

# CHILDHOOD INTERRUPTED:

## How Canada's Child Well-Being Compares to Other Wealthy Countries

### UNICEF Report Card 19 at a Glance

**The well-being of children is the sentinel of the health and potential of any country. Like canaries in a coal mine, children are particularly sensitive to changes in the environments in which they grow up.**

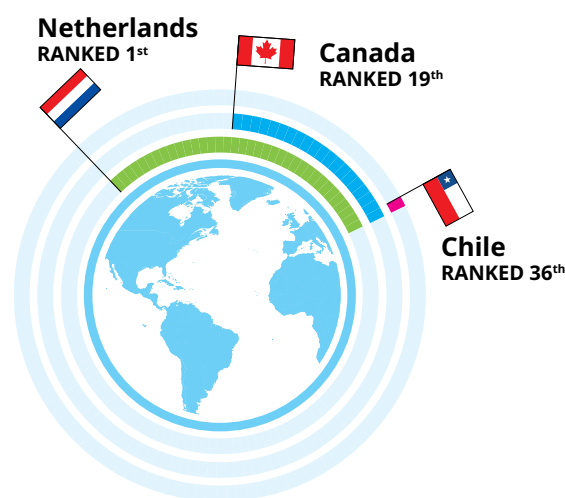
For 25 years, the UNICEF Report Card series has been taking stock of the state of children in Canada and other primarily high-income countries. Report Card 19 compares how these countries achieve six fundamental child well-being indicators using the most current data, measuring the outcomes that should be achievable for every child in a high-income country. The report also tracks recent trends in these aspects of children's lives and how well public policies provide a life of equitable opportunities for every child.

#### Where is Canada now?

Report Card 19 compares outcomes between 2018 and 2022. Progress for children in Canada has largely stalled in this time frame. Canada is one of the ten wealthiest countries in the UNICEF league table, but when we compare the state of children in this country with others the results are middling. Canada ranks 19th of 36 countries, in the middle of the league table comparing the overall state of children.

Canada's performance falls behind most of its peer

countries in most aspects of children's lives. Among six indicators of child well-being, Canada ranks in the top 12 countries in only one: academic skills (6th place). But even this bright spot is at risk of burning out. Reading and math scores have declined in Canada in recent years and as many as one third of children fall below the academic proficiency benchmark, with no progress made over a five-year span.



Canada ranks close to the bottom in three of six indicators: adolescent suicide (33rd), child mortality (25th) and social skills (28th). Low rankings matter because they indicate poor outcomes for a significant proportion of children. For example, one in five children in Canada face frequent bullying, one in five are lonely, one quarter are not learning the social skills they need for life, and more than one in four are overweight. On the other hand, seven of the top 12 countries in the UNICEF league table of child well-being have less national wealth than Canada and better child outcomes.

### How has childhood in Canada changed?

Children's survival has been improving in Canada in some respects. Canada's rate of adolescent suicide – based on a three-year average – has fallen substantially in recent years from 10.1 to 8.4 per 100,000. However, suicide remains a leading cause of death among adolescents, and the rate in Canada is still higher than in most other countries. The rate of child mortality (ages 5 to 14) has lowered from 0.94 to 0.88 per 1,000 – an improvement, but a lesser one than most Report Card countries have achieved in the same time frame.

Progress in overweight, academic and social skills has stagnated with very small recent improvements or declines in these indicators. Children's life satisfaction has fallen three percentage points (from 79 per cent to 76 per cent) – not a statistically significant amount, but the largest deterioration Canada experienced across the six key indicators, and in line with a concerning longer-term trend.

## A snapshot of Canada's performance in Report Card 19

### Mental Well-Being

#### Overall life satisfaction:



**7.6 in 10 Children Report High Life Satisfaction**

Canada ranks 13th of 36 countries. However, children's life satisfaction (how they rate their lives overall) in Canada declined from 79 per cent to 76 per cent since 2018. Japan is the only country in which life satisfaction has risen considerably in recent years. The Report Card country average (72 per cent) dropped by four percentage points overall. Bullying is a major contributor to low life satisfaction, and 22 per cent of

Canada's children report being bullied frequently, ranking 26th of 40 countries. Only the Republic of Korea has a rate below 10 per cent.

