

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE



Child Well-Being in Rich Countries:
A comparative overview

CANADIAN COMPANION

Canada is one of the best places to raise a child – isn't it? UNICEF's new Report Card on child well-being won't tell you if that's the case, but it does offer a view of some important areas of our children's lives.

Kids in 360 degrees

How are Canada's children doing? How does this stack up against other industrialized countries? Has the well-being of Canada's children improved? How can we make progress for children? UNICEF's Report Card 11, *Child Well-Being in Rich Countries: A comparative overview*, measures the level of child well-being achieved in 29 of the world's richest nations. This companion to the Report Card focuses on what the report tells us about Canada's record, and offers some views on why we have these results and what can be done to make progress for our children.

The centrepiece, the League Table of Child Well-being, compares 29 industrialized countries on an index of child well-being. The index averages 26 indicators across five dimensions: Material Well-being, Health and Safety, Education, Behaviours and Risks, and Housing and Environment. League tables for each of these dimensions, and for each indicator within them, measure and compare progress for children across these countries. They record the standards achieved by the highest-achieving nations and should contribute to debate in Canada about how such standards can be achieved. International comparison reveals what is achievable in practice. It demonstrates that child well-being can be influenced by policy choices. The league tables show that some countries are achieving much higher child well-being than others that have similar or larger economies. The Netherlands is the clear leader, the only country ranked among the top five in all dimensions, and whose children also report a very high level of life satisfaction.

The Report Card not only provides a snapshot of how well children are doing today, it tracks progress for children across the world's most affluent nations during the first decade of the new millennium. The Report Card is a story of welcome progress in many dimensions of child well-being. Yet it also captures trends that are worrying and clearly need more attention.

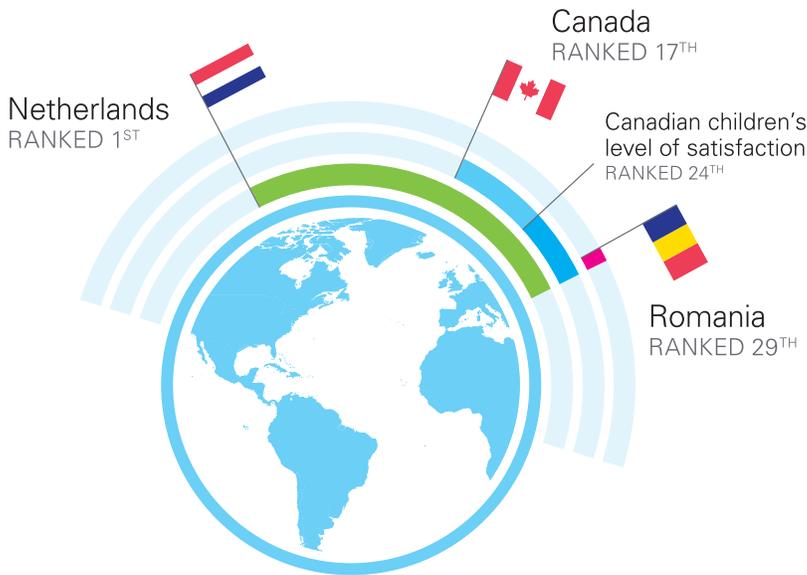


The story of Canada in Report Card 11 is one of a country stuck in the middle. Canada has a middle rank in the League Table of Child Well-being, and this position has not budged since we last measured it a decade ago. In some aspects of child well-being Canada shines, and it lags at the bottom in others – just like the pattern in many other countries. In most indicators, we have made progress over the past ten years. Just not enough to improve our middle rank among comparable countries.

The majority of Canada's children are faring well in any given indicator. Even where we are further behind other countries, in some cases it is not a great distance. Most children are immunized, most do not smoke and most have healthy weights. But in contrast to comparable countries, we have too many children who are left out of public health efforts and who are not benefitting from their years of compulsory education by going on to further education, training and employment. We are raising children in families squeezed for time as well as income. Children living in poverty are more likely to be left out because poverty, in and of itself, is a significant risk factor. But there are many conditions affecting childhood in Canada that cut across all socioeconomic levels, particularly risk behaviours. And because most children are in the middle of the socioeconomic gradient, that is where we find the greatest number who are developmentally vulnerable. If we want to improve the chances for all children, we need to boost interventions that reach all children.

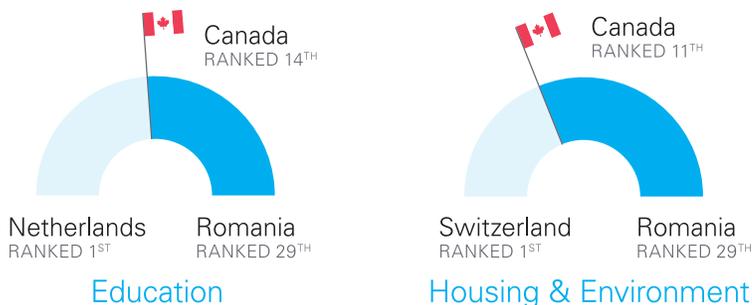
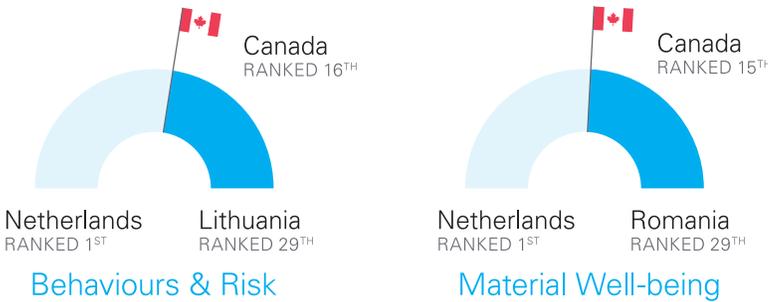
The goal to promote the well-being of all children is a moral imperative. As a pragmatic imperative, it is equally deserving of priority. Failure to protect and promote the well-being of children is associated with increased risk and cost across a wide range of later-life outcomes. The indicators of child well-being are varied; but the confluence of poor performance is often seen early in impaired cognitive development and poor health, then lower school achievement, and on to lower productivity and earnings, high unemployment and welfare dependency, substance abuse, involvement in crime, increased mental illness and higher healthcare costs. The case for a greater national commitment to child well-being is therefore compelling both in principle and practice. And to fulfil that commitment, measuring progress in protecting and promoting the well-being of children is essential to policy-making and advocacy, to the cost-effective allocation of limited resources and to transparency and accountability.

