uniform ways. Recognizing province- and territory-specific mental health trends, bilateral transfers will also support the delivery of these services, ensuring that funding is flexible, targeted, and responsive to the unique needs of local communities.

5. Mandate Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) 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.

With children representing approximately one-third of all internet users globally, being online has become a lifeline for many, enabling learning, play, self-expression, and connection to friends and family (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2025). As a result, digital environments play a central role in children's daily lives and development. At the same time, this extensive digital engagement has shaped children's online behaviours in ways that require greater attention to both digital risks and protective measures. Social media platforms and other forms of online services can expose children to increased risks of online harms, including bullying, sexual and commercial exploitation, self-harm, cyber-related hate speech, misinformation and disinformation, and privacy violations. These harms can have serious and lasting impacts on children's mental health, safety, and well-being, especially when exacerbated by socio-economic factors including economic inequality and geographic location. Legislation should therefore centre children's rights in digital governance decisions to ensure safe, meaningful participation. Duty holders, including governments and private companies, should mandate the use of Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) across the design, development, deployment, and regulation of digital products and services that impact children.

6. Prioritize 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 reintroduction of the food voucher 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.

The lived realities of Indigenous children in Canada continue to be shaped by deep and persistent inequities rooted in systemic barriers and economic marginalization. These conditions directly affect their mental and physical well-being, as well as their ability to thrive socially and developmentally. Closing these gaps demands urgent, sustained action grounded in reconciliation and a clear commitment to ensuring equitable, culturally appropriate access to services and supports for all Indigenous children.

This includes accelerating the completion and full implementation of a national framework for the Inuit Child First Initiative (ICFI), a federal program intended to ensure Inuit children can access the essential health, social, and educational supports they need without delay or jurisdictional barriers. The framework must be co-developed through meaningful, ongoing partnership with Inuit to reflect community-identified needs and self-determined priorities. As part of this effort, reintroducing the food voucher program is critical to addressing the disproportionately high rates of food insecurity across Inuit Nunangat.

At the same time, the federal government must work in close collaboration with First Nations partners to eliminate systemic delays under Jordan's Principle, a child-first principle established to ensure First Nations children receive the public services they need when they need them, without being caught in disputes over which level of government is responsible for payment. This requires strengthening service delivery capacity, improving intergovernmental coordination, and ensuring timely, barrier-free access to the essential health, social, and educational services that First Nations children are entitled to receive.

Appendices

Appendix A:

List of Report Card Topics

No.	Year	Topic
1	2000	Child poverty
2	2001	Child deaths by injury
3	2001	Teenage births
4	2002	Educational disadvantages
5	2003	Child maltreatment deaths
6	2005	Child poverty
7	2007	Multidimensional well-being
8	2008	Early childhood education and care
9	2010	Inequality in child well-being
10	2012	Child poverty
11	2013	Multidimensional well-being
12	2014	Impact of the economic crisis on children
13	2016	Inequality in child well-being
14	2017	Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals' targets for children
15	2018	Educational inequalities
16	2020	Multidimensional well-being
17	2022	Impacts of the environment on children
18	2023	Child poverty and social protection
19	2025	Multidimensional well-being
20	2026	Economic inequalities and multi-dimensional well-being

Appendix B:

International Abbreviations (ISO) for Countries and Regions in the Report Card

Country name	2-letter ISO code	3-letter ISO code	Country name	2-letter ISO code	3-letter ISO code
Australia	AU	AUS	Japan	JP	JPN
Austria	AT	AUT	Latvia	LV	LVA
Belgium	BE	BEL	Lithuania	LT	LTU
Bulgaria	BG	BGR	Luxembourg	LU	LUX
Canada	CA	CAN	Malta	MT	MLT
Chile	CL	CHL	Mexico	MX	MEX
Colombia	CO	COL	Netherlands	NL	NLD
Costa Rica	CR	CRI	New Zealand	NZ	NZL
Croatia	HR	HRV	Norway	NO	NOR
Cyprus	CY	CYP	Poland	PL	POL
Czechia	CZ	CZE	Portugal	PT	PRT
Denmark	DK	DNK	Republic of Korea	KR	KOR
Estonia	EE	EST	Romania	RO	ROU
Finland	FI	FIN	Slovakia	SK	SVK
France	FR	FRA	Slovenia	SI	SVN
Germany	DE	DEU	Spain	ES	ESP
Greece	GR	GRC	Sweden	SE	SWE
Hungary	HU	HUN	Switzerland	CH	CHE
Iceland	IS	ISL	Türkiye	TR	TUR
Ireland	IE	IRL	United Kingdom	GB	GBR
Israel	IL	ISR	United States	US	USA
Italy	IT	ITA	Uruguay	UY	URY

Appendix C:

About the Indicators, Data, and Rankings



In many countries today, a wide and evolving range of indicators is used to measure different aspects of child well-being. However, data for international comparison is limited since countries have different priorities and different data collection methods. UNICEF Report Card 20 indicators are constructed with data from the most recent high-quality administrative data sets and international surveys available for comparison. Most of the data is collected by governments or with government support. Please note that the precision of individual indicator rankings in this companion may vary by indicator based on underlying data. As a result, the visual placement of entities within graphs may not directly correspond to their exact rankings. Additionally, some indicators include tied rankings, which may further affect graphical representation, and due to rounding some percentages may not sum to 100 per cent. Interpret visualizations with these limitations in mind. UNICEF Report Card 20 (available at unicef-irc.org) includes discussion of data timeliness, parameters, and gaps, the rationale behind including and constructing indicators, details of the construction of the league tables, and recommendations for the development of new approaches to measuring child well-being, including the perspectives of children. While it is necessary to continue to develop statistical information about the state of children, perhaps the greatest opportunity before us is to act on the information we already have. UNICEF Report Cards use national averages to compare the state of children

in rich countries. National averages help reveal patterns that may not be visible in smaller areas with smaller data sets (such as provinces, territories, or communities) and are necessary for international comparisons. National averages can tell us how many children in a country are deprived of the conditions to survive, be healthy, and learn, and how that compares to other jurisdictions. If subnational data is available, national averages can facilitate the potential to benchmark the state of children at provincial, territorial, and local levels. If the data can be disaggregated (e.g., categorized by gender, ethnic identity, or immigration status), groups of children can be compared to a national or international average to unmask inequalities between children in the same country. Unfortunately, data for smaller geographic areas and certain groups of children experiencing inequities is not available for all indicators. Data about First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples is also subject to distinctions in and sovereignty over its collection, possession, ownership, and use. National surveys in Canada frequently exclude First Nations living on reserve. It is beyond the UNICEF Report Card's scope to provide within-country comparisons for all countries; however, this Canadian Companion refers to complementary data and examples to illustrate some of the inequalities experienced by children in Canada within the indicators in Report Card 20. It is a resource for others who wish to further examine inequalities among children in Canada.

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