

Written Submission to the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2021 Federal Budget



Children's
Healthcare
Canada

Santé
des enfants
Canada



Pediatric Chairs of Canada
Directeurs de pédiatrie du Canada



RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The Government of Canada establish through legislation an independent Commissioner for Children and Youth in Canada to advocate for and advance policy in the best interests of children and youth.
2. The Government of Canada commit to an annual budget of \$8 million to operate the office of a Commissioner for Children and Youth.

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing global pandemic of COVID-19 has significantly disrupted every aspect of life in Canada, and children and youth are no exception. Aside from the obvious disruption of not being able to attend school every day, children are witnessing their adult family members go through a period of unprecedented economic uncertainty. Some of them will have family members who get sick, or may get sick themselves – for others, the anxiety about health and survival is overwhelming. We know that levels of domestic abuse, including child sexual abuse, are prone to rise. In many ways, the future of Canada for this generation will be shaped by the pandemic: how we respond to it now and as the health crisis wanes.

What can the Government of Canada do to advance the health and well-being of children and youth in the face of this unprecedented pandemic? The child health stakeholders collaborating on this proposal believe an important part of the answer lies in an independent federal Commissioner for Children and Youth.

We can't return to a "normal" that wasn't good enough.

While it is commonly assumed that Canada is one of the best countries in the world to raise a family, the reality for children and youth is quite different. Canada ranks 8th globally for prosperity yet shockingly ranks 21st for Child Poverty, 27th for Children's Health and Safety, 27th for Child Obesity, 21st for Bullying, and 24th for Children's Life Satisfaction.[1] Clearly Parliament requires more effective tools for translating our nation's relative wealth into better outcomes for children and youth.

Investing in kids is not only a moral imperative, but also an economic one. Before the pandemic, the first two leading causes of children's deaths were preventable injuries and suicide. In 2018, Children First Canada's Raising Canada report put a price tag on the cost of inaction: Child Abuse - \$23B per year, Childhood Obesity - \$22B per year, and Bullying - \$4B per year and growing.[2] All of these costs are at serious risk of rising significantly, especially if governments don't take sustained action to protect children from the pandemic's most painful impacts.

[1] Wolff, Lisa. Oh Canada: Our kids deserve better. UNICEF Canada. 2017.

[2] Raising Canada 2018: Economic commentary – a case for investing in children. Children First Canada. 2018.

Threats to child and youth well-being stretch decades into the future.

The experience of the pandemic thus far has shown that education, child care, and other children's services are absolutely essential to the Canadian economy. As this crisis lingers, the long-term effects of the pandemic on young people's future prospects will only deepen. While they are less likely to fall seriously ill with COVID-19, young people will suffer the longest "tail" of the pandemic as its impacts are felt for years and even decades to come.

UNICEF Report Card 12, "Children of the Recession," tracked the impact of the 2008-2009 financial crisis and the resulting recession on children in wealthy countries including Canada. The report is an in-depth look at the lasting impacts of economic disruption on children and youth, and provides insight into how governments can mitigate the long-term impacts of the pandemic on the youngest generation.

Restarting the economy requires taking children's rights and well-being seriously.

Investments in children and families under the previous Parliament including the expanded Canada Child Benefit (CCB) have made a real difference in young people's lives. With the COVID-19 pandemic, continuing that work becomes all the more urgent. A Commissioner for Children and Youth would support parliamentary committees and the budget process to ensure that legislation, policies, and investments that pertain to children and youth consider their rights and well-being in order to maximize impact and avoid unintended consequences and costs. It would also work to amplify the voices of young people themselves, to ensure their opinions and experiences are better incorporated into the decisions Parliament makes on their behalf.

Good governance for children and youth is sound economic policy. Nations with policies and legislation that are attentive to the social, physical, spiritual, and psychological well-being of their youngest and most vulnerable reap the dividends of a healthy, productive and innovative population and avoid the unnecessary costs of poor health, failure to succeed in school and other adverse outcomes. A Commissioner is a very affordable and important way to improve the long-term outlook for today's children and youth.

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

1 The Government of Canada establish through legislation an independent Commissioner for Children and Youth in Canada to advocate for and advance policy in the best interests of children and youth.

More than 60 countries have established a Children's Commissioner or Ombudsperson. [3] These offices are found in countries comparable in population and wealth to Canada, and in federal states, including New Zealand, Australia, Germany, and across the United Kingdom. International evidence demonstrates that an independent, non-partisan, collaborative approach can support government decisions that advance the health and well-being outcomes of all children and youth.

A federal Commissioner for Children and Youth would play several key roles:

- Ensure Canada is making progress in implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and in achieving measurably better outcomes for children.
- Facilitate meaningful engagement with children and youth, families, NGOs and other stakeholders on important priorities for children, in order to advise the federal government and other entities with responsibility for issues affecting childhood, federally and nationally.
- Act as a resource for the development of federal legislation and other decisions affecting children and youth.
- Collaborate with federal, provincial and territorial policy makers, government agencies and parliamentary bodies, and other to ensure the best interests of children and youth are respected.

