Canada's Kids in Lockdown

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Well-being of Children in Canada

Children are the hidden face of the coronavirus pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health crisis, but also a children's crisis. Older and vulnerable people are bearing the greatest burden of illness and mortality. There is a perception among many that because children are less likely to experience severe symptoms of COVID-19, they are less affected. Canada's children and youth are not the generation that is most likely to fall ill from coronavirus, but they will carry its impacts the longest.

The pandemic lockdown is curtailing almost every aspect of childhood. Children are making sacrifices of their education, play, mental and physical health, material security and safety. They are missing out on critical developmental milestones, from the early years when young children need to learn how to play with others, to the loss and grief of missing out on cultural celebrations and school proms and graduations that mark important milestones. Young people are confined and cut off from many of the people and services they depend on to help fulfil their rights and needs, from childcare, to education, to health and protection services, to community programs.

Every child is affected, and UNICEF Canada is particularly concerned about the heightened

impacts on the most vulnerable children, who are more likely to detach from school and sustain mental and physical trauma. Many indigenous children, children with special needs and children deprived of liberty are among those at greater risk of the deprivations and long-term impacts of lockdown.

For some children and youth, with the right support and resources, the situation will be manageable. For others, the effects of the pandemic will cast a long shadow over their lives.

What Canada does now will determine how children recover. The longer children are in lockdown, the more difficult recovery will be. All

levels of government in Canada have the duty to make children's best interests a priority in their decisions, from response to recovery, and uphold the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. UNICEF Canada produced this rapid child rights impact assessment and recommendations for federal, provincial/territorial and local governments at the start of the "lockdown". Coronavirus presents a huge challenge for authorities straining to serve unprecedented demand for support. Government responses have largely aligned with UNICEF Canada's recommendations, but more can be done to lighten the negative impacts of control measures on children and youth and help them cope.

As the pandemic eases, we call on all levels of government to take a child-sensitive approach as they "open up" and lift control measures, ensuring the best interests of children are an urgent priority. The coronavirus is exposing the shortcomings of Canada's public policies for children and young people prior to the pandemic. Governments must also ensure that stimulus contraction does not further damage children's recovery and that we take this opportunity to "build back better" rather than return to a pre-pandemic state that was never good enough for children and youth.

With decades of global experience in responding to crises, UNICEF's global COVID-19 response focuses on what we know now about the likely impacts on children and youth, working with partners to help reduce the transmission of the virus and mitigate its impact on children while ensuring that essential services for children continue. We will continue to work with them toward recovery and work to create a more resilient future for the children and youth of Canada.

We call on Canada's governments to:

Make decisions using Child Rights Impact Assessment: Government stimulus and response at all stages of the pandemic must consider the broad range of possible impacts on children, which extend beyond health protection, taking steps to balance risks, avoid or soften negative impacts and listen directly to children and youth to support their coping strategies, priorities and ideas to improve responses.

Listen to young people: UNICEF Canada and our partners are supporting young people to tell decision-makers what it is like to grow up during the pandemic. U-Report, Kids of Canada and an Open Letter to Canada from Youth are some of the ways to safely and respectfully listen to young people, and provide a real-time evidence base that can help guide decision-makers. We ask every elected official to have regular, virtual town halls with diverse young people to check in on them and take their recommendations into account.

Appoint a Special Council for Children and Youth to help inform and coordinate government plans from crisis response to recovery.

Launch a Comprehensive Child and Youth Reimagine and Recover Plan at every level of government to give this generation support to recover to a better situation on the other side of the pandemic.

Snapshot of the early impacts of the pandemic lockdown on children and youth[1]

Locked out of education

Before the pandemic, 1 in 5 young people in Canada did not achieve the basic international level of proficiency in reading, math and science. Close to 6 per cent were already at risk of lifelong exclusion: at ages 15-19, they were not in school or working.

