



Children's
Healthcare
Canada

Santé
des enfants
Canada



Pediatric Chairs of Canada
Directeurs de pédiatrie du Canada

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget

February 19, 2021



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Children's Healthcare Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada recommend:

1

The Government of Canada invest \$450M to improve timely access to child and youth mental health services.

2

The Government of Canada invest \$62M to advance a robust maternal, child and youth health research agenda.

3

The Government of Canada take action (invest as required) to ensure timely access and distribution of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines for children.

About Us

Children's Healthcare Canada is a national association representing all sixteen children's hospitals in Canada, as well as other health service delivery organizations that serve children and youth including community hospitals, rehabilitation hospitals, children's treatment centres, regional health authorities, palliative care, respite, and home care agencies.

The Pediatric Chairs of Canada represents the Department Heads of Pediatrics within Canada's 17 medical schools.

Introduction

The Government of Canada, working in close collaboration with public health officials, have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic at record speed, adapting policies and investments to ever-changing circumstances. But one key group has been left behind: our kids. While it's true that children are amongst those least likely to fall gravely ill due to COVID-19, the physical and mental health of Canada's 8 million children and youth has suffered tremendously over the past twelve months. For many, the effects of this pandemic will last a lifetime.

As Canada embarks on the long road to recovery, we believe children must be a central focus. From a health perspective, putting children first means meeting the growing and urgent demand for timely access to mental health services so that children and youth do not suffer lifelong consequences as the result of delayed assessments, diagnoses and interventions. It means positioning Canada as a world leader with respect to children's health research. And, it means ensuring Canadian children have access to a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine, as soon as it is available.

While many Canadians believe our country is one of the best in which to raise a child, UNICEF reported in 2020 that the health and wellbeing of Canadian children ranked 30th of 38 OECD countries. Not only is our performance relatively poor, Canada's ranking continues to drop. Countries who invest in their children reap tremendous long term economic and social payoffs. The next several weeks and months will be defining times for all Canadians, including our children and youth. The time has come for Canada to invest in the future, and to invest in the health of children and youth.

Detailed Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Government of Canada invest \$450M to improve timely access to child and youth mental health services.

Children, youth and families across this country are facing unparalleled stress and anxiety related to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health measures to limit the transmission of the virus. Parents across Canada are reporting behavioural changes in their children since the onset of COVID-19 ranging from outbursts or extreme irritability to drastic changes in mood, behaviour and personality. With COVID serving as a catalyst, children's hospitals and other health delivery organizations serving children and youth are seeing a surge of visits and admissions related to mental health concerns. Federal leadership is required to urgently build systems capacity to address the demand for services that existed prior to COVID-19, and now to address this growing crisis.

Children's mental health services have been under resourced for decades (Limb, 2017). Prior to the onset of COVID-19, children and youth were experiencing unacceptable delays accessing appropriate mental health services. As of December 2019, nearly 90,000 children were waiting for mental health services across Canada. For some families, the wait was over 30 months (Children's Mental Health Ontario). According to UNICEF, prior to COVID-19, Canada had the third highest rate of youth suicide among 41 rich countries.

Since March 2020, the mental health of children and youth is measurably declining:

- Canada's children's hospitals are reporting on average, double the number of admissions following a suicide attempt (Children's Healthcare Canada, 2021);
- Youth reporting poor mental health are up to four times more likely to report increased substance use since the pandemic began (Statistics Canada, 2020);
- On average, admissions to Canada's children's hospitals have increased three-fold with respect to substance use since the onset of the pandemic (Children's Healthcare Canada, 2021);
- Canada's children's hospital emergency assessments related to eating disorders have increased by 50%; admissions for the same have risen by 63% from the same period last year (Children's Healthcare Canada, 2021);
- Children who identified as a visible minority were more likely than those who identified as white to report poor mental health since the onset of the pandemic (27.8% vs. 22.9%) and symptoms consistent with "moderate" or "severe" generalized anxiety disorder (30.0% vs. 24.2%) (Statistics Canada, 2020).

In the face of increasing demand for services, many jurisdictions are forced to close beds assigned for child and youth mental health to free system resources for COVID-19 patients. In some regions, there has been a 60% reduction in mental health beds for children (Courtney, Watson, & Battaglia (2020)). Additionally, routine primary care and nonemergency mental health care have both decreased in response to public health reductions to “nonessential” services (Courtney, Watson, & Battaglia, 2020), delaying early detection and treatment.

Federal investment of \$450M is urgently required to reduce wait times for mental health services, to expand the range of mental health and addictions services for children with special needs or medical complexity, and to augment crisis support to appropriately care for children, youth and their families, avoiding emergency department visits. Mental health human resource planning will be a necessary and additional step to ensure a sustainable pipeline of providers to meet the growing needs of children and youth. Children’s Healthcare Canada is prepared to collaborate with the federal government to support these efforts to ensure no child or youth is left behind.

Recommendation 2: The Government of Canada invest \$62M to advance a robust maternal, child and youth health research agenda.

