

A BETTER FUTURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN CANADA

REIMAGINE PLAYBOOK

2024

Youth views about:

EDUCATION
HEALTHCARE
MENTAL HEALTH
RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

A UNICEF Canada
Youth Advocacy Initiative

UNICEF Canada extends our gratitude to:

The young people who contributed to writing this Playbook.

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UNICEF Canada recognizes that our work takes place on Indigenous territories across Turtle Island and pledges to work in reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. UNICEF Canada's national office is situated on the ancestral, traditional territory of many nations including the Huron-Wendat, Petun, Seneca and, most recently, the Mississaugas of the New Credit. This territory is part of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement for all people to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. This territory is also covered by the Upper Canada Treaties. It is home to diverse First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples today, and we are grateful to live and work on this territory.

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For more information about UNICEF Canada:

Call: 1 800 567 4483

Email: info@unicef.ca

ABOUT THIS **PLAYBOOK**

This Playbook represents the work of youth advocates who came together throughout 2024 to learn and share knowledge and skills about their human rights and how to advocate for them. These young people identified four interconnected issues that unite them in their passion for shaping a better country and a reimagined world: **Education, Healthcare, Mental Health** and **Racism and Discrimination**.

Each group statement summarizes how young people are experiencing these issues in Canada and around the world, in their own words. Each section includes recommendations from the youth for decision-makers, adult allies, and other young people on how we can support them in their advocacy. While these words are their own and may not represent positions of UNICEF Canada or our partner organizations in National Child Day, we are proud to provide this platform for the views of young people on the issues that matter to them. Please read and share them widely to amplify youth voices and experiences and help reimagine a better future for young people in Canada.

The Playbook was formally released at the Youth Advocacy Summit on November 20, 2024, in recognition of National Child Day and World Children's Day (November 20).

A digital version of this Playbook is available at
www.unicef.ca/reimagineplaybook 

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SPOTLIGHT: MEGATRENDS AFFECTING THE FUTURE OF CHILDHOOD

UNICEF's 2024 *State of the World's Children* Report discusses how three megatrends (climate change, disruptive technologies and changing demographics) are shaping what it's like to grow up today and the impact they will have on childhood long into the future. Each group was asked to choose the megatrend that they believed would have the most impact on their topic and discuss how the chosen megatrend will affect childhood over the next 25 years.



Climate Change

Significant changes in global temperature, precipitation, wind patterns and other aspects of climate that occur over several decades or longer, associated with more frequent and intense weather-related events like droughts, heat, wildfires, floods and hurricanes/tornadoes. Climate change is also linked to changing habitats for plants, animals, insects and people.



62%

of U-Reporters are very concerned about the impact of climate change.
(JANUARY 2024)



Disruptive Technologies

An innovation that significantly alters the way that consumers, industries or businesses operate. A disruptive technology sweeps away the systems or habits it replaces. It usually brings positive impacts for some and negative impacts for others, which can widen or narrow inequalities. Current disruptive technologies include Artificial Intelligence (AI), social media, and those not even yet invented.



35%

of U-Reporters believe that AI has a positive impact on their daily life and well-being.
(AUGUST 2024)



Changing Demographics

How human populations change over time; changes in population size and structure caused by changes in birth rates, death rates and migration. For example, Canada has an aging population with a growing number of seniors compared to children and younger adults. The birth rate has been steadily falling over the past few generations. Immigration is now the main driver of Canada's population growth, but Indigenous populations are growing faster than other Canadian-born people. These changes come with different demands on public policies and budgets.



64%

of U-Reporters feel like the adults in their lives do not get enough mental health support.
(SEPTEMBER 2022)

SPOTLIGHT: **U-REPORT CANADA**



U-Report is a polling platform developed by UNICEF for youth ages 13 to 24. It provides quick, real-time pulse checks of young people's views about issues they care about; to understand how different groups of youth are affected by decisions, policies, services and events; and to involve youth in decisions that affect them. There are more than 2,000 U-Reporters in Canada, and they reside in every province and territory.

Visit www.ureportcanada.ca for more information and to sign up for U-Report Canada.



A MESSAGE FROM THE YOUTH ADVOCATES

As youth advocates, our voices are not just echoes of the future but calls for the change that we need today. It is time for a new chapter in our shared story, one where the aspirations of young people become the force that drives change.

The future cannot wait – and neither can we.

We wrote the Reimagine Playbook to create a resource for young people who want to have their voices heard and for all people who want to create change. We focused our discussions on **education**, **healthcare**, **mental health**, and **racism and discrimination**.

We discussed what is not often heard and included at tables of decision-makers and policymakers, and what future young people wish to see in Canada and around the world. We shared our unique perspectives and discussed our lived experiences to express our concerns so we could recommend informed solutions to adult allies, decision-makers, and policymakers – because **nothing about us is without us**.

Education: We imagine a Canada where education equips young people with the knowledge and skills to address global issues. We propose a federal education framework where students learn about both domestic and international issues, and feel empowered to advocate for equity and justice on a global scale.

Healthcare: Canadian physicians discovered insulin in 1921, transforming diabetes care globally. However, over 100 years later, children continue to lack access to funding and resources for the diabetes prevention and care they deserve. We address this critical issue by advocating for better treatment, technologies and funding to ensure that all children and youth with diabetes receive high-quality, age-appropriate care.