Part 1: League table of child well-being



In the League Table of Child Well-being, ranking 29 affluent nations according to the **overall well-being of their children**, Canada ranks in a middle position at 17 (averaging our standing in five dimensions of child well-being).

Canada also achieves a middle-level ranking in its scores for:



Most concerning is that in Health and Safety, Canada ranks as low as 27 of the 29 industrialized countries.

HOW CANADA RANKS



At the top

Canada's scores in the indicators below rank in the top third among comparable, affluent nations:



EDUCATION

Educational achievement by age 15:

2 of 29 nations – top performer is Finland

To gauge educational well-being, both participation rates and achievement levels provide an approximate guide to the quantity and quality of education. While the relatively lower rate of young people who are in further education or training in Canada is a concern (see discussion below), in the level of educational achievement Canada's children score at the very top, second only to Finland (in the average of international reading, math and science literacy test scores at age 15). The quality of education, approximated by this indicator, is critical to preparing young people to manage a rapidly changing world in which the educationally disadvantaged are likely to be much more disadvantaged than in the past. However, with a lower rate of participation in further education and training in late adolescence, some young people are finding it difficult to benefit from compulsory education. It is this paradox that requires our concerted efforts to ensure meaningful education and training lead young people to employment and other contributions to society.

Educational achievement by age 15

ranked 2nd of 29

A source of pride, Canada's children score at the very top in the average of international reading, math and science literacy test scores.



BEHAVIOURS AND RISKS

Eating fruit:

2 of 29 nations – top performer is Denmark

Exercise:

7 of 29 nations – top performer is Ireland

Smoking:

3 of 29 nations – top performer is Iceland

Canada's low rate of smoking among children and young people is noteworthy, as one of only five countries where the smoking rate for young people is below five per cent. Canada is also near the top of the league table in children's daily consumption of fruit.

Smoking

ranked 3rd of 29

Canada is one of only five countries where the smoking rate for young people is below five per cent.



HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENT

Air pollution:

7 of 29 nations – top performer is Estonia

Children's safety and health in their communities is a critical aspect of well-being, and is measured by two quite different indicators: the level of crime and the level of pollution. This dimension of well-being is challenging to measure because of the lack of internationally comparable indicators, so those used in the report are approximate guides to the overall level of violence and environmental health, respectively. Unhealthy or violent living conditions in the home and in the environment around it limit children's survival and development. Canadian children on average are exposed to less air pollution than their peers in other industrialized nations; a combination of geography and stronger legislative measures to limit certain types of industrial pollutants.

In the middle

Canada's scores in the indicators below rank in the middle of comparable, affluent nations:

MATERIAL WELL-BEING

Child poverty gap:

13 of 29 nations – top performer is Luxembourg

Low family affluence:

12 of 29 nations – top performers are Iceland and Norway

Canada has a high rate of relative income poverty compared to many, but manages to reduce the child poverty gap (the difference between the median national income and the median of the incomes below it) to a mid-level position among industrialized countries. Canada's income benefits and transfers mostly target lower income families, efficiently, though the top-performing nations tend to invest more in income benefits and transfers. The material deprivation (lack of basic items considered normal and necessary) among Canada's children as measured by the "low family affluence rate" is not as high as in many countries including Eastern European nations.



HEALTH AND SAFETY

Low birthweight:

10 of 29 nations – top performer is Iceland

A fundamental sentinel of child well-being is health at birth measured by the low birthweight rate. Among industrialized nations, variations in low birthweight rate appear to be small. But the differences are significant. According to the United States Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, "The birthweight of an infant is the single most important determinant of its chances of survival and healthy growth." Low birthweight has a strong influence on every other dimension of child well-being and is associated with increased risk across a range of poor outcomes in childhood and beyond. The causes of low birthweight are multiple and include poor prenatal health and pregnancy at older ages.

BEHAVIOURS AND RISKS

Eating breakfast daily:

16 of 29 nations – top performer is Netherlands

Teenage births:

16 of 29 nations – top performer is Switzerland

Alcohol use:

18 of 29 nations – top performer is United States

Fighting:

15 of 29 nations – top performer is Germany

The dimension "Behaviours and Risks" includes a range of habits and behaviours critical to the present and future well-being of children. Canada's performance in this dimension is a mixed bag, with rankings spread across the top, middle and bottom of comparable nations. In most cases, harmful behaviours involve a minority of children. But in many of these indicators, the variation between countries is dramatic and could be reduced through concerted action. For instance, 39 per cent of Canadian children do not eat breakfast daily. Food insecurity¹ and the challenge of reconciling the demands of employment with family time as well as a lack of national coverage in school meal programs (which many other industrialized nations have) contribute to this. Fighting remains a concern, and there is a trend for younger children to be involved in fighting, which may be influenced by violent gaming and media. Boys are more likely to fight with strangers, while girls are more likely to fight with those they know. The rates of teenage births and alcohol use have shown considerable improvement over the past decade.