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[1] *Source of statistical data: Canadian Index of Child and Youth Well-being*

About 70 million days of education will be lost between now and summer. Despite good efforts to provide technology and continue online education, many young people are struggling to learn and meet education expectations. For some, this compounds the stress and anxiety of confinement and the loss of support at school for mental health, school meals and a protective environment. The longer schools are closed, the more likely that some young people will not recover their education, entrenching and widen gaps in educational attainment as well as social exclusion and health.

Locked out of material security

Before the pandemic, close to 1 in 5 children lived in poverty and almost 1 in 4 children aged 11-15 in Canada reported going to bed or to school hungry because there wasn't enough food at home.

More children will face poverty and food insecurity as prolonged job losses and debt take their toll on family finances and some children lose the school meals they relied on. Canada is the only G-8 country without a guaranteed meal at school every day. Following the Great Recession a decade ago, children's food security rose and never recovered. Accelerating efforts to reduce child poverty with robust income support and ensuring every child a healthy meal at school will help Canada "build back better" from the pandemic.

Locked out of health care

Before the pandemic, 90% of 2 year-olds in Canada received at least one dose of measles vaccination, below the level required for population protection.

Children's access to healthcare has been disrupted, as services are stretched, limited or avoided, potentially storing up future long-term health problems for children. Delays in routine childhood immunization may increase children's risk of preventable illness, during a pandemic when they need it the most. Support for immunization, breastfeeding and newborn wellness can continue with every effort to provide alternative service delivery outreach and access.

Locked out of mental health

Before the pandemic, about 1 in 3 11-15 year-olds in Canada had symptoms of psychological distress more than once a week. About 1 in 5 had a mental illness.

Anxiety and stress from staying at home coupled with removal of coping mechanisms and reduction in access to supportive people at school and in community services is a storm cloud for children living with mental health difficulties. Psychosocial support should be guaranteed to every child with specialized training for education support workers during and after school closures, and a public campaign to promote youth-friendly coping strategies.

Locked out of protection

Before the pandemic, about 1 in 4 people reported having experienced abuse as a child. Close to 40% reported that they did not receive a high level of support from their family, an indicator of difficult relationships at home.

Thousands of children are at increased risk of abuse in their homes and online, as pressure and tensions increase, online supervision decreases and predators seek to take advantage of the situation. This may increase the risk of youth homelessness, injury and trauma. Prevention through campaigns to help parents cope and provide young people with access to essential community support programs can help reduce risk and provide support.

Locked out of free play and recreation

Before the pandemic, about 80% of 11-15 year-olds in Canada spent four or more hours a week outdoors in leisure.

Now, children and youth are more likely to be playing indoors and online. For young people and their caregivers, this is a temporary coping strategy. Prolonged exclusion from social and outdoor play and leisure will begin to have negative impacts on mental and physical health, safety and

development. Young people should be given the encouragement, time and space to play outside, within social distancing parameters.

Locked *in* detention and custody

Similar to adult jails and prisons, communicable diseases including COVID-19 can quickly spread through youth detention centres and other forms of secure and open custody institutions, putting young people and staff at risk. Children reside in group settings that make the recommended physical distancing protocols difficult, if not impossible.

Measures taken to control the spread of COVID-19 in these environments can be extremely harmful to the safety and well-being of the youth who live there. Most visits have been canceled, including family and legal representatives. Education and social programs have been canceled or reduced. Despite the reality that the use of segregation for youth is not legal in Canada, in some cases, young people have been held in isolation (segregation) for 20 or more hours a day to enforce physical distance.

Resources

Technical note on COVID-19 and children deprived of liberty

Open letter to Justice Ministers concerning youth in detention and custody during COVID-19

Health

The scale and severity of the direct health impacts of the coronavirus on children is still a topic of debate, and research is ongoing. Children may be infected by the virus at roughly the same rate as adults, although they appear to have developed much lighter and much less fatal symptoms. However, little is known of the risk to children who have pre-existing, poor health conditions, such as those suffering from respiratory disease, chronic illnesses and malnutrition. Children in already

precarious conditions, such as living in overcrowded housing and with poor water and sanitation and food insecurity, face a greater risk of morbidity and mortality due to COVID-19.

