

Child Rights and Well-Being in Nova Scotia: A Critical Conversation

Kristyn Anderson¹, RSW; Cecilia Carrea², PhD; Charlene Gagnon³, BBA; Jenna Hopson⁴, MPH; Sara F. L. Kirk^{1,2}, PhD; Lila Pavey⁴, MPH; and Naj Siritsky⁵, MSSW

¹ Faculty of Health, Dalhousie University

² Healthy Populations Institute, Dalhousie University

³ What We Make It, Kula Partners, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

⁴ Mental Health and Addictions Services, IWK Health Centre, Nova Scotia, Canada

⁵ Nova Scotia College of Social Workers, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

DOI: 10.15273/hpj.v3i2.11592

Abstract

Childhood lays the foundations for lifelong health and well-being. Children and youth have a fundamental right to have their needs met and to have their health and well-being considered a priority. Nova Scotia is one of the last provinces in Canada to create an independent body focused on asserting and protecting children's rights. At present, legislation in support of an independent Child and Youth Commission (CYC) is being considered to monitor child rights and engage young people in conversations about the things that matter to them. On November 18, 2022, and in recognition of National Child Day, a "Fishbowl Conversation" panel presentation was convened, with the panel held in-person at Dalhousie University and an audience participating online. The panel engaged in a critical conversation about ongoing work in Nova Scotia aimed at addressing child rights and well-being, for the purpose of guiding the work of a CYC. This commentary article summarizes the recommendations from this panel, unifying the work from various reports and initiatives addressing child rights in the province.

Canada is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). When Canada ratified the convention in 1991, it committed to including youth voices in decision-making on things that matter to them (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2021). Three decades later, this commitment has yet to be fully implemented, with Nova Scotia being one of the last two provinces in Canada to create a politically independent Child and Youth Commission (CYC) to advise the provincial government and help promote and protect the rights and well-being of children and youth in the province (Stratford, n.d.). Work that focuses

on the rights and well-being of children (1–10 years old) and youth (11–18 years old) takes place in various institutions and organizations across the province. To recognize National Child Day 2022, Dalhousie University's Healthy Populations Institute, IWK Mental Health and Addictions, and the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers (NSCSW) convened a panel to discuss recent, relevant, and multi-faceted reports and initiatives on child and youth rights and well-being in Nova Scotia. The purpose of this panel was to unify the recommendations in these reports and initiatives and guide the work of a future CYC.

Eight presenters gave an overview of their work with children and responded to questions from the moderator that had been provided in advance. The chat room was then opened up to questions from an audience of 207 participants who attended virtually. The panelists and the reports/initiatives they presented on were as follows:

1. Estelle Alexander, a fourth-year health promotion student at Dalhousie University and youth representative, offered the perspectives of youth (11–18 years) regarding the *One Chance to Be a Child* report, a data profile released in April 2022 that provides a comprehensive snapshot of how children and youth are doing in Nova Scotia (Dalhousie University Department of Pediatrics & Healthy Populations Institute, 2022).
2. Danny Graham, the chief engagement officer of Engage Nova Scotia, spoke about the work being undertaken by his organization regarding the Nova Scotia Quality of Life Initiative (Engage Nova Scotia, n.d.). The goal of the initiative is to include well-being as a measure of success and progress in guiding the province into the future.
3. Crystal Hill, a social worker from Nova Scotia Legal Aid, provided a brief history of how Nova Scotia Legal Aid first hired an Indigenous social worker to bridge a gap in services for this population, particularly with respect to support in court proceedings. Hill works with legal aid clients who have family matters before the court.
4. Charys Payne, a lawyer with the African Nova Scotian Justice Institute (ANSJI), provided an overview of the ANSJI, which is a provincially funded, community-led organization established in response to the systemic racism faced by African Nova Scotians in the justice system.
5. Lynn Brogan, president of the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers, provided an overview of the findings from a project aimed at gaining insight into how the child

welfare system could be better designed to support the rights and needs of children in this province (Nova Scotia College of Social Workers, 2021).