Lagging behind

Canada's scores in the indicators below rank in the bottom third among comparable, affluent nations:

MATERIAL WELL-BEING

Relative child poverty:

21 of 29 nations – top performer is Finland

Although Canada's overall rank in Material Well-being is in the middle, in the rate of relative child poverty Canada's rank is in the bottom third. Half the countries in the league table achieve a relative child poverty rate below 10 per cent, while it is about 14 per cent in Canada. This is more than double the rate in the top four countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Norway. The fact that a higher percentage of children live in relative income poverty² in Canada than in the Czech Republic, for example, does not mean that children's actual living standards are lower in

Canada, because the income norm varies from country to country. While only one view of child poverty, this indicator is significant because it shows the proportion of children who are to some extent excluded from the advantages and "normal" living conditions of children in their society. The higher rate of relative income poverty among families with children in Canada (higher than for other groups) is partly the result of restructured employment with globalization (leading to greater wider income disparities) and of the extent and targeting of our social protection benefits and transfers.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

In Health and Safety, Canada's average ranking and our rankings in most of the health and safety indicators in this dimension place in the bottom third of industrialized countries. In a country that allocates a relatively high proportion of public resources in health spending, are children too low a priority? Children are largely invisible in the ongoing public debate about the effectiveness and efficiency of health care provision and spending, with unhealthy weight claiming some attention amidst a general absence of a clear first call for children in the allocation of public resources.

Infant mortality:

22 of 29 nations – top performer is Iceland

The infant mortality rate (IMR), like the low birthweight rate, is a fundamental bellwether of child well-being. In industrialized nations, the relatively small variations in infant mortality rates do not reflect variations in the fundamentals of public health such as safe water and sanitation, but variations in the commitment and capacity to deliver whatever services are necessary to protect every infant in the earliest weeks of life. The rate is also affected by public health efforts to promote healthy pregnancies. The IMR is therefore a measure of commitment to maternal and child health for all – including mothers and children in the most vulnerable circumstances. Only Eastern European nations and the United States post a lower IMR than Canada. There is an unresolved debate about whether IMRs in Canada and the United States might be higher because they include the deaths of extremely premature and/or low birthweight babies who are kept alive for a time by advanced neonatal care but who, in other countries, might not be classified as "live births". However, the fact that IMR varies significantly among the provinces and territories and that it is known to be much higher than the national average among vulnerable groups including indigenous children suggest that Canada has room to make improvements.

Immunization:

28 of 29 nations – top performers are Hungary and Greece

In immunization coverage, Canada's rank is at the bottom of the league table. Three of the richest countries in the world – Canada, Denmark and Austria – are the only ones in which the immunization rate³ is below 90 per cent. The immunization rate is an indicator of the availability and effectiveness of a country's basic preventive health services. As with infant mortality and low birthweight, relatively small differences can be understood to reflect commitment to reaching every single child, including the most marginalized, with essential health services. In Canada, the low immunization rate is likely influenced by public fears (some based on discredited research linking immunization with autism) and the perceived protection offered by "herd immunity" for diseases that are devastating but no longer common. But running a first-class immunization program means making sure that the public is well-informed and children are not put at risk by going without basic immunization.

Lagging behind (cont.)

EDUCATION

Participation in further education:

24 of 29 nations – top performer is Belgium

While Canada's overall score in the Education dimension is average, and our rank in educational achievement is very high, Canada's rank in the rate of young people's participation in further education (the percentage of children aged 15 to 19 in education) is in the bottom third – along with some of the other wealthiest industrialized countries including the United Kingdom and the United States. This indicator is an important measure of the extent to which all children benefit from the years of compulsory schooling – a major investment of public resources in every industrialized nation. It is also associated with the opportunities young people have at the beginning of their adult lives. The variations between nations are not large, but every young person left out is lost potential – potential that an ageing society will increasingly depend upon.

Participation in further education

ranked 24th of 29



This indicator is associated with the opportunities young people have at the beginning of their adult lives. Every young person left out is lost potential.

NEET:

22 of 28 nations – top performer is Norway

Similarly in Canada, the NEET rate (the percentage of children aged 15 to 19 not education, employment or training) is in the bottom third. In all countries, NEET rates are affected by economic conditions and employment opportunities as well as by the effectiveness of education systems in preparing young people for the transition to work. Canada's NEET rate can only be partly attributed to the recession, since the data come from the start of the recession in 2008. A high NEET rate is a threat to the present and future well-being of young people and their societies. Research in different countries has also shown associations between NEET status and long-term unemployment and welfare dependence, as well as mental health problems, drug abuse, and involvement in crime. In total, more than 23 million young people in the industrialized countries fall into the NEET category.