Children in small, remote, northern and some First Nations communities are at greater risk because they tend to be deprived of health-sustaining services and living conditions. Children of essential service providers may also share a greater risk of infection.

As of May 2020, the Canadian Pediatric Society has begun tracking a possible correlation between COVID-19 in children and an increase in an inflammatory syndrome known as Kawasaki disease. While no definitive connection has been made, caregivers are urged to speak to their doctor if they notice redness, rash, fever, or swelling of a child's hands or feet.

This pandemic poses an unprecedented health crisis for children through a combination of reduced services, loss of healthy behaviours and exposure to additional risks. It also has the potential to store up serious health problems for this generation in the coming years. With strained health systems and health care providers, there is an increased likelihood that some essential services for children will be curtailed.

Newborn care and support: As staff across maternity care services are reduced due to sickness and redeployment, support for new mothers to breastfeed may be limited. As a result, rates of breastfeeding may drop substantially. The stress of giving birth in these circumstances may increase the risk of postpartum depression and anxiety among new mothers, while support following birth may be reduced. Antenatal care may be affected with more appointments being carried out remotely, or missed altogether.

Childhood vaccinations: Routine vaccinations are essential health services, and disruptions to childhood immunization can lead to new outbreaks of infectious disease to which children are the most susceptible. Any short-term loss of immunization

will put babies at increased risk of potentially serious illness and life-threatening complications. Home confinement is not a sufficient protective measure for vaccine-preventable childhood diseases.

Healthy behaviours: The pandemic will lower children's engagement in health-promoting behaviours. When children are out of school they are typically less physically active, have irregular sleep patterns and less favourable diets. While temporary behaviours need not have long-term impacts and may be coping mechanisms, a prolonged lockdown raises longer-term risks of obesity and an impact on children's mental health.

Sexual health: Access to sexual health clinics and support will be curtailed. There are concerns around STIs, unplanned pregnancies as well as access to counselling for sexual assault trauma.

Mental health: Children who already struggle with anxiety, and many who did not previously, are now feeling very anxious. They may worry about their health or the health of loved ones, particularly if parents are at high-risk or work in essential services, and the loss, challenges and uncertainties of so many aspects of life. The mental health burden of witnessing families and community members in anxiety over the pandemic, being separated from and losing loved ones to illness, disruption of social and support networks and services including education and community programs, and grief over lost developmental milestones is a significant burden for children and youth that may lead to greater anxiety, trauma and prolonged mental health challenges for many. At a time when they most need support – professional and informal – it is least available. Mental health services have largely been replaced with online or telephone support, or postponed. Some young people may find this less effective or may worry about maintaining privacy if sessions are held remotely with family members close by.

Loss of the supportive environment: Many of the ways in which young people manage their mental health – social support through friends and family,

daily routines, physical activity, being outdoors, participating in school and community services and programs -- are now impaired or impossible. Disrupted routines can cause distress for those suffering from anxiety, eating disorders and other mental health difficulties. School and other community spaces and programs are important sources of support for many young people, as well as a respite for those who have a difficult time at home. For these young people, being cut off from some of these critical services, places and people will be extremely difficult.

Recommendations

Provide (and work with community partners to provide) sufficient hygiene supplies, procedures and information in public places where children gather including schools, day cares, recreation centres, youth shelters and group homes.

Ensure that children and pregnant and lactating women are supported and that breastfeeding can safely continue.

Provide immunizations, antenatal check-ins and other clinical services in creative new ways to support physical distancing, backed by public information and outreach to encourage access.

Support children and caregivers to cope with stress and anxiety by providing appropriate, targeted campaigns, information and resources for parents, teachers and young people of different age groups.

Provide support for additional staff and programming for family and child help lines and for community youth programs during the pandemic.

Train educators and child and youth service providers in psychosocial first aid.

Resources

[UNICEF statements on infant feeding during the COVID-19 outbreak](#)

[COVID-19 operational guidance for mental health and psychosocial support](#)

[COVID-19 information and resources from the Canadian Pediatric Society](#)

Material Security

Physical distancing policies have mandated many public services and business to close and employees to stay at home to mitigate the contagion and spread of the virus. The loss of employment and income for both parents and youth will diminish families' abilities to meet their basic needs, and compound stress and anxiety. Some of these impacts will prevail despite the robustness of emergency income supports.