Children’s Healthcare Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada commend the federal government for acknowledging the crucial role played by the health research community to address and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on Canadians, including children and youth. The link between a nation’s economic health and the health of its citizens is well established. It is further recognized that health research plays an important role in our collective ability to attain good health and minimize the impact of public health threats such as COVID-19.

Canada has historically achieved significant success, positively contributing to children’s health and disease outcomes internationally. However nearly twelve months into this pandemic, Canadian research leaders are ringing the alarm bells with respect to research and data we simply do not have access to in the Canadian context: Globally, there are peer reviewed publications emerging regarding increases in rates of childhood obesity, decreases in Vitamin D, reversals in gains relative to high school dropout rates, increases in child maltreatment and food insecurity, and increases in suicidal ideation. Without comparable data in the Canadian context, we cannot act swiftly to mitigate these very serious health concerns.

Ring-fenced funding in the amount of \$24M is required to advance research dedicated to children, youth and their families directed by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research

Institute of Human Development, Child and Youth Health and focused on the impacts of COVID-19, but also beyond. This funding will enable:

- Research to underpin the delivery of policy, program and services to address health and wellness priorities defined by the Prime Minister's Youth Council including physical health (physical activity and healthy lifestyles), mental health (destigmatizing mental illness, prioritizing positive mental health and access to affordable quality services), and nurturing relationships with adults and mentors;
- Research evidence focused on addressing early years mental health in the context of family, community and culture. Key research that may be addressed include embedding an early years mental health focus into early learning and childcare settings, equitable access to culturally safe programs and services, scale-up of existing evidence-based programs and enhanced understanding of adverse childhood events and their impacts;
- National clinical trial infrastructure to improve safe and effective formulations/medications for children;
- A research strategy to advance measurable improvement in priorities identified in the UNICEF Report Card 16 (2020) where Canada lags behind other countries (adolescent suicide, immunization rates, child mortality, and unhealthy weights). As of 2020, Canada ranks 30th of 38 OECD countries with respect to health and wellbeing outcomes of children and youth;
- Infrastructure to support the implementation of a framework to measurably improve health and wellbeing outcomes of children, youth and families, generated by the pan-Canadian, cross-sector Inspiring Healthy Futures: #WeCANforKids initiative.

\$8M of federal investment is required to facilitate the Canadian Health Survey of Children and Youth (CHSCY) conducted by Statistics Canada. The CHSCY includes data on a nationally representative sample of ~45,000 children and adolescents based on the Canadian Child Benefit File (the most comprehensive sampling frame for children available in Canada). This data is ideally suited to serve as a pre-pandemic baseline assessment of the health of Canadian children and youth.

Leveraging this sample by conducting two follow-up rounds of collection (2021 and 2023) will provide urgently needed high-quality data to inform policy responses and resource allocations – and to assess what is and isn't working. Importantly, the CHSCY is well placed to inform responses for those who are disproportionately affected by this global pandemic.

And finally, Children's Healthcare Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada urge the federal government to fulfill their pledge of \$30M (previously committed in the 2019 Liberal Party campaign platform) to advance childhood cancer research, and develop a long term strategy to ensure sustainable funding for this life saving work.

Recommendation 3: The Government of Canada take action (invest as required) to ensure timely access and distribution of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines for children.

To date, there are not yet clinical trials underway in Canada to test the safety and efficacy of a COVID-19 vaccine for children under the age of 16. These trials are ongoing in many other countries. In an effort to protect Canada's children from potential harms related to the virus, we must have a strategy in place to accelerate the timelines associated with approving foreign-sourced COVID-19 vaccines deemed safe and effective for children. Further, the federal government must make securement and distribution of vaccines safe and effective for this country's 8 million children and youth (22% of our total population, and growing) a top priority.

Ensuring an appropriate and timely supply and distribution of these vaccines will minimize disruptions in children's education, ensure children are best protected from the virus itself, and mitigate the potential transmission of COVID-19 from children to family members, including frail elderly grandparents or siblings with medically complex conditions.

With respect to domestic COVID-19 vaccine production, the federal government is urged to incentivize manufacturers to expedite pediatric data collection during clinical trials, to ensure ongoing availability of a safe and effective vaccine for children and youth.

Children's Healthcare Canada is prepared to collaborate with the federal government to support these efforts to ensure Canada's children and youth are vaccinated as soon as safely possible.

Conclusion

The Government of Canada has called COVID-19 the crisis of our generation. The economic and health impacts of this pandemic will be felt for years to come – and for children and youth, most likely a lifetime.

As the government of Canada considers taking immediate, significant, and decisive action to support Canadians, Children's Healthcare Canada and the Pediatric Chairs of Canada urge you to consider the unique needs of 8 million children and youth. Canada's children do not have the luxury of waiting for this pandemic to pass. Their needs are urgent, they are measurable, and they are well within scope to address at the federal level. Indeed, investing in our children is not only a moral imperative, it is an economic one too.

References are available upon request.

Appendix A: Endorsements

These recommendations have been endorsed by the following organizations:

- UNICEF Canada
- Goodman Pediatric Formulations Centre of the CHU Sainte-Justine
- Children First Canada
- The Sandbox Project
- Pediatric Nurses Interest Group (PedNIG)
- The Children's Healthcare Canada Family Network