BEHAVIOURS AND RISKS

Overweight:

27 of 29 nations – top performer is Netherlands

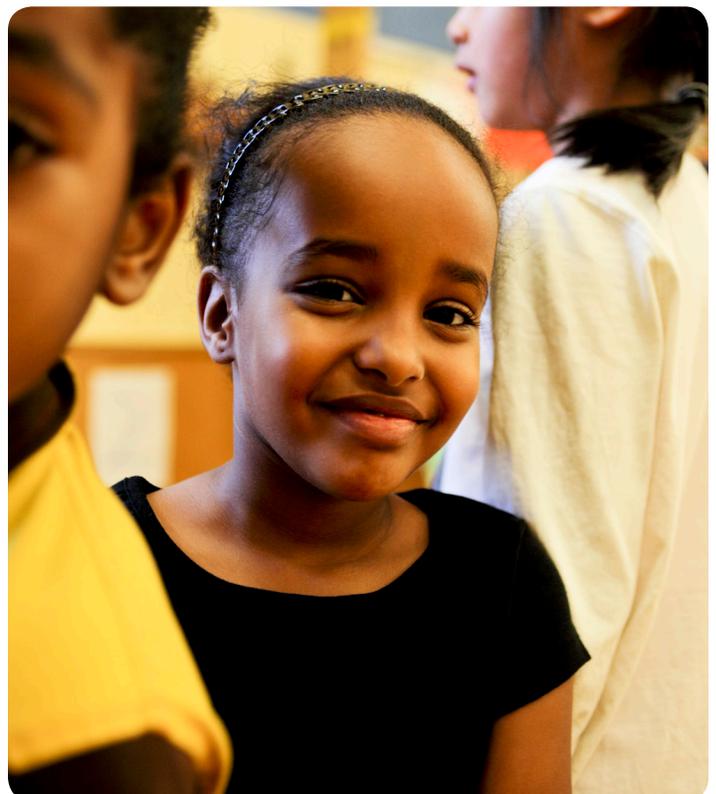
Only Canada, Greece and the United States have childhood obesity levels higher than 20 per cent – twice the rate of the top performing countries. This is a serious concern for children today and into their futures, given the contribution of unhealthy weight to disease including diabetes, making the millennial generation the first that may have a shorter lifespan than their parents. There is some recent indication that the obesity rate in Canada has leveled off after many years of increase, but the persistence of such a high level demands effective public policy measures at all levels of government and across society to help reduce it.

Overweight

ranked 27th of 29



This is a serious concern for children today given the contribution of unhealthy weight to disease including diabetes.



Lagging behind (cont.)

BEHAVIOURS AND RISKS (cont.)

Cannabis use:

29 of 29 nations – top performer is Norway

The only league table in which Canada’s rank is dead last is for the rate of cannabis use (the percentage of children aged 11, 13 and 15 who report having used cannabis in the last 12 months). While countries like Finland, Germany, Norway and Sweden have cannabis use rates under 10 per cent, the rate for Canada’s young people is 28 per cent (down from 40 per cent in 2001/2002). The United Kingdom has more than halved cannabis use among young people over the past decade. The percentage of Canadian young people who report heavier use (several times in the past month) is lower (fewer than one in ten), though both genders are roughly equally involved.

Canada’s ranking cannot be entirely influenced by factors influencing self-reporting by young people, including the “norming” of cannabis use in any society. It is a significant concern, given the substantial number of very young people involved and the impacts on their physical and mental health, school achievement, relationships and futures – including the impact on young people of school expulsions and involvement in the criminal justice system. In 2006, more than 4,700 children young people between the ages of 12 and 17 were charged with a cannabis offence in Canada⁴. This risk behaviour demands concerted public policy attention based on evidence, as Canada brought to successfully reduce the youth smoking to a relatively very low level.

Bullying:

21 of 29 nations – top performer is Italy

Canada’s rate of bullying (the percentage of children who report being bullied at school) is slightly higher than the average among industrialized countries. The impacts on children of bullying are often exacerbated by the use social media, especially for girls, and all children involved are at risk for a range of serious consequences – physical, mental, social, academic and legal.

Bullying

ranked 21st of 29

Canada’s rate of bullying is slightly higher than the average among industrialized countries.



HOUSING AND ENVIRONMENT

National homicides:

22 of 29 nations – top performer is Iceland

A relatively high homicide rate is a proxy indicator of the overall level of violence in a society. Domestic abuse and organized crime are the main contexts for homicide in Canada, and the rates are highest in communities that have higher rates of poverty and social exclusion. Suffering, witnessing and fearing violence should not be a part of growing up. It may disrupt the course of healthy physical, emotional and intellectual development and affect well-being in both the short and the long term. Violence in children’s lives takes many forms including abuse and other forms of maltreatment.



Part 2: What children say about their well-being

It is of particular concern that Canada's ranking drops by seven places when children's views of their life satisfaction are taken into account, in the League Table of Children's Life Satisfaction⁵. For most countries, there is a reasonably close relationship between the objective results of the League Table of Child Well-Being and the more subjective League Table of Children's Life Satisfaction. But when children are asked how they feel about their own lives and priorities, Canada falls from a rank of 17 in well-being (a middle ranking) to a rank of 24 (a ranking in the bottom third). Only the Eastern European nations of Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Romania rank lower in children's self-reported life satisfaction.

The good news is that close to 84 per cent of Canada's children report a fairly high level of life satisfaction, close to the average among industrialized nations. In contrast, 95 per cent of children in the Netherlands do.

The news is not as good when we measure children's subjective assessments of the quality of their close relationships. From the earliest years, a child's sense

of well-being (and their objective level of well-being measured in health, education, risk behaviours, and so on) is intimately bound up with relationships with parents and peers. No child grows up without experiencing some difficulty and tension in these relationships, but for many children prolonged or more severe difficulties in these relationships can be a cause of anxiety, depression and poor outcomes. The quality and contribution to well-being of a child's closest relationships is difficult to measure, but some insight is gained from indicators in our league table of children's relationships with parents and peers.

Canada's ranking in an average of three measures of relationships is very low, at 25 of 28 industrialized countries. Only 58 per cent of Canada's children find their classmates "kind and helpful" – one of the lowest rates in the industrialized world. Just fewer than 80 per cent find it "easy to talk to their mothers" but only 63 per cent find it "easy to talk to their fathers". Canada, France and the United States are the only countries ranked in the bottom for all three relationships (with classmates, mothers and fathers).

