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# 1

## Introduction

### A CHILDREN'S RIGHTS: RIGHT IN PRINCIPLE, RIGHT IN PRACTICE

Canada is focused on the challenges of an aging population. The percentage of the population under age 18 is projected to decline from one in four persons in 2001 to one in five persons by 2021. After 2015, the number of persons over 65 retiring from the workplace will be greater than the number of persons under 15 preparing to enter the workforce.<sup>1</sup> Canada's economic and social well-being will depend on contributions from those who are children now. While the focus on aging tends to shift attention and resources from children to seniors, it is strategically important for Canada's future to develop the full potential of every child.

The best way to realize the full potential of every child is implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter Convention). It ensures that the best interests of children are given priority and that all children have opportunities to develop their skills and fully contribute to society. Realizing the rights of children is not only a moral and legal obligation; it is a good economic and social investment for all Canadians.

Although the basic needs of the majority of children in Canada are met, there are significant gaps in fulfilling the rights of all children. Evidence shows growing inequity between children. That calls for particular attention to vulnerable groups of children. A growing percentage of the population under age 18 is in groups that need focused attention, such as Aboriginal children and immigrant children. Fragmentation of policies for children between different government departments and different levels of government increases the risk of children falling through cracks.

Centering public policies on the whole child, using the Convention as a framework, would benefit Canada's children and the country as a whole. To develop the full potential of every child, Canada needs to pay attention to three major areas:

- 1 **Put systemic mechanisms in place to implement children’s rights across Canada;**
- 2 **Take action on the recommendations that come from monitoring reviews; and**
- 3 **Pay attention to vulnerable groups and the specific issues in this report.**

To help Canada improve its performance, the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children (CCRC) collaborated with more than thirty civil society organizations and individual experts to compile a community-based analysis of progress on children’s rights in Canada. For each theme, this report highlights important data and key issues. It also makes recommendations for action. This report is supported by detailed research reports available for public use through the CCRC website, at [www.rightsofchildren.ca](http://www.rightsofchildren.ca).

## **B DEVELOPING THE REPORT**

### **Preface**

The Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children (CCRC) thanks the many organizations and individuals who contributed to the three-year process of preparing a collective assessment of implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Canada. Each contribution, too many to name individually, adds value to the report and to the on-going process of engagement on children’s rights in Canada.

The first round of discussion, starting in 2007, identified priorities. Research, analysis, and discussion of specific themes followed. Volunteer research groups on each theme were facilitated by leaders with expertise in that theme. During 2010–11, draft reports were posted on the website for public review, critical analysis, and feedback, to enlarge the circle of engagement. Various initiatives to engage young people were included by CCRC partners at all stages of the process. The CCRC also used discussion sessions at public meetings and input through electronic means to tap into a national community of interest.

This report will be submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child for consideration in its review of Canada’s combined *Third and Fourth Reports* on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Canada was allowed to combine its *Third and Fourth Reports* because of delays in the reporting process. For the CCRC, this review is time for serious attention and action on children’s rights in Canada.

This report is one stop on the journey, not the end of the road. The CCRC is committed to continuing action on the issues and recommendations in this report. We invite you to join our efforts in whatever way you can. By working together we can achieve the goal of realizing the rights of all children in Canada. As this report shows, making children’s rights a top priority will be good for children, adults, and Canada.

The Board of the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children

### **Acknowledgements**

While we cannot name each person who contributed to this report, we want to acknowledge those who volunteered to lead on specific themes or aspects of this project. For the survey of young people, thanks go to Dr. Katherine Covell and the team at the Child Rights Center of the University of Cape Breton. A diverse group of young people gathered in three consultations in August through October 2011 to provide input about children’s rights in Canada. Some of their contributions, which remain anonymous to protect the participants’ identities, are included as quotations throughout this report. Thanks go to Tara Collins, Sarah Stevenson, Alana Kapell, the host organizations and the young people who participated in discussions of their priorities. Thanks to the National Youth in Care Network for conducting a national consultation process with young people in care, facilitated by Yvonne Andrews and a team of youth leaders. Thanks to the Kairos Aboriginal Affairs Circle and Cindy Blackstock for facilitating engagement on the rights of indigenous children. For leadership on the right to health, thanks go to a team of experts in children’s health, including Dr. Sue Bennett, Dr. Robin Williams, Dr. Nicholas Steinmetz, Dr. Lee Ford-Jones, and Ms. Lee-Ann Chapman. For early childhood development and care, a joint effort was sponsored by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, led by Lynell Anderson and Susan Harney. Monitoring trends in criminal justice were Emily Chan, Agnes Samler, and the young people associated with Justice for Children and Youth and Defence for Children International Canada. Lisa Wolff led a systematic analysis of factors that affect the right to be free from violence, with assistance from the research team at UNICEF Canada and the research network of PREVNet Canada. The first systematic analysis of how Canada implements the right to play was facilitated by the International Play Association Canada, led by Dr. Pierre Harrison, Dr. Jane Hewes, Kim Sanderson, and Valerie Fronczek. Drawing on a continuous monitoring effort, Lisa Wolff compiled the assessment of progress on the right to education, with input from UNICEF Canada’s national network of children’s rights educators. The International Bureau for Children’s Rights did extensive research to prepare the first alternative report on implementation of the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. Thanks to the Canadian Council for Refugees, who provided an assessment of respect for the rights of immigrant and refugee children and launched its own public education initiative to complement this report. Thanks to Anna MacQuarrie and the Canadian Association for Community Living, who drew on years of community engagement to assess progress in realizing the rights of children with disabilities. To assess progress in implementing the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, Samantha Ponting and Kathy Vandergrift drew on the on-going work of the Children and Armed Conflict Working Group in Canada. Thanks to Sara Austin, Sarah Stevenson, Michael Montgomery, and Kathy Vandergrift for a combined effort to assess children’s rights in Canada’s International Development program. Adrienne Montani and members of First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition drew on years of research on child poverty and recent research on child labour in Canada to contribute on these themes. Thanks to Sandra Scarth, who brought years of engagement in adoption to assess progress in realizing the rights to family, culture, and identity.

For the second round of engagement, thanks go to all the people who reviewed and commented on draft reports, including: CCRC members who participated in two AGM discussions on draft reports; members of the Interdisciplinary Research Laboratory on the Rights of the Child at the University of Ottawa who organized a meeting to provide expert review of draft reports; Marvin Bernstein of UNICEF Canada for suggestions on several drafts; and the First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, who provided a provincial perspective to preparation of the report.