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The Unprecedented State of Children and Youth: An Urgent Call to Action

**Introduction**

The current state of children and youth has reached an unprecedented level of complexity and significance. As we navigate through the 21st century, various factors have converged to shape the lives of younger generations in ways that demand immediate attention and action.

Despite Canada's reputation for high living standards, healthcare and social support systems, recent trends indicate a troubling rise in issues such as child poverty, mental health struggles, access to employment, educational attainment, systemic barriers that hinder the development and success of children and youth.[[1]](#endnote-2)

Significant demographic shifts have exacerbated these complexities as older populations retire and younger generations enter the workforce, the economic and social landscape is evolving in unparalleled ways. This difficulty is compounded by the escalating cost of living, which worsens the financial strain on young individuals striving to establish themselves. Furthermore, the health and well-being of this demographic are being negatively impacted, as they grapple with the pressures of economic instability, systemic barriers, poverty and limited employment opportunities. Our current systems only serve to heighten these systemic barriers, preventing young people from achieving stability and success. Addressing these intertwined issues requires a comprehensive overhaul of policies and structures to create a more equitable landscape for the younger generation.

**Current Crisis**

**Mental Health Crisis:** One in five children and youth in Canada has a mental health challenge, with about 70% of these challenges having their onset in childhood or youth.[[2]](#endnote-3) The mental health crisis is exacerbated by a lack of access to appropriate mental health services and support systems with three in five (57%)[[3]](#endnote-4) leading to long-term negative impacts on their development and well-being.[[4]](#endnote-5) Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people in Canada (21% of deaths).[[5]](#endnote-6)

The notable decline in the mental health of Canadian youth over recent years, the Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth revealed that the proportion of youth rating their mental health as "fair" or "poor" more than doubled from 12% in 2019 to 26% and is continuing to rise.[[6]](#endnote-7)

**Health and Wellness:** The health and well-being crisis of children and youth in Canada is multifaceted, encompassing issues such as food insecurity, inadequate physical activity, and unequal access to healthcare services. These issues are interconnected as young Canadians experience food insecurity, which adversely affects their growth and development. Children and youth do not meet the recommended levels of physical activity, leading to concerns about obesity and related health problems. Disparities in healthcare access, particularly for marginalized communities, which exacerbate these health challenges reports.[[7]](#endnote-8)

**Systemic Barriers and Inequities:**Systemic barriers and inequities further compound the crisis in the child and youth sector. Children from marginalized communities, including Indigenous, racialized, and low-income families, face disproportionate challenges. These systemic issues contribute to a cycle of poverty and disadvantage that is difficult to break. [[8]](#endnote-9) [[9]](#endnote-10)

Significant disparities in social and developmental outcomes for marginalized young people compared to other youth, such as lower employment rates, lower post-secondary education attainment, and poorer health and mental health outcomes,[[10]](#endnote-11) Including:

* Educational Inequities: Access to quality education varies significantly based on socioeconomic status, race, and geographic location. Schools in low-income areas often lack resources, experienced teachers, and extracurricular opportunities.[[11]](#endnote-12)
* Economic Disparities: Youth from marginalized communities often face lower graduation rates[[12]](#endnote-13), higher unemployment rates and limited access to well-paying jobs. This economic instability can perpetuate cycles of poverty.
* Housing Instability: Many young people, especially those from low-income families, experience housing instability or homelessness. This can disrupt their education, employment, and overall stability.
* Healthcare Access: Disparities in healthcare access and quality affect the physical and mental health of young people. Marginalized youth struggle to receive adequate medical care, mental health services, and support for chronic conditions.
* Discrimination and Bias: Systemic racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination create barriers in various aspects of life, including education, employment, and the justice system. These biases can limit opportunities and contribute to negative outcomes.
* Digital Divide: Access to technology and the internet is crucial for education and employment opportunities. However, many young people in marginalized communities lack reliable internet access and digital literacy skills.

**Youth Unemployment’s Economic and Social Costs:** Youth unemployment has significant economic and social costs, leading to short-term wage losses and long-term reductions in earning potential, known as wage scarring. It also negatively impacts mental and physical health, resulting in broader consequences for the economy, such as lost tax revenues and increased expenditures on health, welfare, and social services. Addressing youth unemployment could potentially increase Canada's GDP by $18.5 billion by 2034 and create 228,000 jobs.[[13]](#endnote-14)

Significant labor market dynamics with skill mismatches as older workers retire, there is often a gap between the skills they possessed, and the skills required for new and emerging industries which results in limited job opportunities.

Further economic implications result in increased dependency ratio with a growing number of retirees, the ratio of dependents to working-age individuals increases, putting pressure on the Canadian Pension System. The healthcare costs as an aging population leads to higher healthcare costs, which are straining public finances and require reforms in healthcare funding.

Social and cultural changes include intergenerational tensions that have differences in values and expectations between older and younger generations can lead to social tensions and challenges in workplaces and communities. Children are our most precious commodity and as a country we are failing.

