

Opportunity Brief

An Observatory for Canada's Children

WHAT WE ASK OF YOU

This project is all about imagining what it means to have a good childhood in Canada and exploring how we can make childhood better for all Canadians.

We hope that you'll lend us your voice as you are uniquely positioned to discuss our proposal from your perspective, given your personal context, expertise and worldview.

What we learn from you will come together alongside the perspectives of a breadth of people from across the country, from youth to indigenous groups, academics, journalists, artists, policy-makers and more. This incredible range of thought and experience will help to form a powerful foundation for the Observatory for Canada's Children.

We ask that you bring your perspective and voice to the table for an exciting conversation about the future of Canada's children. Please join us to ignite the vision for a world-leading Observatory for children.

Thank you.



Opportunity Space

As children go, so goes our nation

The well-being of children is perhaps the single most important indicator of the well-being of a society.

Early child development experiences set the trajectory for lifelong potential. Human beings spend about a quarter of their lives in childhood, and a full quarter of Canada's population is children. How we create the conditions for a good childhood is fundamental to Canadian social and economic progress – paradoxically more so in an aging, globalizing society that cannot afford to squander the potential of our youngest generation. Yet, the place of children and childhood in our public debates is relatively remote and diminished in contrast to their prominence in our lives.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the well-being of Canada's children is lower than should be expected. In fact, half the world's industrialized countries achieve a higher level of child well-being – some with smaller economies and larger populations than Canada's. The average level of child well-being in Canada in contrast to other industrialized nations, measured in UNICEF's Report Cards and in other comparative data sets, has remained unchanged and

unchallenged for a decade.¹ There may be disputes about the data that describe the distance to the top and how to get there, but there should be no dispute that we can do better.

The well-being of children depends on many roles and actors. The considerable variation in the well-being of children within and between countries is certainly shaped by their families, friends and communities as well as by children themselves, but it is also influenced by public institutions. In fact, the wide variation in child well-being across countries with similar economic resources demonstrates that policy choices matter enormously.

In UNICEF League Tables of child well-being, the top-performing nations do not necessarily have the largest economies, but they place a high priority on the well-being of their children in demonstrable ways.

They use children's strategies, state of children reporting and other governance mechanisms to put children at the centre of decision-making. They tend to make greater investments in children. Governments, public and private institutions and citizens have the tools and processes to know about children's lives and to consider the implications of their decisions – in policy, law, services and resource allocations – on children. This is often accompanied by public demand, or support, to elevate the needs and interests of children as a priority.

In Canada, governments at all levels make policy decisions affecting children's lives – as do businesses, service organizations and the philanthropic sector.

What influences those decisions? Is it a shared vision of the kind of childhood Canadians want? Is it evidence about the areas of greatest need, and how to respond? Is it knowledge of how their decisions will affect children? Are we doing all we can to create the best possible conditions for growing up in Canada?

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE



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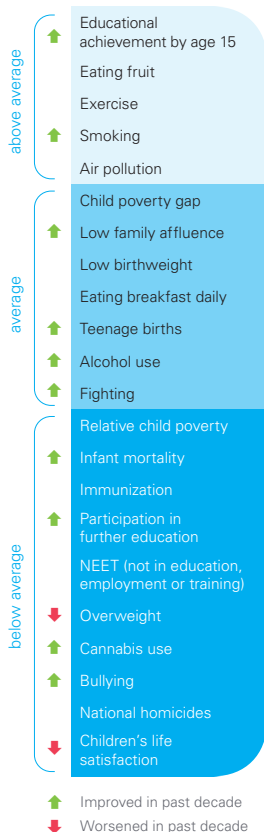
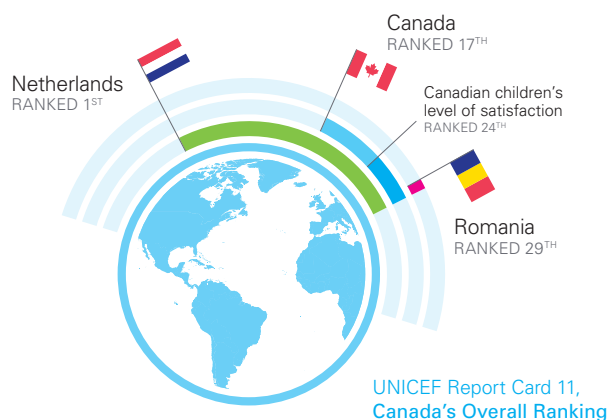
The story of Canada in Report Card 11 is one of a country stuck in the middle.

The League Table of Child Well-being ranks 29 affluent nations on an average of 26 indicators across five dimensions: Material Well-being, Health and Safety, Education, Behaviours and Risks, and Housing and Environment. 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.**

What are children saying?

Canada's ranking drops by seven places (**to number 24**) when children's views of their life satisfaction are taken into account. It is also a concern that this level has fallen over the past decade.

So how does Canada stack up?



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.



Smoking

ranked 3rd of 29

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



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.



Overweight

ranked 27th of 29

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



Bullying

ranked 21st of 29

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



Did you know?

Canada was the first country to introduce a survey of early childhood development indicators.