Country	Average of 3 scores	% of children who find classmates kind and helpful	% of children who find it easy to talk to their mothers	% of children who find it easy to talk to their fathers
Canada	66.7	58.2	79.3	62.6
Netherlands (top performer)	84.5	80.4	91.7	81.4

The relationships children have with families and peers have dramatically changed in a generation, with smaller and more isolated families coping with longer commutes and other demands in the workplace, and the central role of social media in children's lives. There is a need for governments, employers and the other institutions that affect family life to increase attention to the development of healthy relationships. Institutions that create policies and programs affecting children can do more to listen to children and ensure their views help shape those interventions.

Part 3: Changes in child well-being: The 10-year record

Overall, the story of child well-being in the first decade of the new millennium is one of widespread improvement. All countries have made progress in most of the indicators of child well-being measured in the UNICEF Report Card. Some countries have made progress in more indicators than others, and some countries' progress on particular indicators has been greater than that of other countries. UNICEF's league table comparing how each country ranked close to a decade ago with how they rank today shows a reasonably stable rank order – but with some significant changes.

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

Canada's position in the rank order has not budged over the last decade, remaining at 14 of 21 countries (based on a more limited set of indicators and comparable countries for which data was available).

The Nordic countries remain in the top positions. Some countries that were ranked much lower ten years ago made striking gains, including the United Kingdom, Ireland, and countries in Eastern Europe. A high priority to invest in children drove much of the advance in the United Kingdom, including targeted strategies to reduce child poverty, strengthen early learning and education, provide affordable housing and augment child benefits.

MAKING PROGRESS

There are many positive developments for Canadian children over the past decade when changes in individual indicators of well-being are measured. In the first decade of the century, Canada made significant progress in reducing **smoking**, and marked progress in the rates of **teenage births**, participation in **further education**, and, importantly, the use of **cannabis** (from 40 per cent in 2001/2002 to 28 per cent in 2009/2010) – which, however, remains very high. In almost all other indicators some progress was made, though the level of educational achievement has stabilized, and the progress to reduce bullying and fighting has been very limited.



FALLING BEHIND

The childhood **obesity** rate worsened in Canada over the past decade, but it may have stabilized in the last couple of years. Belgium, France, Spain and the United Kingdom are the only industrialized countries that managed to reduce the percentage of overweight children in the past decade, and may be a source of policy solutions to complement those underway in Canada. The United Kingdom, for instance, has used legislation to curtail the marketing of nutritionally poor foods to children.

It is also a concern that the level of children's self-reported life satisfaction has fallen over the past decade. This is true in half of the industrialized countries, while the other half reported increases in children's life satisfaction. However, Canada, Austria and Greece showed the greatest decline. It is also noteworthy that although the low family affluence rate improved, the relative child poverty rate in Canada has been relatively stable (the Report Card does not record this indicator in the ten-year review due to differences in the way the relative income poverty rate is now calculated in the comparator countries).

Indicators that have improved in Canada

- ↑ Educational achievement by age 15
- ↑ Smoking
- ↑ Low family affluence
- ↑ Teenage births
- ↑ Alcohol use
- ↑ Fighting
- ↑ Infant mortality
- ↑ Participation in further education
- ↑ Cannabis use
- ↑ Bullying

Indicators that have worsened in Canada

- ↓ Overweight
- ↓ Children's life satisfaction

Part 3: Changes in child well-being: The 10-year record (cont.)

CANADA IS AN INNOVATOR IN MONITORING EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The Report Card highlights the achievement of Canada and Australia in becoming the first countries in the world to introduce regular monitoring of the developmental progress of young children in the years before schooling begins. With Canada's Early Development Instrument (EDI)⁶, "a start has been made towards making known the proportion of young children who are developmentally 'on track', 'at risk' or 'vulnerable.'" The EDI has been adapted for use in Australia and is being looked at by many other nations. Canadian experts have worked with the UNICEF Early Child Development Unit to create an *Early Child Development Index* for inclusion in the *Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys* conducted by UNICEF in close to 50 low- and middle-income countries.

Recent analysis of Canada's EDI results has shown that:

- Approximately 25 per cent of children experience some difficulties that prevent them from taking full advantage of the education offered by school: about 30 per cent of children in poor families and in First Nations families are developmentally vulnerable – as opposed to 15 per cent of children from better-off families. However, in absolute numbers, children are vulnerable across the socio-economic gradient.
- There is a pronounced tendency for boys to be more developmentally vulnerable than girls.
- Follow-up studies from earlier evaluations in specific communities have confirmed the relationship between "school readiness to learn," as identified by the EDI, and school performance at Grade 3.

Taking action

Canada does well in many areas of children's well-being. That Canada can do better for children is evident in the contrast to the standards achieved in similar nations. It is also a concern that our ranking has not improved in a decade, though like most other countries, progress has been made in most areas of child well-being.

Every nation wants the best for its children. The well-being of children is a shared responsibility among families, communities and public institutions. All of the indicators in the Report Card can be influenced by policy. Lifting more children out of poverty in Canada through training and employment and a higher priority for children in social protection and services will go a long way to improving their well-being in all areas – improving family and peer relationships and health and education, and decreasing risky behaviour. For specific indicators where Canada's performance is weaker, there are specific actions – many of which are underway or already studied and proposed – that can be sustained or accelerated. Most of the aspects of child well-being examined in the Report Card occur within such a complex interaction of psychosocial, economic, and environmental determinants that there is no single cause or solution.

1. Make children a priority in budget allocations and give them first call on the nation's resources

The countries at the top of the league tables are those that invest more in child benefits and services. The federal government should review the proportion of its budget allocated to child benefits and services, particularly for the lowest income families, and ensure that children receive

a fair share of public resources. All levels of government should publish budgets that clearly indicate direct allocations for child-focused benefits and services, to monitor the priority afforded children in public investments.