Mental Health: Mental health touches every part of our lives, yet many of us struggle to talk about it or get help when we need it. Everyone should have immediate access to the mental health support they need, regardless of their background or condition. Our goals are to make sure no one is left behind and break down stigma around mental health.

Racism and Discrimination: In 2024, workplaces remain the most common settings of racism and discrimination for Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) in Canada, ranging from interpersonal discrimination to structural racism that causes economic disparities. As Canada grows more diverse, we need drastic changes for the children and youth entering the workforce to ensure that workers of all ages and backgrounds can thrive, free from the stressors of discrimination and racial oppression.

To the readers of this Playbook: **Now that you have this resource, what will you do with it?**

Yours truly,

**The Youth of UNICEF Canada's Youth
Advocacy Program 2024**

EDUCATION



The Current State of Education

Today's youth are the generation of globalization. With 1.8 billion youth aged 10 to 24 alive right now, the global population of youth is the largest in history (UNFPA, 2014). Youth are more interconnected now than ever, making the ability to interact with social issues in regions across the world much more accessible.

Canada is a multicultural nation, and our education should reflect this. We do not have to look outside of our own borders to find issues of inequity. Yet, learning about broader issues of sustainable development will allow young leaders to act on issues in both the Canadian and broader global context. Educating Canadian high school students on global issues, guided by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is essential for fostering global citizenship and awareness in today's interconnected world. Learning of the privileges we hold as young people in Canada is critical to developing tomorrow's leaders. If we are better informed about the complex areas that work together to build peace and prosperity, we can be better global allies.

Section 93 of the *Constitutional Act* of 1867 states that each Canadian has the right to education (Government of Canada, 2024). It is our duty to ensure that what is being taught prepares and empowers students to go into the world and address the gaps they consider important. Teaching the new generation about global affairs, such as access to quality education, climate change, social justice and equity, will lead to youth standing in solidarity with those most affected by social unrest and inequalities. Currently, there is no standard model in place that ensures youth are learning about key issues that impact us all in some capacity. This leaves us unprepared to tackle such issues, many of which will fall onto our generation to resolve. Learning about climate change, gender equity and social justice in classrooms can offer us the necessary guidance to enact meaningful change. A federal framework will give the tools needed to facilitate activism and change in the world (Oxfam, 2015).

How Young People Are Experiencing Issues Surrounding Education

Large-scale issues such as climate change and gender equity can feel so complex that youth do not know how to begin engaging with these topics. Many youth realize the conundrum we are in but feel helpless. Canada's physical geography can also inhibit youth from participating in global engagement. Youth commonly feel that they are too far removed from the issues at hand or that an issue does not pertain to them as they do not experience the direct impacts of inequitable development. Youth may also feel too overwhelmed to begin advocacy work, for example, as with eco-anxiety related to climate change (BJPsych Bulletin, 2021). Climate anxiety can motivate young people to undertake environmental activism, or it can hinder eco-action through a sense of hopelessness when confronted with the impacts of environmental degradation.

A strong education in global citizenship and engagement can help mitigate these feelings. The challenges of working in global development can negatively impact the mental health of those in the field. However, if youth receive guidance on strategies to prevent burn out, fatigue and a sense of hopelessness, they will be better equipped to continue with their goals and ambitions. Globalization has tightly intertwined us with nations across the globe. These links do not remove us from challenges outside our borders, such as conflict zones, because we will now forever be intertwined through economic, social and political processes. Now is the time to stand in solidarity with those more disadvantaged than us.

Lived experiences are shaped by so many factors: geographical location, our community's political landscapes, ability to access support from our public institutions, racial identity and gender. How these and other factors define our identity varies across borders. Different groups of young people are affected disproportionately by global issues, often reflecting the factors that shape our lived experiences. The ways in which people are impacted by an issue within the SDG frameworks indicate broader patterns of inequality.

First, it is necessary to learn about systemic inequalities and how they are found within societies. For instance, Indigenous youth are marginalized in Canada due to the nation's history of colonization and oppression of Indigenous communities. Across the globe, youth with marginalized identities may face greater impacts from any given social issue, as their communities are already subjected to systemic inequalities. Youth in marginalized and under-resourced areas often lack access to educational resources that promote an understanding of global issues or sustainable development, limiting their capacity to engage in solutions. Moreover, gender plays a significant role; young women, especially in underprivileged or developing contexts, may face additional barriers such as gender discrimination, which can limit their participation in discussions and decision-making about global challenges. These are all plausible ways youth face challenges in their efforts to learn about global citizenship.

Knowing that education in Canada is well-established and a national priority, we are calling for a focus on learning about social justice and equity in our classrooms. This stems from the opportunity we have to foster open and safe conversations on topics that youth understand to be critically important, within Canada and internationally. Youth in Canada have the right to access education, so it is our duty to ensure we offer them programming that will support their paths to global citizenship.



I do not think education is equitably accessible in Canada because there continues to be many groups of young people who experience inequality and discrimination within societal institutions, including schools"

– U-Reporter, September 2024



EDUCATION RECOMMENDATIONS

YOUNG PEOPLE

Youth have the ability to interact with global issues in various scales and capacities: in school, in their communities and by supporting initiatives abroad. Global engagement to become a better global citizen will take forms in many contexts, by youth within Canada and across the globe who care about making the world more equitable. It is essential that we act collectively, as it is all of us youth, not bound by geography, who will lead us to a more prosperous future.

