



GROWING UP *in* NORTH AMERICA:

Child Health and Safety in Canada, the United States, and Mexico



Executive Summary

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There are roughly 120 million children in North America—73 million in the United States, more than 39 million in Mexico, and about 7 million in Canada. They account for over one-quarter of the 426 million people who live on this continent.

Their daily lives are shaped by where they live. They are residents of a continent undergoing significant change in the way their elders cooperate, do business, and engage with the rest of the world.

So far, the existing trilateral efforts among the governments of Canada, the United States, and Mexico have resulted in detailed monitoring and reporting on diverse issues—from textile production to shipping to avian flu. But fundamental issues are being ignored. There exists no such detailed monitoring and reporting on the well-being of those who will have a significant role to play in achieving future prosperity.

BUT IT IS NOT TOO LATE.

As the relationship among Canada, the United States, and Mexico develops, it creates the opportunity to ask ourselves if and how continental prosperity is benefiting our most significant asset—our children.

Does a child raised on this continent have the best chance at health, education, and safety? Will a child raised on this continent be able to face the challenges that globalization brings—today and in the future?

Securing the well-being of our young people requires greater cooperation and information sharing. The tri-national work done for this report through the *Children in North America Project* shows that we have only a partial picture of how our children are doing—there are significant knowledge gaps that if better understood could help us make wise and cost-effective decisions in support of children and youth.

Information about child health forms the basis of this report. Good health is an essential factor if children are to live to their fullest potential. Children in North America share a number of similar experiences when it comes to their health and well-being. While the context of their lives varies, and there are some differences in the health challenges they face, there are surprising similarities across the continent. In fact, there are a number of critical health problems that could profitably be addressed through tri-national initiatives.

Obesity All three countries report that the rates of obesity and being overweight among young people are too high—between 26 percent and 30 percent. However, there is a significant paradox surrounding this health problem. In Canada and the United States, obesity rates are soaring, yet a number of children live with hunger. In Mexico, while growing numbers of children are becoming obese, malnutrition and anemia continue to be significant health problems.

Respiratory Illness Respiratory illness has become epidemic in large portions of North America. In some regions of the continent, there has been a fourfold increase in asthma prevalence in the last 20 years. Air pollutants know no boundaries—making this issue of primary concern to all governments.

Chemical Exposure Continued exposure of some children to lead in their environment—a well-known neurotoxin—is having serious effects on their development. And experts have increasing concerns about children being exposed to chemicals in the environment and resultant neurodevelopmental disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation's (CEC) children's environmental health indicators initiative was making important progress in coming to grips with the scale of this problem. However, this important children's environmental health indicators initiative was recently cancelled.

Mental Health All three countries have identified depression as a serious mental health problem among youth. They have all reported concerns about eating disorders. While the three countries have different measures of mental health and illness, all three recognize that better data and measures are needed to address this issue.

Cancer For all three countries, cancer is the second leading cause of death for children age 5 to 14. Children in Mexico are more likely to die from leukemia (and other types of cancer) than are children in Canada and the United States. It is critical to share knowledge and experience across the continent to benefit the children of Mexico.

Safety and Security Unintentional injury remains the leading cause of death in all three countries among children and youth over the age of one—and it takes a considerable toll on the teens and young adults of all three nations. In 2000, more than 21,000 young North Americans age 15 to 24 years died as a result of unintentional injuries, many of which were preventable. These accounted for 41 percent of all deaths in this age group.



Intentional injuries—or homicide and assault—are significant problems also. While the rates of homicide are much higher in Mexico and the United States, Canada has reported increasing homicides in recent years. Across North America, homicides claimed the lives of over 7,500 youth age 15 to 24 in 2000. Bullying also has been identified as a significant problem in both the United States and Canada—where more than one-quarter of 11-year-old girls and more than one-third of 11-year-old boys reported bullying other children.

Health Disparities Across the continent, significant health disparities exist. In Canada, Aboriginal children rank with many children in the developing world on several key indicators, including infant mortality and injury deaths. In Mexico, children living in rural and indigenous communities experience worse health outcomes than those who live in cities. And, in the United States, children of color suffer poorer health on a number of indicators.

Children's health and security demand our attention. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right of children to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health and to have access to health care. It states that every child has the right to a standard of living adequate for their development, including nutrition. While parents have a primary responsibility to secure the conditions to ensure the health of their children, governments and society overall have committed to assist parents in providing for these rights.

Decision-making without data is a recipe for costly mistakes. As leaders work to maximize the opportunities of a North American partnership, they need to consider a key factor—the future of the continent's children and youth. Security and prosperity are more complex than improving transportation across borders and developing common industrial standards. They require a sustainable plan for the future of children and youth. Investing in this now will help ensure that North America is “the safest and best place to live” for all of our children and youth.