2. Increase support for families and children to develop healthy relationships

The troubling indicators for healthy relationships in the Report Card suggest that we need to pay more attention to the development of healthy relationships at home and with peers. Parent trust and communication has a greater influence on children's emotional health, school engagement and risk-taking behaviour than family affluence. Canada's public policy priorities need to adapt to the challenges of raising children in smaller, more isolated families and across the digital divide that often separates parents and children with the rapidly evolving role of social media in children's lives. Sensible investments in child care, parenting support and flexible employment demonstrate high returns in high-performing nations. The "New Deal for Families" proposed by the Human Early Learning Partnership proposes such policies that address Canada's flat wages, high housing and child care costs, long working hours and commuting times, and the "squeeze" these conditions have on families raising children.

Taking action (cont.)

Parents can take a step to increase positive communication with their children by sharing more family meals together every week – Canada’s families report a very low number of shared meals relative to many other nations. UNICEF’s *Making Meals Meaningful* is a contribution to that; we have conversation-starters that parents and their kids can use at mealtime to foster communication, free at unicef.ca.

3. Make child health a higher priority

To bring down the high rate of **infant mortality** and increase the immunization rate, children must be a higher priority in our public health efforts, with a concerted focus on reaching the hardest to reach with culturally appropriate, accessible services. Canada’s national prenatal nutrition program and Community Action Programs for children help stimulate supportive environments for child health. But more effort can be invested in addressing public attitudes about immunization and extending coverage of health services to hard-to-reach populations, including scaling up innovative practices to reach low-income communities, indigenous children and newcomers.

The high rate of **unhealthy childhood weights** must be addressed through multiple, sustained actions attuned to current family and community life. Current efforts to make healthy and affordable food more easily available in schools and neighbourhoods and to promote play and exercise away from screens should be accelerated while being strongly evidence based to meet the realities of young people’s lives and the needs of families⁷. Better consumer information on food packaging and in restaurants; discouraging the production of foods high in saturated fats and trans-fatty acids, sugar and sodium; and more effective restrictions on the production and marketing of nutritionally poor (high salt, sugar and fat) foods to children are proposals that should be fully explored for their potential to improve children’s health. A national children and food strategy (including school food policies and meal programs, food literacy and school garden programs) has been advocated to ensure that all children, at all times, have access to healthy and nutritious food⁸.

4. Address risky behaviours

Canada must do more to reduce the proportion of our children using cannabis, with the same intensity we applied to reducing smoking. The reduction in the rates of daily smoking may reflect a change in attitudes towards smoking among young people. This attitudinal shift may be attributable in large part to aggressive policy initiatives (e.g., banning smoking from public spaces and price increases) and anti-smoking campaigns targeting youth. Many Canadian adolescents believe that smoking cannabis

on an occasional basis poses only a “slight risk” or “no risk” to their health. These adolescents also see regular smoking of cannabis as less risky than regular smoking of cigarettes. The misinformation about and availability of cannabis is a significant concern, and the focus should be on evidence-based programs to prevent use and to reduce harm for those already using it. Legal sanctions against young people generally lead to even worse outcomes, not improvements in their lives.

Bullying has been the subject of sustained public and increasing political attention over the past several years, with a growing evidence base pointing to the kinds of interventions at home, at school and in peer groups that are most likely to reduce it. Our current efforts are not enough, since the rate of bullying has not diminished over the past decade. The role of legal and other sanctions against children who bully remains a disproportionate focus among the range of effective responses, which should prioritize prevention through more emphasis on learning how to develop healthy relationships, effective information for young people on managing social media, and progressive discipline in schools, along with a strong focus on the proper roles of adults including parents, teachers and legislators.

5. Improve the path from education to work

Canada must do more to ensure that compulsory education is preparing all young people for a productive future, and **further education** must help young people find a route that eventually leads to decent employment. Despite gains over the past decade in the rate of young people in further education, it is still below the rate in many industrialized countries. There is evidence that boys are increasingly disengaged in secondary school and are participating less in further education⁹. There is a growing debate about the proper roles of technology, the basics versus the “soft skills” of creativity and entrepreneurship, the vocations versus the academics, and experiential learning in the “K-to-work” journey. What seems clear is the need for more customized learning trajectories to keep more young people engaged on a path that leads to available work. The renewed focus of Canada’s governments on training leading to employment should include measures that will help more young people make the transition, as well as measures for those who drop out of and do not graduate from secondary education.

Taking action (cont.)

6. Make governance more child-sensitive

To scaffold these efforts, we have to keep our eyes on our children. **Measuring progress in child well-being is essential.** It is necessary for setting effective public policy and for the cost-effective allocation of limited resources. GDP per capita, a measure historically relied on as a proxy for economic and social well-being, is not a good predictor of child well-being. UNICEF's Report Cards have demonstrated that there does not appear to be a strong relationship between GDP per capita and overall child well-being. Canada needs a regular state of the children report that measures a range of indicators across the conditions for good childhood, and presents the data and analysis clearly and regularly for public monitoring and debate. Although international comparison like that offered in UNICEF Report Cards offers important insight into a country's performance for its children, national level monitoring of how well our children are doing is the more important task. Both the federal and provincial/territorial governments need good information about how children are doing, since all levels of government take decisions that significantly affect it. Our parliament, legislatures and policy developers should use these reports to catch concerns like obesity before they reach epidemic proportions and guide investments to meet the needs and rights of children. Citizens should use this information to decide what to ask of our governments and how we will judge their performance.