- **Advocate for policy change:** Engage with educational policymakers, school boards and local governments to advocate for global topics to be included in school curricula. Youth can shape their schooling to include topics they consider essential.
- **Join SDG-related clubs:** Youth can take an active part in ensuring that students are aware of global citizenship by starting SDG clubs in schools. In these clubs, youth can raise awareness, advocate and mentor their peers about SDGs and global citizenship.
- **Encourage peer-to-peer education:** Youth-led peer education is a powerful approach to promoting SDG awareness and global citizenship. Learning about the lived experiences of other youth and what drives them to be passionate about a particular topic can facilitate supportive learning environments.
- **Use social media and digital platforms:** In today's digital age, social media provides a powerful tool for youth to raise awareness and inspire action around the SDGs. Using the digital space to learn about inequities and initiatives being taken to address them will help Canadian youth shape their advocacy and leadership skills.

ADULT ALLIES

Adult allies can play a key role in supporting the integration of global citizenship in Canadian classrooms. By taking the initiative to become globally minded, you can foster inclusive environments for youth to begin shaping their understanding of the world and how their path forward could help better the lives of those near and far from them.

- **Advocate for curriculum integration:** Push for systemic change by supporting the integration of global citizenship into national and provincial curricula. Engage with school boards, provincial ministries of education and policymakers to ensure that SDG-focused learning becomes part of youth learning.
- **Support youth leadership:** Create spaces for students to lead initiatives connected to global citizenship. Supporting youth-led clubs, student councils and extracurricular activities that focus on sustainability, social justice, gender equity and community service empowers young people to take ownership of their learning and activism.
- **Create a culture of sustainability and social responsibility:** Foster a school culture that reflects the values of global citizenship by promoting sustainability practices within schools and classrooms. When students see their schools practicing the principles of the SDGs, they are more likely to internalize these values and apply them in their own lives.
- **Ensure equity and inclusion:** Ensure that education is inclusive and accessible to all students, regardless of their background. This includes addressing barriers faced by marginalized groups who may experience global challenges differently.
- **Foster discussions:** Adult allies should encourage youth in any capacity to discover global issues and support them to develop their own opinions. You can do this by offering informational resources, guiding open conversations and allowing youth to express a different perspective than yours.

EDUCATION RECOMMENDATIONS

DECISION-MAKERS

The Decision-makers have the most direct pathway to influence curriculum and learning objectives within Canadian education systems. Their support for promoting global citizenship and engagement for young people is critical.

Your support for promoting global citizenship and engagement for young people can be acted upon by:

- **Integrate SDGs in curricula:** Creating interdisciplinary, action-oriented learning models is essential for integrating global-mindedness in education. By connecting subjects like gender, education and social inequality, students can engage with real-world problems and work on meaningful solutions. To support this, decision-makers should mandate that global topics are integrated into national and provincial curricula. This could involve updating curricula to include SDG themes or creating specific courses on global issues.
- **Provide professional development for educators:** A significant barrier to the successful implementation of SDG learning is that many educators may not have the knowledge or confidence to teach these topics effectively. Decision-makers should allocate funding and resources for professional development programs that train teachers on the SDGs, global citizenship and instructional approaches for teaching complex global challenges.
- **Incorporate youth voice and leadership in decision-making:** Youth should be seen as partners in shaping the future of education, especially when it comes to issues that directly impact their lives. For the topics in this field, decision-makers should actively involve young people in the process of designing and implementing global curriculum.
- **Increase funding for youth-led SDG projects:** Decision-makers can play an important role by dedicating more funding and support to youth-led initiatives that address the pressing concerns about the SDGs, promote social inclusion and empower young people to take action.
- **Collaborate with the Ministry of Education and other organizations:** The government can foster more partnerships with organizations such as UNICEF and Plan Canada to enhance educational initiatives related to the SDGs through facilitating professional development, providing resources and evaluating impact.



ALMOST **1 IN 3**

U-Reporters believe that national governments should be primarily responsible for ensuring all children receive a quality education.

(SEPTEMBER 2024)

THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION



Megatrend: Climate Change

Climate change impacts youth around the world in various ways. In the next 25 years, the importance of understanding the dynamic processes of global warming will only increase. The issue is cross-cutting, meaning it will compound many other facets of everyday life. Climate change is one of the most pressing issues that our systems of governance will need to address in this century. Youth understand just how far the issue stretches and are already actively engaging with climate action. Now more than ever, it is important that youth receive a strong education about the topic, with the scientific evidence that supports the field. Climate change has become politicized, and narratives have been skewed; as a result, complete systematic reform is required to properly address the root causes of our climate catastrophe. A strong exploration of the issue in the classroom setting is important so that youth can be better equipped to engage with stakeholders and guide their actions in a way they see appropriate, knowing the evidence within the field. Discussion about climate change could lead young students to shift their career goals toward fields like environmental science, renewable energy or social entrepreneurship, as they recognize the need for solutions to global problems.



HEALTHCARE



The Current State of Healthcare

Access to quality health services is a fundamental human right that influences individuals' quality of life and well-being (DHHS, 2020). Our healthcare group advocates for child-friendly practices in the provision of health services, ensuring that children experience less anxiety in healthcare settings and access care in a safe and supportive environment. We believe a child's comfort and autonomy in their care is not prioritized enough and aim to highlight the importance of this issue.

