

Suicide attempts among Canadian children have doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic

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A Canadian children's charity has declared a state of emergency with respect to children's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Children First Canada launched the #codePINK campaign, which aims to raise awareness about pediatric emergencies.

The figures reported by the campaign are devastating:

? A 200 percent increase in hospital admissions for substance abuse among children over the past year

? A 100 percent increase in suicide attempts by children during the same period

? 70 percent of children between ages 6 and 18 say that the pandemic has harmed their mental health in some form

? 62 percent of parents admit that the pandemic has worsened the mental health of at least one of their children

? 61 percent of parents expect the residual effects of the pandemic to impact their child's mental health even after the pandemic ends

While the pandemic has unquestionably dramatically worsened the mental health crisis facing children, the real cause of the dramatic rise in suicides and substance abuse, which had begun well before COVID-19 emerged, is the capitalist profit system.

The statistics cited by #codePINK are ultimately a by-product of the disastrous, decades-long gutting of social services by all the major political parties, from the social democratic New Democratic Party to the Liberals and Conservatives. Mental health services across Canada are in an atrocious state, with patients often waiting months to see specialists and receive support. Public education is also in a deplorable state following decades of austerity, which has pushed up class sizes, cut back on support staff, and placed increased demands on already overworked teachers.

Meanwhile, the same politicians and political parties who repeat ad nauseam the claim that there is "no money" for critical health care and mental health services have lavished hundreds of billions of dollars on the banks and major corporations, and increased military spending by tens of billions of dollars.

Even as Canada's billionaires increased their wealth by \$78 billion over the past year, no significant additional resources were made available to support children and their families. The

millions of workers thrown out of their jobs were provided with a piddling \$500 per week under the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, plunging tens of thousands of families into poverty.

Provincial governments across the country, under the direction of the federal Liberals, have pursued a savage policy of mass infection, including by keeping schools open to in-person learning. The underlying goal of this policy was to keep children in classrooms as much as possible, so that their parents could go to work and generate profits for the corporations. This policy was continued even when COVID-19 ran rampant during last winter's second wave, which claimed the lives of more than 10,000 people across Canada.

When the authorities felt they had no other option but to resort to remote learning, they pursued a policy of deliberate sabotage. Children and their families, not to mention teachers, were left largely to fend for themselves. Virtually no equipment or support was provided to facilitate the transition to online learning, including much needed social support for students facing an unprecedented situation that placed incredible pressure on their mental health.

In partnership with some of the country's top children's hospitals and pediatric organizations, Children's First Canada is using the #codePINK platform to lobby governments for greater investment in and support for improved mental health outcomes. They stress that for years, every government in Canada has grievously underfunded mental health supports. This has disproportionately impacted working class communities, where individuals are twice as likely to be hospitalized due to self-harm than their counterparts in affluent neighbourhoods.

According to Sara Austin, CEO of Children First Canada, "We simply haven't seen that robust investments that are really needed in our health-care system, particularly when it comes to the mental health of our children, but even simple things like accessing rehabilitation services or life-saving surgeries for children, kids are being put on a waitlist sometimes for months, upwards of years now, and it's getting worse by the day."

A prominent, yet unsettling feature of their campaign is the demand for a return to in-classroom learning while the global pandemic rages out of control.

The campaign organizers have called for a summit between Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the provincial premiers to address their concerns. Such a meeting, however, would only be used to provide unwarranted scientific legitimacy to the ruling class' drive to end all restrictions on the spread of the virus.

A return to in-classroom learning would lead to thousands of infections among children, especially given their low vaccination rates—those under age 12 are still ineligible for vaccination. These children would then go on to infect their family members and the broader community, fuelling a resurgence of the pandemic. To date, there have been over 271,000 COVID-19 cases among youth 19 and under, representing 19.2 percent of all infections, the largest proportion of any age group.

Capitalist governments across the world have utilized a mixture of pseudo-science, cherry-picked medical research and outright lies to advance the claim that schools are not significant vectors of COVID-19 infection, and that children are not at risk of serious illness when contracting the virus.

This was most egregiously demonstrated in February, when US President Joe Biden flatly lied to a second grader, telling her that she and her family bore no risk of getting infected. A barrage of editorials in the major US papers followed, falsely claiming that schools were safe to reopen, even as classroom transmission helped drive the disastrous winter and spring waves of the pandemic in the US and Canada. This prepared the way for school reopenings across the continent.

The majority of school districts in Canada remained open for at least partial in-classroom education through the end of the current school year. However, millions of workers opted to keep their children learning remotely. A survey conducted in June revealed that a majority of respondents (59 percent) opposed the return of students to classrooms in the fall without being vaccinated.

In conjunction with the inadequate and haphazard execution of remote learning, the renewed push to scapegoat the latter for children's declining mental health is squarely aimed at breaking all remaining opposition in the working class to full school reopenings.

The ruling class reopening campaign has produced its intended effect on a section of the middle class, represented by pediatricians and children's health professionals. On June 4, an open letter was sent to Ontario's Progressive Conservative Premier Doug Ford, demanding the immediate reopening of schools, and the provision of in-classroom instruction for summer and fall classes. Similar letters have been sent to provincial governments across Canada.

Signed by over 400 medical professionals, the letter's arguments for reopening schools mirror the rhetoric articulated by the most unabashed proponents of the "herd immunity" policy, which has been thoroughly debunked by science. The nightmare unfolding in the UK shows what is in store for

Canada if such a course is pursued. There, the number of daily new cases driven by the Delta variant has surpassed 50,000 and the death rate is quickly rising.

In a recent column on the current surge in the UK, the BMJ (formerly the *British Medical Journal*) clearly laid out how school transmission helped drive the rapidly emerging fourth wave of the pandemic. Examining outbreaks of the more transmissible Delta variant up to the end of May, Public Health England identified 140 outbreaks in schools, the largest number of any setting. As the BMJ put it, "Spread of the delta variant is likely to have played an important role in the exponential rises we are seeing of cases in England, and hospitalisations in North West England."

While the pediatric concern for children's mental health is well-founded, capitalist governments across the country have absolutely no interest in devoting additional resources to the safe resumption of public education. On the contrary, the concerns as outlined in the doctors' letters are being shamelessly touted by these governments as proof that all school doors must be reopened with virtually no public health restrictions in place.

A situation in which the ruling class feels unrestrained to promote its murderous herd immunity policy is primarily the responsibility of the trade unions and their pseudo-left adjuncts. From the start of the pandemic, they have supported this policy and ruled out any job action to oppose it. In April of this year, Harvey Bischof, president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, urged the provincial government to "safely" resume in-classroom education, knowing full well that the hard-right Conservatives had no intention of keeping children and their families safe.

Teachers, students, parents and other sections of the working class who wish to fight for a rational scientific approach to combating the pandemic, which must include the investment of billions of dollars to fund comprehensive mental health services for all children who need them, must join the Cross-Canada Educators' Rank-and-File Safety Committee (CERSC). Visit our Facebook page or contact us at: cersc.cspnb@gmail.com.

The CERSC advocates a halt to all in-person learning and nonessential business activity until the pandemic is brought to an end, and the payment of full wages to all workers and families so they can shelter at home until COVID-19 is suppressed. The resources to fund these demands exist in abundance, but they must be expropriated from the billionaires, banks and corporations by the working class mobilized on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.



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