Nutrition: Families face uncertain financial futures because of the economic crisis triggered by coronavirus. For those already experiencing financial hardship, further reductions in income, job loss and the increased cost of having children out of school will exacerbate food insecurity. Households with children typically have lower food security. For these families, the additional pressures of children being at home instead of school, difficulties in buying an appropriate range of foods within their budget, disruptions to the food supply and challenges for community-based emergency food distribution pose a crisis in which many families will struggle to feed their children, with lasting mental and physical health impacts for some.

Housing: Physical distancing to protect health is not as feasible or effective for children and their caretakers who live in overcrowded housing and densely populated neighbourhoods with limited outdoor amenities, compounding their risk. Families with children also face a heightened risk of eviction,

during or after the pandemic (when temporary bans on evictions lift). Combined with more stressful household relationships, the risk of youth homelessness is heightened. Children and youth already homeless also face compounded risks during the pandemic.

Recommendations

Provide emergency income support to a level sufficient to meet children's needs, and use every means available to incentivize employers to protect workers' employment, including youth employees.

Some children rely on school lunches and meals provided in other community programs. Provide alternative solutions during disruptions in these settings for vulnerable populations.

Rationing and supply disruption of groceries in small and remote communities and in urban "food deserts" can severely affect children. Help ensure the orderly transport of sufficient food to these communities.

Provide emergency housing for children and families if needed, and ban evictions for families with children until they recover.

Resources

[Guidance note: mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on food and nutrition of school children](#)

[Technical note from UNICEF, ILO and UN Women on family-friendly policies and other good workplace practices in the context of COVID-19](#)

Family Support and Child Protection

Lockdown is likely to increase the risk of children's exposure to abuse and exploitation. Children may be separated from family members due to hospitalization, border/travel restrictions or medical isolation/quarantine of parents, presenting protection and mental and physical health risks to children. They may be alone at home or in public spaces if parents are ill or unable to provide direct supervision due to employment or other demands on them.

Children who are excluded from school and other community spaces are at heightened risk of exploitation and other harm. A combustible environment has been created with widespread income loss, confinement, challenges to reconcile parental work and education support for children and difficulties in helping children cope. Stress for parents during this time might also contribute to an increased risk of substance misuse or worsening mental health symptoms. While schools are closed, many children will spend longer periods of unsupervised time online. While this provides many opportunities for socializing and education, it also increases the risk of online harm.

For children confined in abusive homes, there is the potential for more exposure to harm, with fewer avenues to get informal support and fewer teachers and community members to report abuse and engage child protection services. This is likely to increase abuse and impair children's mental health and development. It may also propel more young people into homelessness. We may never know the full extent of childhood abuse and neglect as so much of it remains hidden. While some of those who experience, or are at risk of, abuse are known to social services, many more are not. Child protective services have not typically been designated as essential, and may be limited to virtual access. It is essential that children who experience abuse are identified and supported as far as possible, but every effort must be made to avoid and prevent heightened risk of abuse and reduce the number of children in need of protective services.

Recommendations

Work with children's services to ensure protection of children temporarily separated from their families.

Designate child protection services as essential and ensure outreach and support continues, with increased capacity following the lockdown.

Consider some community children's programs (such as day camps and youth clubs) as essential, with safe physical spaces for children and youth to access support and reprieve.

Provide enhanced support to homeless young people.

For young people deprived of liberty, provide for early release when possible based on a best interests determination, and sustain their access to independent advocacy, development programs and visits with caring relations.

For children in alternative care, ensure that their family and community visits are sustained, using virtual measures if physical distancing is required following consideration of the needs and protection of all children and adults in the circle of care.