Canada collects a considerable amount of data about children, but because there is no robust debate and consensus on what we should measure, there are significant gaps. Some of the data we collect at the provincial/territorial level is not comparable from one jurisdiction to the next. We have no accurate data on the number of children in state care for instance, and First Nations children and other indigenous groups are often left out or masked by averages. There are disputes about how we measure the provision of early childcare, spending on services and child benefits, and child poverty.

Recent initiatives to measure the well-being of Canadians demonstrate how to use available data to communicate progress. The Conference Board of Canada's Society Report Card in *How Canada Performs: A Report Card on Canada* measures seventeen indicators in international comparison to give Canada a middle position (ranking seven out of 17 industrialized countries), a similar position to what Canada achieves for children in UNICEF's Report Card. Canada's ranking in both Report Cards has remained static over the past decade. The Canadian Index of Well-Being is a national composite index that measures changes over time in the quality of life of Canadians in a number of dimensions including the economy, health, education and the environment. It finds that while Canada's GDP has

surged over the past decade, the growth in well-being has been much more limited, and has declined in the recent recessionary period. How we measure our success as a country tells a lot about what we value, and although some indicators specific to children are included in these indices, the absence of a national effort to measure children's well-being in is a void that it is time to fill.

What the Conference Board of Canada's Society Report Card says about Canada's children

The Society Report Card uses four indicators similar to those found in the UNICEF Report Card. Like the UNICEF Report Card, it gives Canada a low grade for child poverty, and reports that the relative child poverty rate has increased from 12.8 per cent to 15.1 per cent since the mid-1990s, which it describes as "particularly disheartening". The Society Report Card gives Canada a middle grade for the rate of jobless youth. It is worthy of further debate that the "life satisfaction" reported by Canadians as a whole (of all ages) in the Society Report Card achieves a top grade, in contrast to the low level reported by children in UNICEF's Report Card. Both Report Cards report Canada's relatively high homicide rate in contrast to most other industrialized nations. The Society uses an indicator for "intergenerational income mobility" that gives Canada a high ranking (children born to poor parents in Canada are not as likely to stay poor as adults as they would be in some other countries including United States and England), but cautions that increasing income inequality may dampen this mobility. The Conference Board of Canada says that "Canada's middle-of-the-pack ranking means it is not living up to its reputation or potential".

Finally, the fact that Canadian children's view of their own well-being is so different than that captured by the "objective" indicators such as educational achievement and healthy eating suggests that decision-makers and others need to listen to what children say about their lives. A National Commissioner for Children and Young People could help raise the priority afforded to children in public policy, and relay the views of children and young people to inform decisions that affect them.



What's missing

The measurement and comparison of child well-being across different countries is an imperfect exercise with gaps and limitations. It would be improved if internationally comparable data were available on critical indicators of injury (a leading cause of child mortality in Canada), suicide, children's mental health, child maltreatment (abuse and neglect), and children in detention and in state care, among others. Most of the available data on children's lives relates to older children, though Canada was the first country to introduce a survey of early childhood development indicators. It would also benefit from analysis of the interdependencies between the indicators. In Canada, for instance, the Public Health Agency of Canada has found that gender is a strong determinant of many aspects of adolescent life: physical and emotional health; satisfaction with school and home; healthy living patterns; and bullying and injuries. Socio-economic inequalities associated with family wealth and social status (for example, parent occupation) also have a pronounced influence on many aspects of child well-being¹⁰.

International comparisons generally depend on national averages, which mask variations and inequities experienced by particularly vulnerable groups of children. Canada's domestic surveys reveal that children of low socioeconomic status and indigenous children generally have much poorer outcomes in most indicators of child well-being than our national averages. Although we have gaps in how we measure this inside our own country, it is reported for example that the relative child poverty rate among First Nations children is about four times the national average, and the infant mortality rate in some communities is seven times higher. Geographic variations in Canada are also significant for many child well-being indicators, with some provinces/territories achieving much higher than others and inequities for those children left behind.

Canadian data is missing in UNICEF's Report card in certain indicators (child deprivation rate, child and youth mortality rate, preschool enrolment rate, rooms per person and multiple housing problems) because we do not participate in the international surveys (primarily those administered in the European Union) from which the comparative data was drawn. However, data reported in 2007 on "rooms per person" in Canada (a proxy measure of housing overcrowding) was 1.5, similar to the top-performing nations in the current Report Card¹¹. A more meaningful indicator of housing problems for Canada's children would be access to affordable, safe housing; core housing need¹². We can also estimate Canada's "percentage of children between 4 years and the start of compulsory education who are enrolled in preschool" at 62 per cent, which does not account for informal care but reflects the degree to which governments invest in preschool education and would place Canada at the bottom of that league table¹³.

The impact of the current financial crisis on children is not fully reflected in the Report Card. It draws on the latest available internationally comparable data, but this is primarily from 2009-2010 which takes us into the beginning of the major financial crisis that hit many of these countries in 2008. As the report underlines, many of the indicators of child well-being are slow-moving as a result of long term investments, and many outcomes of recent policy decisions are still to be felt. The financial crisis and the bite of austerity measures, underwritten by prolonged economic instability, have many effects still to unwind. Over the last three years, many nations have experienced rising unemployment, falling real incomes (especially for the already low-paid) and cuts in government services – upon which disadvantaged children depend most heavily. This is the context in which future changes in child well-being will occur. The question is – will they be mitigated by our policy choices today?