#### Adolescent suicide:



Canada ranks 33rd of 42 countries. The rate of adolescent suicide in Canada fell significantly from 10.1 to 8.4 per 100,000 since 2018 – Canada's most substantial improvement across the six indicators. But suicide remains a leading cause of death of adolescents, and the rate in Canada is still higher than in most other countries: the average rate across Report Card countries is 6.2 per 100,000. Eight countries have kept the rate below 3 per 100,000. There is no clear trend in adolescent suicide across countries, with increases in some and decreases in others.

## Physical Well-Being

### Child mortality:



Canada ranks 25th of 43 countries. The rate of child mortality in Canada has improved from 0.94 to 0.88 per 1,000 since 2018, while it has improved by more in most other Report Card countries. The average child mortality rate across Report Card countries is 0.99 per 1,000. Only newer and Eastern European Report Card countries have higher rates of child mortality than Canada, New Zealand and United States.

### Overweight:



**Nearly 3 in 10  
Children are  
Overweight**

Canada ranks 24th of 43 countries. At 28 per cent (in line with the average across high-income countries), the rate of overweight children in Canada has changed minimally (by less than a percentage point) over the period measured in this Report Card. In most other countries, it has stagnated or risen since 2018.

## Skills Development

### Academic skills:



**Around 7 in 10  
Children Achieve  
Academic  
Proficiency**

Canada ranks sixth of 42 countries. However, the percentage of children achieving proficiency in reading and math in Canada fell slightly since 2018, from 68 per cent to 67 per cent - not a significant change but one that continues a longer-term trend. This leaves almost one in three children without these basic academic skills. In contrast, children's academic proficiency dipped more sharply in most

Report Card countries, leaving 45 per cent on average without academic proficiency. Academic skills are also becoming more unequal: the gap in mean math scores between children in the highest and lowest socio-economic groups widened by 13 percentage points in Canada since 2018.

### Social skills:



**7.5 in 10 Children  
Make Friends  
Easily**

Canada ranks 28th of 41 countries. The rate of children's competence in social skills (ability to make friends) in Canada is 75 per cent and has shifted little (by less than a percentage point) since 2018. Children's acquisition of social skills has been relatively stable in most countries and declined or improved in others. The average rate of children that have competence in social skills across Report Card countries is 77 per cent.

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

Canada can aim higher than a middle ranking among peer countries for child well-being. Every government, institution, company and voter in Canada has a direct influence on public policy and should prioritize improving child well-being from the baseline in this Report Card and making it more equitable.

The good news is that Canada already has some of the right policy ingredients to rise above its lacklustre ranking for child well-being. Proven child social protection and care policies – including income benefits, child care, parenting leave and school food programs – are partially in place but need more time, investment and reach to achieve meaningful impacts on child outcomes. The alarming state of children's mental and physical well-being and skills development call for greater and more equity-producing investments in education, youth programs

and accessible health care. Policy solutions should be designed not only for, but with, diverse young people, who have the ideas and capacity to be involved in decisions affecting them.

Higher policy ambition will lead to happier, healthier children and, in turn, higher rankings in UNICEF league tables. All levels of government in Canada should level up their ambition for children with these public policies:

- Eliminate child poverty through more effective child-focused income benefits, ensuring equitable access, and double the Child Disability Benefit.
- Guarantee every infant adequately paid, protected time with a parent or primary caregiver at birth through parenting leave and ratify the International Labour Organization (ILO) Maternity Protection Convention 2000 (no. 183).
- Assure to every child an inclusive education that begins with access to quality, affordable early learning and child care, and ends with proficiency in the social and academic skills they need for life.

- Provide every schoolchild with access to healthy food at school, every school day by expanding on existing investments.
- Nurture a healthy and safe environment for children in all facets, including protection from marketing, digital harms, injury and victimization, and climate change.
- Ensure that every child can readily access preventive and responsive mental and physical health care.
- Implement the Spirit Bear Plan for First Nations and territorial children proposed by the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society and improve the responsiveness of Jordan's Principle to eliminate denials and delays of the services to which every child is entitled.
- Prioritize children on the policy agenda and give them first call on the nation's resources: Improve governance for children with a children's commission and strategy, a child policy lens and child budget expenditure tracking in fulfillment of children's rights.

*The true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued and included in the families and societies to which they were born.*

**UNICEF Report Card 7**