In 1921, Canadian physicians discovered insulin, revolutionizing care for diabetes (Parks Canada, 2021). Now, over 100 years later, children with diabetes still lack the level of funding and resources they deserve. While the prevalence of Type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM) in children historically has been low, it has increased significantly globally over the last 20 years (Diabetes Canada, n.d.a). We believe in a future where Canadian children will be able to get the care they need when they need it, where they need it, delivered in an age-appropriate manner.

Type 1 diabetes mellitus (T1DM) is characterized by the body's inability to produce insulin, the hormone needed to take up glucose (sugar) and use it for energy. T2DM is when the body still produces the needed hormone but doesn't produce as much as it needs and/or doesn't use it as well (Diabetes Canada, n.d.c). While both have genetic components, T2DM has a strong link to lifestyle factors like diet and physical activity (Diabetes Canada, n.d.c).

Monitoring blood glucose to ensure safe levels consists of daily finger pricks, and for those requiring insulin as a medication (T1DM and insulin-dependent T2DM), more needles are then required to administer it (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2018). Children deserve the tools, resources and help to prevent T2DM and to control T1DM and T2DM in a safe and comfortable way.

How Young People Are Experiencing Issues Surrounding Healthcare

Children all over the world deal with many physical and mental health challenges, such as stress and anxiety, when living with T2DM (Sellers et al., 2022). According to Mayo Clinic (2023), children with T2DM are more likely to develop heart and blood vessel disease, nerve damage, kidney damage, eye damage, and even osteoporosis. Cognitive challenges of diabetes include impacts on children's learning abilities, memory, processing, perception and focus (Diabetes UK, n.d.).

In Canada, no provinces or territories cover continuous glucose monitoring (CGM) in children with non-insulin-dependent T2DM (Diabetes Canada, 2021). The yearly out-of-pocket cost for CGM in Canada ranges from \$2,000 to \$6,000, depending on whether the monitor is scanned intermittently or provides continuous data (Diabetes Canada, 2021). With estimates that two out of three children experience a fear of needles, CGM offers an alternative to multiple daily finger pokes with more regular monitoring of blood glucose values (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2023; Diabetes Canada, 2021). This gives children a more positive experience, encourages them to increase their knowledge of their condition, and supports them in playing a more independent and autonomous role in their care (Manfredo et al., 2023).

Beside the physical complications of diabetes, youth with T2DM often face stigma, as blame is often shifted onto them or their caregivers for their condition, even if they were pre-disposed due to circumstances beyond their control (Wang and Chen, 2020). It is crucial to note that while T2DM can be prevented or delayed by lifestyle changes, many patients develop it due to having different conditions or medications or being in an environment that does not allow them to choose healthier options (Gonzalez and Peyrot, 2021). Care for T2DM can cost an individual up to \$10,014 per year in out-of-pocket expenses, or 7% of the average family's income (Diabetes Canada, n.d.a). Additionally, youth in rural areas have decreased access to specialized care and added costs for clinic visits (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020).

In Canada, Indigenous children make up 44% of new childhood-onset T2DM diagnoses, with ethnic groups from Africa, West Asia and South Asia also being more highly predisposed (Diabetes Canada, n.d.b). These groups require more frequent monitoring of blood glucose and increased accessibility of services that allow them to be regularly screened for symptoms or conditions such as pre-diabetes and metabolic syndrome that may increase the likelihood of developing T2DM (PHAC, 2023). These groups often face difficulty with accessing needed healthcare due to geographic location, and many are not provided with the culturally sensitive care needed to build trust and compliance (CMA, 2022).



50%

of U-Reporters have or know someone who has faced barriers to participation because of a lack of accessibility or accommodation for their disability.

(JULY 2023)

HEALTHCARE RECOMMENDATIONS

YOUNG PEOPLE

Children and youth in Canada make many decisions daily that impact their physical and mental health, both in the moment and through downstream effects years later. Our unique experiences are essential to a future where healthy children can become healthy adults. This starts with us today.

- **Speak up:** Don't be afraid to speak up about your physical and psychosocial needs. Use these opportunities to create awareness, encourage others to share, and promote meaningful dialogue and understanding.
- **Know your rights:** Know your rights as a child and patient, and learn how you can support the rights of others. Get involved in diabetes research or advocacy as a youth advocate and by reaching out to decision-makers in your community and beyond.
- **Raise awareness:** Encourage health literacy and peer awareness within communities and remove stigma around T2DM through advocacy.
- **Make healthy choices:** Engage in healthy living yourself! This may include incorporating physical activity, healthy food choices, and self-care practices.

ADULT ALLIES

We, as children and youth, rely on the support of our adult allies to elevate our voices through direct intervention and intentional advocacy. Together we are stronger and can collectively work toward a healthier future for all.

- **Reach out to decision-makers:** Support children and youth by reaching out to decision-makers in your community and beyond to highlight the need for early detection, recognition and treatment for childhood-onset T2DM.
- **Support initiatives:** Support and spearhead initiatives within schools that raise awareness and/or funds for T2DM prevention and treatment.
- **Healthy encouragement:** To those caring for or working with children and youth, encourage healthy choices, self-care, and active living. In medical and educational settings, provide children and youth with the knowledge to understand their bodies and advocate for themselves.
- **Foster supportive environments:** Foster a supportive environment for children living with diabetes by listening to their lived experiences and providing them with a seat at the decision-making table.
- **Make connections to resources:** Connect youth and parents with the physical and educational resources needed to make healthy lifestyle choices, as well as recognize signs that help with early detection of T2DM.



