



The well-being of children in wealthy countries: UNICEF Report Card 7¹

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UNICEF Report Card 7: Child poverty in perspective

In February 2007, UNICEF released the seventh publication in its series of Innocenti Report Cards. This series is designed to monitor and compare the performance of countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in securing the rights of their children.

In this report, entitled “*Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries*,” Canada tied with Greece in 12th place out of 21 OECD countries in terms of the well-being of children and adolescents.² No one country ranked at the top of the list for all the dimensions that were included in the report. However, northern European nations such as the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark dominated the top half of the rankings.

The true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends to its children—their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born.³

Dimensions of well-being

Report Card 7 looks at six dimensions of child well-being, drawing upon 40 separate indicators relevant to children’s lives (see Table 1).

The six dimensions of child well-being used in the report are: material well-being, health and safety, educational well-being, family and peer relationships, behaviours and risks, and subjective well-being of young people.

A broader vision of the well-being of children

The purpose of the UNICEF Report Card 7 is to encourage monitoring, allow for comparisons, promote discussion, and implement policies to improve life for children in the OECD countries. The current report takes a broader perspective on the indicators of child well-being than previous UNICEF Report Cards, which used only one dimension, poverty level income, as a proxy measure of overall child well-being. Economic poverty is an important indicator of child well-being, especially if it is prolonged in duration, however the overall well-being of children is increasingly being defined as the result of complex and multidimensional relationships among the developmental needs of the child, the capability of parents and family, and environmental factors.⁴

Each of the six dimensions of child well-being has three components, with each component being calculated from indicators, taken from a variety of sources.⁵ To ensure that indicators are comparable, standard methods were used to collect and analyze data. Some data were from national level compilations and are objective in nature. Taking note of the child's right to be heard, however several dimensions were subjective. For example, one dimension incorporated children's own subjective sense of their well-being, with data being gathered from children 11 years of age and over.

1. Material well-being

The three components of material well-being are:

- relative income poverty,
- households without employment, and
- deprivation.

One of the indicators of deprivation, for example, is the percentage of children reporting that there are fewer than 10 books in their home.

Canada ranks in 6th place for material well-being in children.

2. Health and safety

The three components of health and safety are:

- child health from 0 to 1 year of age,
- preventative health services, and
- safety.

For example, one of the indicators of preventative health services is the percentage of children between the ages of 12 to 23 months who have been immunized against measles, diphtheria and polio.

Canada ranks in 13th place for child health and safety.

3. Educational well-being

The three components of educational well-being are:

- school achievement at age 15,
- ongoing studies after age 15, and
- transition to employment.

For example, countries were compared in terms of school achievement by young people at age 15 in literacy, mathematics and science.

Canada ranks in 2nd place in this dimension, second only to Belgium.

4. Family and peer relationships

The three components of family and peer relationships are:

- family structure,
- family relationships, and
- peer relationships.

One of the components of family structure, for example, is the percentage of children living in single-parent families.

Canada ranks in 18th place for this dimension. Canadian children spend considerably less time with their families, compared to some other OECD countries. Slightly below 50% of Canadian children, for example, reported talking regularly with their parents.

5. Behaviours and risks

The three components of the behaviours and risks dimension are:

- behaviours linked to health,
- behaviours linked to risks, and
- experience of violence.

For example, one of the indicators of risk-prone behaviour is the percentage of 11, 13 and 15 year olds reporting to have used cannabis in the last 12 months. Canada is the only country where the level of cannabis use among 15 year olds is above 40 percent.

Canada ranks in 17th place for this dimension. Paradoxically, although Canada (along with Ireland and the United States) is the country where young people take the most exercise, it also ranks among the countries where rates of obesity are the highest.

6. Subjective well-being

The three components of subjective well-being used in the report are:

- the proportion of youth who rate their own health no more than "fair" or "poor,"
- the proportion who report "liking school a lot," and
- a measure of children's own satisfaction with their lives.

For example, one of the indicators of a lack of personal well-being is the percentage of 15 year olds who reported negative statements such as loneliness and exclusion, etc.

Canada ranks in 15th place for the dimension of subjective well-being in children.

