



## **Response to the Standing Committee on Health**

### **Study on Children's Health**

#### **Overview:**

The Young Canadians Roundtable on Health (YCRH), a national organization representing the voices of Canadian Youth, is pleased to submit this report to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health's Study on Children's Health.

Children and youth have been heavily impacted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From school closures and canceled graduations, to social and physical distancing from friends, they have had to give up a lot of milestones and traditions.. The effects of the pandemic are not short term - they will be felt for years to come. Youth in Canada need our support to help them recover. We are youth that have lived expertise with the struggles of living through a pandemic, and have lost out on some of the most important parts of our development.

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, children in Canada were experiencing negative impacts on their health and wellbeing. According to the 2020 UNICEF Report Card. Canada ranks 30th in child wellbeing out of 38 and 31st in child mental health out of 38 of the richest countries around the world. These numbers will only get worse within vulnerable populations.

The Inspiring Healthy Futures initiative has highlighted many priorities that the government should focus on to prevent further negative implications for children and youth. There is a need to ensure that equitable child, youth, and family health and well-being is at the forefront of this

response. Without child and youth recovery, there will not be any form of economic recovery and no feasible future for Canadians.

### **Global Themes:**

The Inspiring Healthy Futures initiative considered four global themes to guide action during this process; interdependence, equity, collaboration, and youth & family participation.

There is a need for a multidimensional approach to **all actions**, rather than those that are at different times and in different ways, that can be accomplished in ways that are connected with one another. For example, relating physical health outcomes and mental health outcomes are intersectional.

There is also a need to ensure this response is **equitable**. Children and youth in Indigenous and marginalized communities, gender-diverse and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, and those with disabilities and complex medical conditions are at severe disadvantages. All children and youth need to be prioritized in ways that are beneficial to all, but take into account the needs of different populations.

**Collaboration** is key to any successful actions that are proposed to help fix a problem. Working with other like-minded organizations, and those who present different perspectives than others, will have a greater impact than doing the work with a one-way view. The community wants to be able to have access to different systems, to implement these actions in ways that will benefit everyone, not just a select few.

Finally, **children and youth themselves need to be included** during this process as a form of co-creation; not only at the end, but throughout the entire operation. They are eager and crucial partners in designing and carrying out meaningful actions that will benefit not only the present, but the future as well. Their lived expertise during this time will shed light on how best to support young people moving forward.

### **Key Findings:**

There were **five keys findings** that were presented out of the first stage of the Inspiring Healthy Futures initiative; the basics of life, feeling love and a sense of belonging and having opportunities for unstructured leisure and play, their voices being heard, accessible mental and physical healthcare services, and racial, gender and structural equity. These came from consultations with:

- Youth
- Parents
- Educators
- Policy influencers
- Caregivers
- Advocates
- Sector leaders
- Health and community service providers
- Researchers
- Think tanks
- Community leaders
- Youth-serving agencies

#### **The basics of life:**

There are many facets to be considered in terms of everyday life; reliable income, food security, good housing, a safe environment, clean water, learning and literacy, development support and childcare, and access to the internet are all needed to live comfortably.

#### **Accessible mental and physical healthcare services:**

There is a need for easily navigated and designed mental and physical healthcare services to support the unique needs of each child, youth and family. The use of an integrated services delivery approach will allow schools, community agencies and service providers to collaborate in order to provide the best services possible to our children and youth.

#### **Their voices need to be heard:**

Children, youth and families cannot thrive if they feel their voices are not heard, and if they have no hope for the future. They need to be involved during policy development, in order to maximize the best possible outcome for these individuals and that they are supported.

#### **Feeling love and a sense of belonging, and having opportunities for unstructured leisure and play:**

There is a need for access to outdoor recreation and green space. For this to happen, families and young people need support. The government needs to provide funding opportunities to support these spaces. A study conducted by Gladwell., et al (2013) has shown that outdoor activities benefit physical and mental health.

## **Racial, gender and structural equity**

It's not possible to talk about thriving futures for children and youth without fully engaging in racial justice and gender equity. There is a need to incorporate equity into all solutions to help children and youth across the country; they all need support to come back from the pandemic.

### **Priorities:**

This initiative has highlighted **five priorities for recommendation** that the government needs to focus on when supporting children and youth.