The Office of the Commissioner would be expected to follow international best practices as outlined by the CRC in General Comments 2 and 5 in addition to the Paris Principles for Independent Human Rights Institutions. The essential elements include:

- Be independent, to be free to conduct their duties without fear or favour of Government, children's agencies, and the voluntary and private sectors;
- Be established in legislation with clearly defined powers and duties; Report to Parliament annually, as to ensure accountability to all citizens;
- Have a broad mandate that includes the power to study, investigate, raise awareness, and monitor progress
- Have a statutory obligation to listen to and involve children.

[3] It's Time for a National Children's Commissioner for Canada. UNICEF Canada. 2010.

The Federal Commissioner for Children and Youth should work to establish protocols with provincial and territorial Child and Youth Advocates on inter-jurisdictional matters and should promote collaborative efforts across Canada as appropriate. A Federal Commissioner of Children and Youth must also work in close collaboration with First Nations, Inuit and Métis governing bodies to fulfill the federal government's specific obligations under the Constitution towards Indigenous children and youth.

2 The Government of Canada commit to an annual budget of \$8 million to operate the office of a Commissioner for Children and Youth.

This is comparable to the annual budget of other Offices of Parliament with similar form and function to the proposed Commissioner for Children and Youth. It would also correspond to a symbolic rate of \$1 per child, as there are currently eight million children and youth in Canada, the equivalent of 22% of the nation's population.

CONCLUSION

In June 2020, Senator Rosemary Moodie tabled Bill S-217, An Act to establish the Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young Persons in Canada. The signatories to this proposal were consulted extensively in the development of that bill, and are pleased to see many of our contributions reflected in the version currently before the Senate. The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society has identified a number of concerns with Bill S-217, but has also proposed reasonable amendments that we hope will be addressed in committee. We encourage the federal government to work nation-to-nation, respecting the self-governance rights of Indigenous peoples and their self-determined goals for children, when considering both Bill S-217 and this proposal. Assuming that, we the undersigned would support the Senator's bill and encourage the government to adopt it and seek cross-party support to pass it through Parliament.

Over the course of 12 years, there have been no less than five previous private member's bills advocating for an Office of the Commissioner for Children and Youth, tabled by the Liberals (three times), Conservatives (once) and the NDP (once). Two seminal reports (produced by Senator Landon Pearson, and The Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights) reiterated a call for this long overdue action.

The CRC has repeatedly called upon Canada to fulfil its obligations under the Convention to establish a federal Children's Ombudsman/Commissioner. [4] The CRC's next report is expected in 2021. The time to act is now.

Young people are a significant population that has very limited influence in government, despite the many government decisions that affect them, directly and indirectly, today and long into their future. Never has this been truer than during this global pandemic. Children have unique concerns and rights. They deserve a champion for their voices, to bring to parliament the insight that only this population holds.

[4] Concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic report of Canada, adopted by the Committee at its sixty-first session (17 September - 5 October 2012).

APPENDIX A: About Us

Canadian Paediatric Society

The Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS) is the national association of paediatricians, committed to working together to advance the health of children and youth by nurturing excellence in health care, advocacy, education, research and support of its membership. Founded in 1922, the CPS is a voluntary professional association that represents more than 3,600 paediatricians, paediatric subspecialists, paediatric residents, and others who work with and care for children and youth.

Children's Healthcare Canada

Children's Healthcare Canada is a national association representing health service delivery organizations serving children and youth. Our members include all sixteen Canadian Children's Hospitals, Regional Health Authorities, Community Hospitals, Rehabilitation and Children's Treatment Centres, and Home Care Agencies. Through purposeful partnerships, we accelerate excellence and innovation in health systems caring for children and youth.

Pediatric Chairs of Canada

The Pediatric Chairs of Canada is the national network of academic leaders in pediatric medicine strengthening the future of pediatrics and improving the health outcomes of all children, by working together to advance evidence-based care, education and research.

UNICEF Canada

UNICEF is the world's farthest-reaching humanitarian organization for children and is active in 190 countries and territories. UNICEF Canada works with governments, civil society organizations, the private sector and children and youth, in Canada and internationally, to advance their rights and well-being.

APPENDIX B: Important Canadian milestones relating to a National Commission for Children and Youth

1979 | The Commission for the International Year of the Child recommended that “children should be a first priority” for any state and that a mechanism must be devised to support that.

1999 | Senator Landon Pearson and Liberal MP Karen Kraft-Sloan co-drafted a discussion paper, “A Commissioner for Canada’s Children”

2007 | The Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights published a report, Children: The Silenced Citizens, with a recommendation to establish a National Children’s Commissioner.

2008 | Reaching for the Top: A Report by the Advisor on Healthy Children and Youth, Dr. K. Kellie Leitch, was conducted on behalf of the Government of Canada

2012 | Private Member’s Bill (C-420) is introduced in Parliament by Marc Garneau (Lib)

2015 | Private Member’s Bill (C-701) is introduced in Parliament by Irwin Cotler (Lib)

2019 | Private Member’s Bill (C-441) is introduced in Parliament by Anne Minh-Thu Quach (NDP)

2019 | Private Member’s Bill (C-451) is introduced in Parliament by K. Kellie Leitch (Con)

2020 | Senate Public Bill (S-217) is introduced in the Senate by Rosemary Moodie (Independent)