I think lack of information is not the problem. I think lack of trust is. To build trust, community engagement is required."

– U-Reporter, March 2024



HEALTHCARE RECOMMENDATIONS

DECISION-MAKERS

The social and economic determinants of health, as well as political factors, systemically disadvantage equity-deserving groups. We call on decision-makers to work with today's youth and use their power for good through policy changes and actions that allow children and youth to get the care they need, when and where they need it, delivered in a developmentally appropriate manner.

- **Create a national plan:** Create a national plan for early detection, recognition and treatment for children with T2DM, with additional emphasis and resource allocation for equity-deserving groups.
- **Develop targeted outreach programs:** Develop targeted outreach programs for urban, northern and rural Indigenous children and youth that involve prevention and management of T2DM.
- **Invest in national surveillance:** Invest in national surveillance for obesity, metabolic syndrome, and T2DM in Canadian children.
- **Invest in organizations:** Invest in organizations that are dedicated to diabetes awareness, prevention and treatment.
- **Facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration:** Facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration between youth, schools, nurses, physicians and diabetes specialists.
- **Health literacy incorporation:** Incorporate health literacy concepts into education on an early and ongoing basis, including emphasis on healthy living through physical activity, diet, understanding of body systems and functions, and mental health.



39%

of U-Reporters believe that it is very important to have other people's support in helping them eat healthy.

(JULY 2022)

THE FUTURE OF HEALTHCARE



Megatrend: Changing Demographics

As Canada's population ages, birth rates have been simultaneously declining (Statistics Canada, 2024). We believe this could cause a major shift in which demographics are prioritized in terms of accessibility and healthcare. With Indigenous Peoples being the fastest growing population in Canada and 44% of new childhood-onset T2DM diagnoses being in Indigenous children, better access to prevention and treatment is needed now, both for urban Indigenous children and youth and for those in northern and rural communities (Panagiotopolous et al., 2024).

Every three minutes, a person in Canada is diagnosed with T2DM, and it is predicted that diabetes (Type 1 and Type 2) will increase in prevalence by 26% by 2033 (Diabetes Canada, n.d.b.). The average yearly cost of diabetes treatment in the healthcare system is 15 billion CAD, and this cost will only increase as children are diagnosed and require interventions earlier on in life (PHAC, 2023). By preventing childhood-onset T2DM now, we are promoting healthy living, helping to reduce rates of preventable chronic diseases and reducing the strain on healthcare resources, allowing increased funding to be allocated and prioritized appropriately (PHAC, 2023).



MENTAL HEALTH



The Current State of Mental Health

Youth mental health has become a critical issue that demands immediate attention. Today’s young people are under intense pressure, not just from academics but also from the constant presence of social media and the looming threat of climate change. These combined factors have led to a worrying rise in anxiety and depression among youth. In Canada alone, one in five young people face a mental health challenge (Canadian Mental Health Association), and globally, mental health issues account for 16% of the total disease burden among adolescents. The COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified feelings of isolation, anxiety, and hopelessness (Government of Canada).

One of the biggest obstacles to care is access to mental health resources. In Canada, wait times for counselling often stretch for months, leaving many without timely support. Worse, stigma still surrounds mental health, preventing countless young people from seeking the help they need.

We cannot afford to delay action. By advocating for better mental health resources, comprehensive education, and stronger support systems, we can empower youth to face these challenges head-on. Prioritizing their mental well-being is not just about addressing today’s crisis; it’s about ensuring a healthier, more resilient future for everyone.



34%

of U-Reporters are feeling negatively about their mental health, compared to a year ago.
(JANUARY 2024)

Mental Health Challenges Young People Are Facing Today

Mental health issues have significant impact on Canadian youth. They affect not only individuals but their families and communities. The feelings of anxiety, depression and loneliness stem from the pressures of academics, social media and stigma surrounding mental health. These challenges can create a sense of hopelessness, leaving many young people feeling overwhelmed and unsure of where to turn for help. In a society that often prioritizes achievement and success, the toll on mental well-being can lead to a cycle of negative thoughts and behaviors, further intensifying their struggles. It is crucial to recognize that mental health is not just an individual issue but a societal one that calls for collective action and understanding.

The competitive nature of education, coupled with high expectations from schools and families, leads to anxiety and depression among young people. This pressure often makes it challenging for students to balance school and personal life, resulting in difficulties with concentration and, ultimately, lower academic performance. Many students may fall behind or even drop out as they struggle to cope with the stress. Additionally, social media creates unrealistic standards that foster feelings of self-doubt, further exacerbating their mental health issues.

Compounding these challenges is the stigma surrounding mental health, which prevents many young people from seeking help due to fear of judgment. This reluctance to reach out for support can leave them feeling isolated, creating a painful cycle of suffering in silence. The culture of silence surrounding mental health issues can hinder discussions that are crucial for reducing stigma and fostering understanding. Open conversations about mental health not only validate the experiences of those struggling but also encourage others to share their challenges, ultimately creating a more supportive environment.

Poor mental health can strain relationships and lower overall happiness. In severe cases, untreated mental health issues can result in self-harm or suicidal thoughts, which are critical concerns. Suicide is one of the leading causes of death among youth in Canada, highlighting the urgent need for better mental health resources. Different groups of young people experience these challenges differently, as factors like socioeconomic status, race, gender, and sexual orientation play significant roles. Marginalized communities often face additional barriers to accessing mental health services, such as cultural stigma and lack of representation. Indigenous youth in Canada, for instance, experience high rates of mental health issues due to historical trauma and ongoing marginalization (NCBI), compounded by barriers such as cultural stigma, lack of representation in healthcare, geographic isolation, and socioeconomic challenges. These factors collectively make access to care more difficult, underscoring the need for targeted mental health initiatives.