Table 1: Summary table of child well-being in rich countries

		Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4	Dimension 5	Dimension 6
Dimensions of child well-being	Average ranking position (for all 6 dimensions)	Material well-being	Health and safety	Educational well-being	Family and peer relationships	Behaviours and risks	Subjective well-being
Netherlands	4.2	10	2	6	3	3	1
Sweden	5.0	1	1	5	15	1	7
Denmark	7.2	4	4	8	9	6	12
Finland	7.5	3	3	4	17	7	11
Spain	8.0	12	6	15	8	5	2
Switzerland	8.3	5	9	14	4	12	6
Norway	8.7	2	8	11	10	13	8
Italy	10.0	14	5	20	1	10	10
Ireland	10.2	19	19	7	7	4	5
Belgium	10.7	7	16	1	5	19	16
Germany	11.2	13	11	10	13	11	9
Canada	11.8	6	13	2	18	17	15
Greece	11.8	15	18	16	11	8	3
Poland	12.3	21	15	3	14	2	19
Czech Republic	12.5	11	10	9	19	9	17
France	13.0	9	7	18	12	14	18
Portugal	13.7	16	14	21	2	15	14
Austria	13.8	8	20	19	16	16	4
Hungary	14.5	20	17	13	6	18	13
United States	18.0	17	21	12	20	20	-
United Kingdom	18.2	18	12	17	21	21	20

Source: UNICEF (2007). *Child poverty in perspective: an overview of child poverty in rich countries, Report Card Innocenti 7*. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy.

Comments specific to Canada in the UNICEF report

Canada's ranking is relatively high in two dimensions: education (2nd place) and material well-being (6th place). For the other dimensions assessed, the well-being of Canada's children was ranked in the bottom half of the countries surveyed. For example, in the family and peer relations dimension, UNICEF found that Canadian children spend less time with their parents, sharing fewer main meals and talking less regularly with their families, when compared to children in the other countries surveyed. These important factors form the basic emotional bonds between adolescents and their parents, fostering their sense of security, enriching their emotional ties to

Child poverty increasing in wealthy countries

Previous UNICEF Innocenti reports on the well-being of children have taken note of the fact that the Canadian government vowed in 1990 to end child poverty by the year 2000.⁶ In reality, however, the rate of child poverty in Canada has remained the same, and no official position on child poverty has been adopted. Canada's situation is not an isolated case, since child poverty has recently increased in 17 of the 24 OECD countries for which data have been compiled. OECD countries tend to allocate social spending mainly towards retirement and health, to the detriment of funding services that are more specifically related to children and their well-being.

others, and providing them with numerous opportunities to grow, develop and live a healthy life.⁷ Young Canadians are also more prone to risky behaviours (use of cannabis and alcohol, teen pregnancy, bad eating habits) and their subjective perception of their well-being is more negative than children and youth in most other countries surveyed.

Conclusion

Child well-being is a multidimensional concept that is difficult to measure, and even more difficult to compare on an international scale. A careful selection of indicators is essential to ensure uniformity in gathering data from each country, and for optimal data comparison. In the UNICEF Report Card 7, some indicators were not sufficiently addressed or were simply unavailable, such as children's exposure to domestic violence, their mental health and emotional well-being and age and gender differences. In spite of these acknowledged limitations, the 7th Report Card by UNICEF represents a significant advance over any previous international assessment of the global well-being of children.

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- 1 The information in this report is taken from: UNICEF (2007). *Child poverty in perspective: an overview of child poverty in rich countries, Innocenti Report Card 7*. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy.
 - 2 Please note that the following OECD countries did not have sufficient available data to be included in the Report Card: Australia, Iceland, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, New-Zealand, Slovak Republic, South Korea, Turkey.
 - 3 UNICEF (2007). *Child poverty in perspective: an overview of child poverty in rich countries, Innocenti Report Card 7*. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy.
 - 4 Bronfenbrenner, U. (1996). Le modèle Processus-Personne-Contexte-Temps dans la recherche en psychologie du développement: principes, applications et implications. In R. Tessier & G.M. Tarabulsy (Eds.), *Le modèle écologique dans l'étude du développement de l'enfant* (pp. 9–59). Sainte-Foy, Quebec: Presses de l'Université du Québec.
 - 5 Two sources of information widely used in the Report Card are the 2000 and 2003 chapters of the *Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)* by the OECD and the 2001 study by the World Health Organisation on *Health Behaviour in School Aged Children (HBSC)*.
 - 6 UNICEF (2005). *Child Poverty in Rich Countries, Innocenti Report Card 6*. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy.
 - 7 Brown, I., Léveillé, S. & Gough, P. (2005). Is permanence necessary for resilience?: Advice for policy makers. In R.J Flynn, P. M. Dudding & J.G. Barber. (Eds.), *Promoting Resilience in Child Welfare* (pp. 94–114). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.