Resources

Guidance Note: Maintaining Connections with Children and Youth during COVID-19

Technical note: Protection of children during the coronavirus pandemic

Technical note: COVID-19 and children deprived of their liberty

COVID-19 and its implications for protecting children online

Education

Every child has the right to learn. It is likely that prolonged school closures and loss of early years care and education will widen the attainment gap, increase the risk of detachment from school and lead to entrenched inequalities that follow children throughout their lives. School closures will also have multiple secondary impacts, many of which are highlighted elsewhere in this briefing. These include exacerbated food insecurity and child protection vulnerabilities, as well as increasing physical and mental health risks.

Virtual school continuity is a key measure to offer young people opportunities to complete credentials and continue learning. While some children will receive parental support and have supportive resources at home to engage, others will face considerable challenges to continued learning at home. The education divide is more than digital. Children in families that cannot afford resources for home learning activities and lack broadband access, where parents have low levels of educational attainment or are not fluent English speakers, where there are special needs or where there is inadequate space and support for effective learning, will likely fall behind during this period – often accompanied by increased anxiety.

Early childhood education (ECE) provides an essential service both in preparing children for school and enabling parents to work. Quality ECE is critical for establishing the building blocks for learning. The foundation of education is established before primary school begins. Short-term closures and the potential loss of privately run nurseries in the longer term are likely to contribute further to inequality in education outcomes.

Recommendations

Schools have many challenging roles to fulfil and balance during and after lockdown, from providing health-safe environments and hygiene practices; to supporting every student continue and recover their learning; to providing mental health and psychosocial support; to responding to heightened child protection needs. Approaches to continue education during lockdown and to reopen schools should give priority to the contribution of schools and education to the broader well-being of young people, particularly in the early recovery period.

During school closures, facilitate continued access to a basic level of education to ensure some continuity of learning and support children and parents in providing a normalized daily routine, including technology support to every student for remote learning. School continuity should recognize that some students will not be able to meet learning expectations and offer specialized alternatives, as well as appropriate re-engagement and catch-up once schools open.

Schools should work to reduce anxiety and "friction" by keeping education continuity simple to engage with, eliminate exams where possible, and avoid a grading system that exacerbates school failure and exclusion.

Provide psychosocial support to young people as a regular part of learning and with additional support for students who need it, both during and after school closures. This may include additional staffing of school support workers, particularly in the weeks following school re-opening.

Continue to provide accurate information through effective channels about how adults and children can keep themselves and others safe.

Reopen schools and childcare at the earliest opportunity, considering new global guidelines to help balance health and the best interests of children. When schools begin to reopen, give priority to children with special needs and those who are vulnerable to detachment and exclusion.

Resources

Framework for reopening schools

Interim guidance for COVID-19 prevention and control in schools

Conclusion

As this briefing note describes, the impacts of the pandemic on children and youth – particularly the lockdown measures –are interconnected. Every action, such as school closure, has ripples across their lives. To avoid or lighten the negative impacts on them takes comprehensive and coordinated consideration of their needs and rights and the potential impacts of every decision. UNICEF Canada produced this rapid impact assessment of the COVID-19 crisis on the children of Canada at the start of the lockdown. It draws on UNICEF's long and wide experience in emergencies and our broad knowledge of the situation of children and youth in Canada. It is not exhaustive, but highlights key measures to support a comprehensive and prevention-based approach to child well-being.

UNICEF is responding to the pandemic in Canada and worldwide, working with organizations and decision-makers across the country to improve responses as we move through lockdown to a recovery that will "build back better". We are doing this through the provision of technical and policy support to decision-makers and service providers including drawing on the best international evidence and practice; amplifying the voices of young people; providing trusted information to Canadians, including young people; and providing and monitoring data and evidence for understanding and decision-making.

Children themselves show remarkable resilience, creativity and adaptability, yet they are rarely consulted on decisions that affect their lives, especially in a crisis. Young people from all backgrounds should have opportunities to influence

the decisions made during this time, and support to reimagine and recover their future.

General Resources

U-Report Canada

Kids of Canada: The COVID Diaries

Impact of COVID-19 on Children

UNICEF Canada resources for parents and youth

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Statement on the COVID-19 Pandemic (April 8, 2020)