This growing crisis in the child and youth sector has far-reaching implications for future generations. Children living in poverty and facing mental health challenges are at a higher risk of poor academic outcomes, lower earning potential, and poorer health in adulthood. Economists estimate that even a 1% increase in literacy levels could translate to a GDP growth of $54 to $67 billion.[[14]](#endnote-15) Furthermore, this same increase would lead to a 5% boost in national productivity.[[15]](#endnote-16) This underscores the profound impact literacy has on the country’s economic health. The long-term effects of these issues can perpetuate cycles of poverty and disadvantage, making it crucial to address the root causes and provide adequate support to children and youth.[[16]](#endnote-17)

Currently, one million children are currently living in poverty, this sharp rise is driven by factors such as rising inflation, high interest rates, and the overall cost of living crisis.[[17]](#endnote-18)

**Polarization, Misinformation, and Young People**

We’re at a crossroads for democracy in Canada. Misinformation is eroding trust, distort public policy, and increase social divisions, resulting in conflict and violence around the world. This has a profound impact on young people, harming their ability to think critically, trust others, and maintain healthy self-esteem and mental well-being.[[18]](#endnote-19) Misinformation can lead to harmful beliefs, such as hate speech and anti-science views, and dangerous behaviors, including violence and extremism.

**Recommendations for Action**

To address the growing crisis in the child and youth sector, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Empowering Youth:** Youth participation, involve young people in decision-making processes at all levels of government and society to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are addressed. Enhance government investments in youth-led Initiatives that are working to create positive change in their communities.
2. **Increase and Stabilize Funding for Child and Youth Sector**: Allocate more resources to programs and services that support children and youth, including mental health and well-being services, educational support, youth leadership, employment supports, physical and social emotional services.
3. **Implement Comprehensive Poverty Reduction Strategies**: Develop, implement and measure strategies to reduce child poverty, including measures to address housing insecurity, food insecurity, and income inequality.
4. **Enhance Access to Mental Health Services**: Improve access to mental health care for children and youth by increasing funding for mental health services, reducing wait times, and providing culturally competent and trauma informed care. Early identification and intervention are critical and can lead to improved achievement in school and better health outcomes in life.
5. **Address Systemic Barriers and Inequities**: Implement inclusive and comprehensive approach to system change that includes policy changes, increased funding for social and community services, and targeted interventions to support vulnerable populations. Involving the active participation of marginalized communities in the design and delivery to better support marginalized children and youth.
6. **Provide permanent and secure funding for youth employment and skills development:** Urgent investment is needed to create meaningful job opportunities for more young people in partnership with youth serving organizations that have the infrastructure and expertise needed to support young people in their employment readiness. Include a continuous improvement mechanism for strategic advice on program design and best practices from service providers.
7. **Promoting Health and Well-being:** Imagine an equitable ecosystem that fosters health and well-being, resilience, and opportunity for all. Strengthen healthcare system for leaders, organizations, and governments to make children and youth a priority and create a healthier, stronger future for children, youth, and families in Canada. Ensuring all children have access to medical care, regardless of their economic status. Investing in preventive care and public health initiatives to reduce the burden of diseases and improve overall health outcomes.
8. **Partner with Youth organizations to deliver:** The child and youth-serving sector is deeply embedded in Canadian society, with some organizations having operated for over 150 years. These organizations have been at the forefront of education, employment, health, social and physical well-being, technology, and support for marginalized populations. Leveraging with increased and stable resources with the established infrastructure can significantly enhance support for young people, in a timely and effective way contributing to a better Canada.
9. **Promote Collaboration and Partnerships**: Foster collaboration between government agencies, non-profit organizations, and community groups to create a coordinated and comprehensive approach to supporting children and youth.
10. **Create safe spaces**: Foster educational programs and literacy equipping young people with the tools to identify and analyze misinformation, they can become more discerning consumers of information. Support initiatives that create safe spaces for dialogue on controversial and polarizing topics. Launch public awareness campaigns to educate the broader community about the dangers of misinformation and the importance of verifying information before sharing it. Through respectful and informed discussions, we can address the root causes of misinformation and work towards a more informed and cohesive society.

**Conclusion**

The current and growing crisis in the child and youth sector in Canada requires urgent attention and action. Investing in the child and youth sector in a coordinated approach to address the root causes of child poverty, mental health challenges, and systemic barriers, we can create a more equitable and supportive environment for children and youth. Investing in the well-being of the younger population is not only a moral imperative but also a crucial step towards building a healthier and more prosperous future for all Canadians.

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2. A Generation at Risk : The State of Youth Mental Health in Canada [A Generation at Risk - Youth Mental Health in Canada — Mental Health Research Canada](https://www.mhrc.ca/youth-mental-health) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. A Generation At Risk: The State Of Youth Mental Health In Canada. 2024 [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f31a311d93d0f2e28aaf04a/t/67926a4d06ab3a3b91ec6090/1737648721860/A+Generation+at+Risk+The+State+of+Youth+Mental+Health+in+Canada+%281%29.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f31a311d93d0f2e28aaf04a/t/67926a4d06ab3a3b91ec6090/1737648721860/A%2BGeneration%2Bat%2BRisk%2BThe%2BState%2Bof%2BYouth%2BMental%2BHealth%2Bin%2BCanada%2B%281%29.pdf) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. UNICEF Canada. (n.d.). *UNICEF report card 18: For every child*. [UNICEF REPORT CARD 18 | UNICEF Canada: For Every Child](https://www.unicef.ca/en/unicef-report-card-18) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Mental Health Research Canada. “A Generation at Rsk: The State of Youth Mental Health in Canada” [A Generation at Risk - Youth Mental Health in Canada — Mental Health Research Canada](https://www.mhrc.ca/youth-mental-health) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
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12. Children’s Aid Foundation of Canada. 2024. <https://cafdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/CAFC-Focus-on-Education-Report.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
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