Put children first!

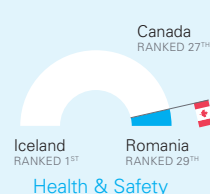
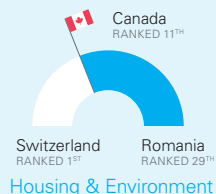
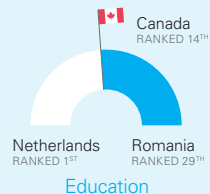
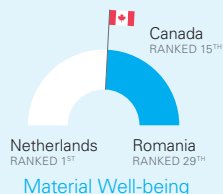
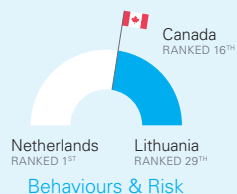
Child well-being can be influenced by policy choices, and in order to do that, the Canadian government needs to:

- Provide information on how much money is being spent on children
- Publish regular state-of-children reports to identify progress and emerging concerns
- Ensure the rights of children are prioritized in policy decisions
- Establish a National Children's Commissioner



Join UNICEF Canada to improve the well-being of Canadian children. Learn about the issues by reading **UNICEF Report Card 11: Child Well-Being in Rich Countries** and ask your MP to put children first.

unicef.ca/irc11



Our Vision >

Our Vision

In 2014, UNICEF is challenging the world to think differently about children.

Throughout this year, the 25th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, we will use our convening role to bring together change-makers everywhere, to think creatively and develop new approaches to ensure that childhood is good for children in a changing world.

The Observatory for Canada's Children is envisioned as a collaborative forum of national and international partners in support of the best possible childhood for every child in Canada.

The Observatory would be the centre that strives to understand children's lives and pay attention to the future of childhood, complementing the work of others by charting the state of children; monitoring investment in children; and exploring the implications for children of major social and economic forces shaping childhood and emerging choices in public policy, business and other domains. It would create conversations to help elevate the well-being of children to a higher national priority.

Mapping Childhood: Data Collection and Indicators of Child Well-Being

The Observatory could monitor the state of Canada's children – a renewed national effort to develop data to understand children's lives – what Canadians want growing up in Canada to be like, where we are making progress, where we need to direct attention and who is being left behind.

Data tell stories about how children are born and cared for, how they grow and learn, and how they connect with others and make their way in the world.

Of course, numbers alone don't change childhoods, but they make change possible by helping influence decision-makers, identify gaps and target resources and action to children's needs. The Observatory could revisit what we measure to help understand children's lives and what growing up in Canada should be like, and develop new ways of collecting the data to overcome current challenges.

Budget Analysis for Children

There is some evidence that Canada is under-spending on children – and that we top-load our investments later in life when it is more costly and remedial. We want to ensure Canadians know what is spent on children and how investment can be directed – by government, by business, by philanthropic and service organizations – to meet evidenced need, and to invest in the right things at the right times in people's lives.

Child-responsive budgeting has the potential to improve the transparency of fiscal decisions and monitor our society's commitment to children.

The Observatory could identify resources spent on children by governments and other actors, whether children are protected from the adverse effects of economic policies or financial downturns, and revive the concept of "first call for children".

Issue and Policy Analysis for Children

Through constructive, authoritative and relevant issue and policy analysis, the Observatory could provide a platform for Canadians to access balanced, well-reasoned views on a range of issues, from the cost of raising a child, to how reproduction technology is changing children's identity rights. We can support the use of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in framing debates and aligning Canadians around shared priorities.

Communicating Effectively to the Rest of Canada

With a strong focus on public engagement, an Observatory for Canada's children could promote a shared understanding among Canadians of the state of our children, how and why childhood is changing and the levers of influence we have to offer them the best childhoods we can.

We believe that just as Canada has world-class centres of research and advocacy for children, the Observatory could be a world-class centre to convene, translate and amplify our efforts through public dialogue and debate.

Our Approach

For the research and concept development phase of this effort to consider what an Observatory for Canada's children could be and do, we've charted a cross-country engagement process to explore what it means to have a good childhood in Canada and how the Observatory could fill in gaps and support the work of others. We are hosting dialogue to test ideas and listen to each other. We started by asking children and youth about their experiences, challenges and aspirations, and how they could engage with the Observatory. We explored what a "good" childhood looks like, and what the Observatory could do to contribute to that.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED SO FAR

This stage of the concept development and research phase has been about opening up the possibilities of what an Observatory could do, which has resulted in ideas and questions that should be further explored. One suggestion from a young person was to have "trial and error sessions" – which gives rise to interesting possibilities. The children and youth we spoke with suggested that the Observatory could:

- Track different types of "life literacies" (such as health, finances, and interpersonal skills);
- Demonstrate by example that youth are worth listening to;
- Open up the conversation about what a good childhood is;
- Keep track of all the problems affecting children – and what ambitions youth have;
- Measure happiness;
- Physically keep its doors open to children and youth.

As we move forward, we will continue to ask questions, listen and check in with children and young people as we incorporate the perspectives of our colleagues across Canada who have been working hard to build a Canada fit for children.



Photos: © UNICEF Canada/Sri Utami

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