Neurodivergent communities often face unique challenges in mental health that require special attention in addressing how we can understand improvements that must be made to mental health services and our knowledge on neurodiversity. Recognizing these equity issues is essential for understanding the diverse experiences of young people and developing effective support strategies. It is important to create spaces where young people feel supported and understood, having these support systems in place diminishes the stereotypes and stigma associated with mental health struggles.



44%

of U-Reporters have experienced cyberbullying or negative interactions online that have affected their mental health.

(JANUARY 2024)

MENTAL HEALTH RECOMMENDATIONS

YOUNG PEOPLE

To effectively address mental health issues, it's important for young people to take active steps in their communities and support one another. By taking these steps, you can create a positive environment that supports mental health and encourages others to reach out for help.

- **Participate in the community:** Join clubs or programs, and volunteer with local organizations to build a network of people that can both rely on you and help you when needed.
- **Share resources:** Make sure your friends know where to find mental health resources and support services.
- **Start conversations:** Organize or participate in discussions about mental health to raise awareness and reduce stigma.
- **Be supportive:** Check in with friends regularly, listen to their concerns and encourage them to seek help if needed.

ADULT ALLIES

Youth need your support now more than ever, but they often don't know how to reach out or seek help. It's crucial for adults to educate themselves and create a judgment-free space. By taking these steps, you can help empower young people to navigate their mental health journeys and feel supported.

- **Educate yourself:** Learn about mental health issues to better understand what youth are experiencing.
- **Be approachable:** Make sure young people feel comfortable coming to you with their concerns or questions.
- **Provide resources:** Share information about local mental health services and support groups.
- **Listen without judgment:** Create a safe environment where youth can express themselves freely without fear of being judged.

DECISION-MAKERS

To effectively support youth mental health, we need mental health education in schools starting from a young age. This proactive approach will help children understand and manage their mental health early on. Additionally, community-based support is essential, especially in Canada's diverse demographic landscape. By prioritizing these actions, you can help create a supportive environment that promotes mental well-being for all young people.

- **Facilitate workshops:** Organize sessions that focus on mental health awareness and coping strategies.
- **Support mental health curriculum:** Support programs aimed at teaching students about mental health.
- **Enhance community programs:** Ensure that mental health programs help communities work together to combat mental health issues.
- **Increase funding for resources:** Allocate budgetary support for mental health services in schools and communities to ensure accessibility for all youth.
- **Offer programs for parents:** Develop programs aimed at educating and sensitizing parents about mental health issues and how to support their children.
- **Encourage partnerships:** Foster collaboration between schools, community organizations and mental health professionals to create a comprehensive support network that people can rely on.



Sometimes it feels so hard to be happy, since negativity feels like the socially acceptable response to everything."

– U-Reporter, January 2024



THE FUTURE OF MENTAL HEALTH



Megatrend: Climate Change

Climate change will have a major impact on youth mental health in the future (the Center of Addiction and Mental Health). As extreme weather events like wildfires, floods, and heat waves become more common, many young people will likely face increased anxiety and stress. Experiencing natural disasters can lead to trauma, and uncertainty about future living conditions can create a deep sense of insecurity.

The changing climate can expose pre-existing psychological vulnerabilities in youth; for example, young individuals with depression and anxiety are at a disproportionate disadvantage due to the increased risk for worsening symptoms in the face of climate change. Additionally, the emotional toll of witnessing environmental destruction and loss of nature can lead to feelings of hopelessness, often referred to as eco-anxiety. This is especially true for young people who are already dealing with their own mental health challenges.

The long-term impacts of climate change, such as heat, droughts, and poor air quality, can increase the risk of anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, interpersonal aggression, and other mental health issues. Furthermore, the social changes brought on by climate change, such as increased migration and competition for resources, can strain community support systems. Many youth may find it harder to access mental health services, making their struggles even tougher.

It's clear that addressing climate change isn't just about protecting the planet; it's also about ensuring the mental well-being of future generations. We need to prioritize mental health initiatives that help young people navigate these challenges in an increasingly unpredictable world.



RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION



The Current State of Racism and Discrimination

Here in Canada, we often hear “diversity is our strength.” This is a great idea, but it does not mean much if we do not ensure a society that allows people of all backgrounds to achieve their full potential. Research shows that racialized groups in Canada, especially Black and Indigenous peoples, are more likely to have insecure employment and are often paid less than non-racialized people, and continue to report instances of discrimination within the workplace and broader society (Statistics Canada, 2023). These inequities are unacceptable, especially in a country that is growing more diverse. We chose to focus on racism and discrimination in the workplace because it is highly relevant and requires a response from the national government.

Workplaces are microcosms of society: the inequalities within them reinforce those in the wider world. Thus, systemic racism and discrimination in the workplace are pervasive issues that not only undermine the potential of individuals but hinder social development.

In 2024, the workplace became the most frequent setting for racialized Canadians to face unfair treatment (Statistics Canada, 2024). This silent crisis is particularly concerning for younger generations: 48% of Gen Z workers are from ethnic minorities (Insight Global, 2022), and as this makes them the most diverse generation yet, drastic changes need to be made for youth entering the workforce.

