

End Canada's failure to protect children

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Repeated failures to protect children from institutional abuse should receive more attention than a Canadian cardinal's chances to become the next Pope. The failure to protect children is at the centre of the class action lawsuits against the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec and the recent class action lawsuit against a Christian school in Saskatoon. The lawsuits in Quebec include almost 300 alleged cases; many of them occurred during the adolescent years, as did the alleged violations in Saskatoon and numerous cases in earlier lawsuits in BC and elsewhere. Add these to the voluminous evidence of abuses within residential and day schools and one has to ask whether the problem is much deeper than isolated incidents by a "few bad apples" in a few places or only an indigenous issue.

It is time for Canada to learn from Australia and Ireland where the failure of institutions to protect children's right to grow up free from violence became the subject of royal commissions. The analysis and recommendations in the reports from these commissions apply in Canada as well. While both Australia and Ireland have made substantive public policy improvements to better protect the rights of children, governments in Canada continue to minimize the problem and double down on the false myth that Canada is a leader in children's rights. Meanwhile, violence against children is pervasive in Canada. In repeated surveys, including Statistics Canada surveys, fully one-third of Canadians report having experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse, or exposure to intimate partner violence during childhood.

Canada's children deserve better. There are no excuses for the continuing failure to fulfill their right to grow up free from violence. More than thirty years ago Canada ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes the right to grow up free from **all** forms of violence.

The recent 5th/6th review of Canada by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child shows that implementation remains weak. Federalism is blamed and children do fall through the cracks between federal and provincial inaction. In 2018 the BC Supreme Court explicitly ruled that provinces have an obligation to prevent abuses of children's rights as well as caring for children without parents or other guardians. Both federal and provincial governments need to make preventing child abuse a higher priority.

We cannot rely on reform within institutions alone. There is improvement in child protection protocols within churches, schools, and community agencies. Based on my years of experience in abuse prevention within churches, a growing focus on reducing risk of legal liability is leading to some positive changes, but it is inadequate without a deeper cultural change toward genuine respect for children as persons with rights. In Canada children are the only group who still lack full legal protection against violence. That has to change.

Now is time to act. Canada just received relevant recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. As a matter of urgency, Canada was asked to implement a national strategy to prevent and combat child abuse, including legislation that explicitly prohibits all forms of violence against all age groups, within the family, in schools, and in other institutions. (see [Concluding Observations from 5th/6th Review of Canada](#), with specific focus on paragraph 25 and 26). Australia's 10 Child Safe Standards would make a good starting point to end the cycles of child abuse that reduce future potential as well as plague Canada's history.