#### **1. Mobilized Communities around Children, Youth and Families:**

There is a need to create a national child, youth and family hub, that will connect a community of care spanning research, policy, systems, advocacy, and services. Not only is this an opportunity to engage researchers and policy makers, but children and youth as well, where they can provide their lived expertise during these processes. There is a need to build capacity for anti-racist practices, decolonizing structures, and working in full partnership with underserved communities such as Indigenous populations. Mobilization of community action around child, youth and family-oriented needs for COVID-19 recovery, including child, youth and parent/caregiver mental health, is essential to coming back stronger and healthier post-pandemic. By supporting innovation in an expanded reach of youth engagement and participation opportunities, children and youth will feel valued for their contributions and change. They will feel as if they are making a difference and their voices are being heard.

#### **2. Cross- Canada Strategic Goals:**

Research needs to be recognized as a critical part informing the environment for family and child health and well-being. Canadians need to have the opportunity to be engaged in and see and feel the impact of the research, with the evidence being integrated into Canadian policy and practice. This process will lead to a sustainable and integrated research sphere. There is also a need to work in partnership with the community, to identify the most pressing health concerns, and address them through new knowledge generation and knowledge sharing.

#### **3. Child Centered Policies and Structures:**

The government needs to ensure that every child, youth and family can access high-speed internet, especially in rural areas and Indigenous communities. The introduction of the Canada

Youth Guarantee will allow youth to get support to reconnect with their school and recover their learning; every youth in transition will be assured a place in post-secondary education, training or employment until the pre-pandemic rate of youth not in employment, education, or training is reached; and youth in care have broad and flexible transitional supports.

#### **4. Schools and Communities as Health and Wellbeing Hubs**

Schools need to be recognized as child and youth development centers, while ensuring that every child has access to child care, quality early learning, developmental and social care, and access to necessary diagnosis, therapy and early intervention, and that parents are fully engaged as partners and peer supporters. Every child needs to have access to a free and healthy meal every school day. This can only be achieved with the introduction of a National School Food program, cost shared between the federal and provincial governments. Education departments across the country also need to provide culturally responsive Mental Health First Aid training to every teacher, youth service provider and parent, to ensure all young people are supported in a time of crisis.

#### **5. Accessible, Adaptable, Health and Well-being Systems**

There needs to be a consistent approach to health, where the child's physical and mental health needs are delivered through a fully integrated system of care. The access to child and youth mental health services, child development services, and services for children, youth and families with disabilities and medical complexities needs to be timely and appropriate. Every Indigenous child, youth and family should have had a stable and sustainable community source of clean water at this point in time and needs to be made more of a priority than it has been. This is crucial to positive health and wellbeing for Indigenous peoples.

#### **Summary:**

The Government of Canada has had an inconsistent response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes the lack of support for children and youth. While the vaccination program has been successful for young people, there is much more to consider when helping them to recover.

The Inspiring Healthy Futures initiative lays out the specific key priorities that the government needs to focus on that will support young people coming out of the pandemic. With physical and

mental health being of the utmost concern, the federal government needs to focus on providing more research opportunities on best practices, funding for this research and support programs, and youth engagement opportunities to let children and youth have their voices heard.

We intend to hold the government accountable for these actions moving forward and expect regular updates and communications on the progress that is made or any obstacles that may prevent changes from happening. Young people are future leaders and want to ensure a strong and healthy future not only for us, but for future generations as well.

### **About Us:**

**The Young Canadians Roundtable on Health (YCRH)** was created in 2013 based on one of the recommendations in The Sandbox Project's founding report, *Reaching for the Top*. The recommendation focused on creating a national advisory of youth leaders to participate in decision-making around child and youth health. The YCRH's activities happen across Canada, bringing together as many youth perspectives as possible. The YCRH operates in a unique model within The Sandbox Project, while being youth-run and youth-led. YCRH leadership has the authority to make decisions and coordinate youth health projects independent of Sandbox approval.

### **Reference:**

Gladwell, V. F., Brown, D. K., Wood, C., Sandercock, G. R., & Barton, J. L. (2013). The great outdoors: how a green exercise environment can benefit all. *Extreme physiology & medicine*, 2(1), 3. <https://doi.org/10.1186/2046-7648-2-3>