The last word

Childhood is a period of rapid and delicate development of mind and body, a time when skill should build on skill, but when disadvantage can also build on disadvantage. It is a time when future patterns and pathways of health and well-being are being laid down and in which disruption can have lifelong consequences and costs. Protecting the years of childhood is essential for the well-being of children today and for their societies of tomorrow. It should be a priority, and never set aside, even temporarily, because other demands appear more pressing. Children have the right to first call on their nations' resources and capacities, in good times and bad. Every government should have an explicit policy to give children's interests and needs priority in decision-making. There will always be some interest more immediate than protecting the well-being of children. There will never be one more important.

For more information, visit unicef.ca/irc11

The Public Health Agency of Canada offers a detailed analysis of many of the indicators in the UNICEF Report Card in its report on the most recent Health Behaviours in School Aged Children survey. A useful analysis is provided at http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/dca-dea/publications/yjc/ch8_151_159-eng.php.

Another major source of data for the UNICEF Report Card is the Programme for International Student Assessment; detailed Canadian analysis is provided by the Council of Ministers of Education Canada at [http://www.cmec.ca/252/Programs-and-Initiatives/Assessment/Programme-for-International-Student-Assessment-\(PISA\)/PISA-2012/index.html](http://www.cmec.ca/252/Programs-and-Initiatives/Assessment/Programme-for-International-Student-Assessment-(PISA)/PISA-2012/index.html).

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1. One in 10 families with at least one child under the age of six are food insecure, according to Health Canada, "Household Food Insecurity in Canada in 2007-2008: Key Statistics and Graphics," <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/surveill/nutrition/commun/insecurit/key-stats-cles-2007-2008-eng.php>. Children represent 38% of food bank users in Canada, according to Food Banks Canada. (2012). Hunger Count 2012.
2. The percentage of children living in households where income is below 50% of the national median.
3. Against measles, polio and DPT3.
4. Department of Justice Canada (2008), Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.
5. Based on the Life Satisfaction Scale, the league table shows the proportion of children aged 11, 13 and 15 in each country who report a high level of life satisfaction (6 or more on the scale between 0 and 10, where 10 represents 'the best possible life for me').
6. The EDI was developed in the 1990s at the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research and the Canadian Centre for the Study of Children at Risk (now the Offord Centre for Child Studies at McMaster University, Ontario). Towards the end of the decade the Government of Canada made a major commitment to assessing "the readiness to learn of Canadian children so that we can assess our progress in providing children with the best possible start." Following a pilot implementation in North York, Toronto, the EDI was finalized in 2000. Ten years later, nationwide coverage has almost been achieved and 'early development maps' are now available on-line and in published form.
7. At the federal level initiatives include nutrition guidelines and policies such as Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide, infant feeding guidelines and prenatal nutrition guidelines. Provinces have taken steps to develop rural economies, encourage the production and consumption of local foods and adopt policies seeking to improve food security and promote healthy diets, including British Columbia's Community Food Action Initiative, the Yukon's Nutrition Framework, Alberta's Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth, Manitoba's Northern Healthy Foods Initiative, Ontario's Student Nutrition Program and Nunavut's Framework for Action on Nutrition. Initiatives have also been adopted at the municipal level.
8. On March 4, 2013 Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, presented his December 2012 report on Canada to the United Nations.
9. http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/dca-dea/publications/hbsc-2004/chapter_11-eng.php
10. http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-ps/dca-dea/publications/hbsc-2004/chapter_11-eng.php
11. UNICEF Report Card 7 (2007): An overview of child well-being in rich countries.
12. As measured by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Association, http://www.cmhc.ca/en/corp/about/cahoob/upload/chapter6_2010_trends_in_affordability_chn.pdf
13. Source: Martha Friendly from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada data <http://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/12/10/public-investments-early-childhood-education-and-care-canad>. Compulsory school-age in Canada is usually 6 years; these figures represent kindergarten for all 5 year olds, which is universal and usually not compulsory plus kindergarten for all four year olds in Ontario, where it is universal, plus full and part day centre-based child care, calculated for four year olds, as data is not available by year-of-age. The child care data represent licensed spaces, not enrolment data, which is not available.

APPENDIX 1

Indicator	Rank out of 29 countries	Score	Top-performing country	Score
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CANADA AT THE TOP

Educational achievement by age 15	2	527 (Average PISA scores)	Finland	544 (Average PISA scores)
Eating fruit	2	44%	Denmark	49%
Smoking	3	4%	Iceland	3%
Exercise	7	23%	Ireland	29%
Air pollution	7	21%	Estonia	11%

CANADA IN THE MIDDLE

Low birthweight	10	6%	Iceland	4%
Low family affluence	12	8%	Iceland/ Norway	2%
Child poverty gap	13	22%	Luxembourg	11%
Fighting	15	36%	Germany	23%
Eating breakfast daily	16	61%	Netherlands	85%
Teenage births	16	13%	Switzerland	4%
Alcohol use	18	16%	United States	6%

CANADA AT THE BOTTOM

Relative child poverty	21	14%	Finland	4%
Bullying	21	35%	Italy	11%
National homicides	22	1.8%	Iceland	0.3%
Infant mortality	22	5%	Iceland	2%
NEET (not in education, employment or training)	22	8%	Norway	2%
Participation in further education	24	81%	Belgium	93%
Overweight	27	20%	Netherlands	8%
Immunization	28	84%	Hungary/ Greece	99%
Cannabis use	29	28%	Norway	5%

APPENDIX 2

Indicators that have improved in Canada

Current status

Low family affluence	8%
Infant mortality	5%
Participation in further education	81%
Educational achievement by age 15	527 (Average PISA scores)
Teenage births	13%
Smoking	4%
Alcohol use	16%
Cannabis use	28%
Fighting	36%
Bullying	35%

Indicators that have worsened in Canada

Current status

Overweight	20%
Children's self-reported life satisfaction	84%