Systemic racism extends beyond the workplace. It harms mental health and leads to psychological distress for people of colour (POC), with 58% of racialized workers anticipating discrimination at work (Catalyst, 2019). This phenomenon, known as “emotional tax,” occurs when POC expect to experience racism in the workplace, causing them to be “on guard against bias related to race or ethnicity” (KPMG, 2024). This data highlights the impact of discrimination on POC, when psychological safety should be a strict minimum at work.

Worsening these issues, racialized workers have no effective mechanism to report instances of racism and discrimination. The Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) was recently reported to have a pervasive internal problem with anti-Black racism. The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat completed an investigation following complaints from nine employees and found the CHRC guilty of discriminating against its own Black and racialized employees (Thurton, 2023). The Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights called for the federal government to take immediate action to address anti-Black racism and other forms of discrimination in the government and public service (Senate of Canada, 2023). These examples demonstrate the urgency of the issue, which is currently influencing a world the youth will inherit tomorrow.

How Racism and Discrimination is Impacting Young People's Lives

As young people, our team members have each faced first-hand experiences with racism and discrimination that have impacted our personal and/or professional lives.

“In my own experience, racism and discrimination have made me hyper-aware of how I'm perceived, whether in school, work or everyday interactions. As a Black woman and first-generation Haitian-Canadian, I've always felt the pressure to prove myself in environments that don't make space for people like me. The weight of this expectation can be suffocating, particularly when racialized Canadians are less likely to secure quality employment (Statistics Canada, 2023). For other young people from ethnic backgrounds, the impacts are similar: I've seen friends and colleagues who are equally, and often more, qualified for positions and opportunities than non-racialized peers but are passed over because of racism. Such discrimination limits our future as workers and leaders – but still, we rise and advocate to move beyond them.”

– Harantxa, 20, Quebec

“As a South Asian settler in Canada who is a person of colour and Muslim, I regularly face microaggressions, overt discrimination and exclusion, including racism and Islamophobia. Being treated differently at school, at work or in public spaces based on my skin colour or accent, and being judged for religious practices like wearing a hijab, praying or fasting, creates a constant sense of alienation and anxiety. Situations like these impact the mental health and identity of youth from minority groups, creating additional hurdles in their education and career advancement. Opportunities for leadership, jobs and even social inclusion become limited when you are perceived as 'different' due to racial, ethnic and religious differences.”

– Mohammad, 23, Saskatchewan

As one can tell by our testimonies, the ways people encounter racism and discrimination vary widely across personal experiences. However, there are some noticeable equity issues in the workplace: out of all racialized groups, Black and Indigenous Peoples are the most likely to confront discrimination (Cotter, 2022). Furthermore, youth with intersecting marginalized identities, such as queer racialized people, face even greater risks of experiencing racism and discrimination (Rajan, 2021; Balsam et al., 2014). Addressing this pressing issue is a necessity to allow us, the next generation, to reach our full potential.

“Growing up in a rural area in Newfoundland, witnessing racism and discrimination was not uncommon. As a white person, I've had the privilege of not having to confront racism first-hand. As a queer and neurodivergent girl, I felt a portion of the ostracization and alienation that comes with all forms of discrimination and felt pressure to suppress my authentic self to conform as closely as possible to the racist, sexist and homophobic societal norms. This created a lot of unhappiness and loneliness for me as I attempted to 'blend in' within hostile spaces, and it wasn't until I connected with like-minded peers that I was able to be myself and find genuine satisfaction in my life. Racism and discrimination affect us all differently, but the impacts on our lives, communities and workplaces remain negative.”

– Rachel, 20, Newfoundland

“Being a 15-year-old second-generation Chinese-Canadian high-schooler, I experience racism and discrimination through things like racist jokes and stereotypes that have somehow been normalized in high school environments. I often also find my fellow racialized youth being peer-pressured into laughing even if they are the ones being discriminated against. This makes me feel alienated, uncomfortable and awkward when approaching new people. For young people, these issues affect not only our mental health and confidence, but also our future careers and social development. Different groups experience this in different ways and face their unique challenges, but we should all do our part to combat racism and discrimination.”

– Jayden, 15, British Columbia

RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION RECOMMENDATIONS

YOUNG PEOPLE

Youths' enthusiasm for justice and equality can make a significant difference:

- **Raise Awareness through social media:** Make people stand against discrimination through platforms like Instagram, TikTok or Twitter.
- **Join or start initiatives:** Affiliate with organizations or start clubs that promote diversity.
- **Stand against stereotypes:** Facilitate honest discussions with your peers and stand in solidarity.

ADULT ALLIES

In the battle against racism and discrimination, our adult allies hold vital responsibilities in creating inclusive and supportive spaces for youth. By learning about racial histories, advocating for change and fostering understanding in our local communities, you can empower youth and help make a more equitable society.

- **Speak up:** Speak up against racist jokes or comments, especially when youth are present. It is important to intervene and call out racist behaviour in order to show that it is unacceptable in any type of setting, including casual settings.
- **Educate yourself:** Educate yourself on different cultures and the history of racism in order to understand the root cause of racism and the perspectives of racialized groups. This helps to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes in future generations.
- **Provide support for racialized youth:** Creating safe spaces where youth can speak about their experiences with racism and discrimination is crucial for finding solutions to various racism- and discrimination-based issues.
- **Advocate:** If you feel passionate about preventing racism and discrimination, advocate! Adult allies can promote change and address discrimination even in local places like schools, workplaces and communities.

