

# research snapshot

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## Canada Lags in Improving Living Conditions that Impact Children's Health

### What is this research about?

The social determinants of health are the living conditions that shape the health of children and their families. For example, a lack of food, quality housing, and health care can pose a threat to children's health. It can also limit the ability of parents to nurture their children's intellectual, emotional, and social development.

Public policy has a critical impact on the social determinants of the health of children. Governments, after all, shape the living conditions of families. They influence the distribution of income and make available affordable housing and education. Governments also shape the employment security and working conditions of parents through legislation and regulation. Canada, however, lags behind most wealthy nations in providing a responsive public policy in areas like income equality and housing.

### What did the researcher do?

Dennis Raphael, Professor in the School of Health Policy & Management at York University, set out to explore the health of Canada's children in a four-part study. In the third part, Raphael looked at how Canada compares to other countries in developing public policy that impacts the living conditions of children and, in turn, their health. He also offered some suggestions for policies that would improve these conditions.

### What you need to know:

Canada lags far behind other wealthy, industrialized nations when it comes to public policy that improves the living conditions that shape the health of children.

### What did the researcher find?

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Canada is among the highest spenders on health care. But it does a poor job of providing benefits and support in other areas. Indeed, Canada ranks very low when it comes to offering income support to the working-age population. It also ranks low on social services. In terms of an active labour policy – which aims to foster jobs – Canada ranks 19th of 29 wealthy nations.

In terms of a strong family policy – which aims to support and nurture families – Canada lags far behind. Canada ranks 32nd out of 37 nations in public spending on family benefits. It ranks 36th of 37 in public spending on child care and early childhood education services. It ranks 13th of 25 nations in parental leave.

In terms of early childhood services, the OECD recently considered 10 benchmarks for early childhood services. Canada met only one of the benchmarks, sharing the lowest ranking with Ireland. Nations that achieve the highest number of

benchmarks are those with the lowest infant mortality and low birth weight rates.

### How can you use this research?

Policymakers need to acknowledge the impact that public policy has on the health of Canadian children. Canada, as a liberal welfare state, has a tradition of reducing the role that government plays in the lives of its citizens. It has favoured the rights of the individual, emphasizing the market as a central institution. As a result, Canada has limited the sort of policy which, in social democratic welfare states like Sweden, makes more resources available to the public. Canada, however, needs to spend more on improving the living conditions that shape the health of children. It can begin to do so by following some of the proposals of the Canadian Association of Food Banks and Campaign 2000. In general, these proposals encourage policymakers to increase benefits and supports for disadvantaged Canadians and their children in areas like employment, education, and housing, among others. They include:

- An enhanced child benefit for low-income families to a maximum of \$5,100 (2007 dollars) per child
- Restore and expand eligibility for employment insurance
- Increase federal work tax credits to \$2,400 per year
- Establish a federal minimum wage of \$10 per hour (2007 dollars)
- Create a national housing plan including substantial federal funding for social housing
- Establish a system of early childhood education and care that is affordable and available to all children (zero to 12 years of age)
- Include a strong equity plan to ensure equal opportunities for all children and address systemic barriers

- Develop appropriate poverty reduction targets, timetables and indicators for Aboriginal families, irrespective of where they live, in coordination with First Nations and urban Aboriginal communities.

### About the Researcher

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### Keywords

Canada, Social determinants, Living conditions, Public policy, Health care, Family benefits

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