

Commentary  
**The Laurent Commission's Report:  
Gaps and Way Forward**

Hala Mreiwed, PhD  
Vice-Chair, CCRC

The death of a seven-year-old child from Granby, Québec in April 2019 led to major concerns and questions regarding Québec's youth protection department (DPJ) as well as the existing policies intended to protect children and youth. In response, a Special Commission on the Rights of Children and Youth Protection (CSDEPJ) was mandated by the Québec government to examine youth protection services, identify issues and obstacles, and recommend changes and actions for the way forward.

The tragic death of more children within the months that followed further exposed the problems *with* and *within* the system, and the need for immediate and diverse/context-specific action, training, support, and services as well as children's rights education, accountability, and clear consequences for violations of these rights. It is not acceptable to keep putting band aids on a system that requires a complete change from its policies to education, staff training, support services and funding.

In response to a recommendation to the Commission's preliminary report in November 2020, the first step taken was the creation of the position of a National Director of Youth Protection and the appointment of Catherine Lemay as its director in March 2021. Her mandate includes reviewing youth protection services, the laws that govern it, and the roles of all those involved in the process across the various stages. The next step is an action plan to implement the recommendations of the [Laurent Commission's report](#), which was made public on 3 May 2021.

Some of the major recommendations with further sub-recommendations include:

- Establishing a Commissioner for the Well-Being and Rights of Children
- Appointing a Deputy Commissioner for Indigenous Children
- Adopting a children right's charter which affirms, amongst other key points, that: Québec is bound by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); children have rights and freedoms; and any corporal punishment of a child constitutes a harm to the physical and psychological integrity of children
- Improving prevention through support, services, monitoring and promotion; ensuring that youth protection is the last resort
- Working together to better support children and their families
- Improving intervention in youth protection
- Listening to children and taking into account what they want and need
- Developing a collaborative, participatory and adapted judicial process
- Humanizing rehabilitation services
- Supporting youth entering adulthood

- Action for Indigenous children
- Adapting services to ethnocultural communities
- Meeting the needs of English-speaking children
- Recognizing the impacts of family conflict and domestic violence on children
- Valuing, supporting, and recognizing workers
- Investing in delivering the right service, at the right time

## Gaps

While the report brings to the fore essential key findings and recommendations, areas that need further attention include but are not limited to the following:

- Immediate solutions for children, youth and families that are presently in the system who can no longer wait.
- Recommendations that not only recognize the overrepresentation of Black children and youth in DYP but outline concrete reforms and measures to ensure protection of their rights, access to services, and support that is specific to their contexts and needs. The Centre for Research-Action on Race Relations (CRARR) notes in its [press release](#):  

The 550-page report found that Black children are significantly overrepresented in the DYP. However, despite honing in on the needs of the Black communities in Quebec, the report lumps Black children and families with immigrants and other ethnocultural groups (or “cultural communities”). In addition, the words “systemic racism” are avoided, leading to concerns that the root causes of the overrepresentation of Black and other racialized children will be overlooked in upcoming reforms.
- Strategies to inform children and youth about their rights. The report acknowledges that rights are essential and that Quebec is bound by the CRC; as per Article 42 of the CRC, children have the right to know their rights.
- To place children at the centre and have their best interests at the core of all work, their voices must be heard. Without their voices, experiences and involvement in decisions that will impact their lives, the concept becomes merely symbolic. How will children and youth become involved in the process as calls to such involvement are not new? Who will monitor and ensure accountability? This is also essential in the case of children with disabilities whose voices are often muted as decisions are made on their behalf claiming to be in their best interests.

## Way Forward

To answer one of the Commission’s questions; “How can we, together, better protect the children of Quebec?”, we must ensure:

### *Children’s’ rights education (CRE)*

- Evidence shows that rights not only empower their holders but also protect them; however, while the report addresses the importance of respecting and promoting

children's rights, teaching children about their rights, what violations of these rights look like, and where to go if their rights are violated are not outlined. This is a right that must be met to ensure prevention and protection.

- CRE must be a part of the curriculum across grade levels and a part of pre- and in-service education and training as well as ongoing training for all school staff, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, educators, lawyers, families, nurses, doctors, front-line workers, and youth protection staff to name a few.

Without children's rights education, clear reporting mechanisms, access to information, working with community groups and diverse services, problems will continue to arise. Since children's rights education is not a part of the curriculum, the majority of children do not know their rights under domestic and international laws; this needs to be a priority.

### *Implementation – Putting words into action*

Action requires:

- Ensuring that children's voices are heard, their rights respected, and their diverse contexts, abilities and needs are at the core of all decisions and solutions/reforms.
- Engaging and working with children, youth, families, and Indigenous, Black, and racialized community groups and organizations throughout the process. Community-based organizations should be key stakeholders in youth project reforms.
- Transparency at every stage.

When you speak to children and youth who are or were in the system as well as their families/friends/community and those who work in youth protection, they will tell you what the problems are. They know them, have lived them and many are still living them. Not all the issues are new although new issues keep emerging alongside old ones; the lack of support, services, training, and staff shortages (not just in terms of the number of individuals but also diversity) have existed for as long as the system has been in place. This needs to change.

What is needed now is immediate action for children, youth, and families in the system as well as prevention for possible new cases along with a timeline and details for all the actions to be taken – what, when, where, and how. It took two years for the report to come out, how many more years will it take for action? We are talking about the lives of children and youth. A day is too long for some who are presently suffering and struggling to be heard.