DECISION-MAKERS

Decision-makers have the power to dismantle the structures and systems that perpetuate racism and discrimination. Change is imperative, and your leadership can pave the way for an equitable society. We call on you to take decisive action to confront these injustices and to champion inclusive policies that empower every individual, regardless of their background.

- **Launch "emotional tax" awareness campaigns:** Educate organizations about the impact of the "emotional tax" on POC, promoting understanding and empathy.
- **Create safe spaces for POC:** Establish affinity groups and mental health resources where individuals can share experiences and receive support without fear of retaliation.
- **Promote diversity and inclusion:** Implement mandatory training on unconscious bias and establish a zero-tolerance policy for discriminatory behavior to enhance workplace ethics and effectiveness.
- **Enhance anti-racism policies:** Strengthen existing policies to address both overt and subtle discrimination, allowing employers to maximize the potential of a diverse workforce, as shown by McKinsey's 2019 report highlighting a 36% higher likelihood of success in diverse organizations.
- **Introduce more diversity benchmark incentives:** Create incentives, similar to the "50-30 Challenge" to encourage companies to achieve diversity targets, fostering better representation and connection with their customer base.



Discrimination is so common that it feels normal. It should not."

– U-Reporter, February 2024



THE FUTURE OF RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION



Megatrend: Climate Change

Climate change is perhaps the most pressing issue of our generation, affecting people globally across all ages, cultures, ethnicities and religions. However, like many systemic problems, the climate crisis disproportionately impacts people experiencing marginalization. Increasing environmental instability and rising temperatures have severe, inequitable impacts on racialized communities, especially Black and Indigenous Peoples. Not only are Black and Indigenous Peoples more likely to live in areas with high poverty rates, making the community more vulnerable to prolonged harms from extreme weather events, but they are also more likely to live in regions that already face environmental degradation as a consequence of extractive resource projects, such as oil pipelines and mining projects, and struggle with access to clean water and air (Deivanayagam et al, 2023; Waldron, 2021; Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2024; Waldron, 2022; Ram, 2024). As climate change worsens, these ongoing problems will only continue to exacerbate and pose threats to the health and safety of these communities, and to communities everywhere.



54%

of U-Reporters believe that discrimination (based on how people identify by gender, race and other aspects of identity) is a very serious problem in Canada.

(FEBRUARY 2024)



4 OUT OF 5

U-Reporters have experienced or witnessed discrimination.

(FEBRUARY 2024)



A MESSAGE FROM THE PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

This year has seen an increase in crises and conflicts around the world, and in our increasingly interconnected society, these conflicts inevitably trickle or burst into our own communities in Canada. Polarization of views about these conflicts and many other issues continues to rise, while willingness to engage in dialogue declines. To make progress, we must cultivate the ability to interact and engage in respectful dialogue that embraces a diversity of viewpoints.

In the face of unprecedented challenges and global shifts, young people across Canada have stepped forward with courage and creativity, proving that their perspectives are not just valuable – they are essential. Their activism is a testament to the belief that every voice matters and demonstrates that constructive conversation is crucial for transformative change. Embracing these conversations helps us understand the nuances of others’ perspectives and strengthens our collective efforts toward their vision for an unequivocally rights-respecting world.

Many of the challenges we face in our society disproportionately impact children and youth. They must be able to exercise their right to participation and to have their voices heard by engaging in dialogue with other young people, adult allies and decision-makers. Young people need opportunities like those provided by UNICEF Canada and its partner organizations to build skills in dialogue so that future generations are not paralyzed by polarization.

By supporting and amplifying the voices of young people in Canada and engaging in thoughtful dialogue, by reinforcing human rights for all, we can build a more inclusive, equitable, and vibrant society. By coming together and listening to their calls to action in this year’s Reimagine Playbook, we can begin to understand how these issues are impacting youth and be guided by them to make the necessary changes in communities across Canada. We challenge each person reading this book to pick one action and commit to it this year.

The future is bright, and it is shaped by the conversations we have today.

Sincerely,



Owen Charters

Owen Charters
President and CEO
BGC Canada



Peter Dinsdale

Peter Dinsdale
President and CEO
YMCA Canada



Lindsay Glassco

Lindsay Glassco
President and CEO
Plan International Canada



Vivien Glencross

Vivien Glencross
Interim President and CEO
Jack.org



Danny Glenwright

Danny Glenwright
President and CEO
Save the Children Canada



Sharif Mandy

Sharif Mandy
Chief Executive Officer
The Students Commission of
Canada, Centre of Excellence
for Youth Engagement



Odette McCarthy

Odette McCarthy
Executive Director
Equitas Center for
International Human Rights
Education



Sevaun Palvetzian

Sevaun Palvetzian
President and CEO
UNICEF Canada

About UNICEF Canada

UNICEF is the world's leading organization for children and adolescents. Created by the United Nations, UNICEF is one of the few organizations that works in Canada and internationally. UNICEF Canada is the face of UNICEF in Canada. We secure young people's rights and well-being by mobilizing resources for children and youth, advocating forever-improving policies and practices and engaging diverse young people as rights-holders and advocates. We are calling on Canadians to take action and do better for children and youth.

UNICEF is supported entirely by voluntary donations.

For more information about UNICEF Canada, please visit www.unicef.ca

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