6. Jacqueline Gahagan, a professor and associate vice-president of research at Mount Saint Vincent University, presented on their research (Gahagan, 2021) examining and evaluating the impact of post-secondary tuition-waiver programs for former youth in care of the welfare system.
7. Malcolm Shookner, the president of Atlantic Summer Institute (ASI) on Healthy and Safe Communities, provided an overview of ASI and its mandate as a catalyst for social change focused on the determinants of health. He spoke of the need for a whole-of-government approach in terms of intersectoral action across departments, the value of investing in “upstream” mental health promotion, and the impact it can have on child and youth mental health (ASI, 2022).
8. Lila Pavey, a health promotion specialist with the Mental Health and Addictions Program at IWK Health, began by stating that Nova Scotia currently has the highest provincial rate of police-reported human trafficking in Canada and one of the highest provincial rates of trafficking of victims aged 12 to 17 years. She presented on the *Hearing Them* report (Pavey et al., n.d.), which resulted from the direct consultations of 149 adults with past or present lived experience in the sex industry to explore what makes people vulnerable and to identify specific risks. The consultations were specific to trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth because these experiences can have harmful lifelong implications and contribute to poor health outcomes.

Panel Recommendations

The full report and recording of this panel event can be accessed through DalSpace at the following links:

- <http://hdl.handle.net/10222/82367>
(report)
- <http://hdl.handle.net/10222/82387>
(video)

Recommendations from each of the presenters are summarized below:

1. Estelle Alexander emphasized the need to establish child and youth panels or advisories within government to provide counsel on decisions that affect young people. This includes topics regarding child and youth mental health, bullying, different ways of learning, changes to the school curriculum, at-home supports, equitable access to opportunities, and overall well-being.
2. Danny Graham recommended the inclusion of well-being as a measure of success and progress in guiding the province into the future. Special attention to single-parent and low-income families is required.
3. Crystal Hill spoke about the need to “bridge the gap between client and lawyer” to support families in court proceedings.
4. Charys Payne recommended that the powers, education strategies, and advocacy strategies of the CYC be made robust enough to mandate structural requirements such as the following:
 - i. the collection of race-based data as it relates to overrepresentation of youth in social and criminal justice systems,
 - ii. the development of culturally competent practice standards for staff working with African Nova Scotian and racialized youth, and
 - iii. the inclusion of a provision in the proposed legislation, recognizing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent. This provision should require the CYC to be responsible for educating on and advocating for the interests and

needs of children of African descent and mirror Prince Edward Island’s Child and Youth Advocate Act, section 12, subsection 1-C.

5. Lynn Brogan highlighted the need to address issues of systemic racism, discrimination, and bias within the child welfare system, as well as the unintended inequity and other negative consequences for Nova Scotians at risk created by the amendments implemented in 2017 to the Children and Family Services Act.
6. Jacqueline Gahagan proposed to establish a minimum set of program evaluation standards with data comparability at the national level to address disparities and reduce barriers to educational attainment among those with experience in the child welfare system.
7. Malcolm Shookner recommended a greater focus upstream on the social determinants of health that support infant, child, and youth mental health. This can be targeted by building on the extensive evidence compiled and reported by organizations represented at the panel discussion.
8. Given that the risk factors for commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth are also health and well-being indicators, Lila Pavey recommended that each of these factors needs to be monitored and addressed through a comprehensive whole-of-government approach. One way to start is by establishing an integrated plan with shared outcomes for Nova Scotia to ensure children and youth’s rights are at the forefront of all decision-making.

Conclusion

“Having a sense of belonging” and “feeling like their voice is being heard” were central themes emerging from youth who participated in focus groups and whose voices were relayed by the youth representative at this panel, Estelle Alexander. The tools and information available through existing reports and initiatives need to be acted upon. With the

formation of a CYC, an opportunity exists to advance the rights of children and youth in Nova Scotia. Sustainable development goals and social determinants are embedded in human rights charters, and government and wider society have a responsibility to act.

References

- Atlantic Summer Institute on Healthy and Safe Communities. (2022, March). *Upstream investment: Placing infant, child and youth mental health promotion at the forefront: Executive summary* [Policy brief]. <https://www.asi-iea.ca/en/files/2022/03/Policy-Brief-ES-.pdf>
- Dalhousie University Department of Pediatrics, & Healthy Populations Institute. (2022). *One chance to be a child: A data profile to inform a better future for child and youth well-being in Nova Scotia*. Retrieved July 3, 2022, from www.onechancens.ca
- Engage Nova Scotia. (n.d.). *Overview of the NS Quality of Life Initiative*. <https://engagenovascotia.ca/about-qol>
- Gahagan, J. (2021, July 19). Youth who grew up in care have the right to post-secondary education—and tuition waivers open doors. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/youth-who-grew-up-in-care-have-the-right-to-post-secondary-education-and-tuition-waivers-open-doors-160972>
- Nova Scotia College of Social Workers. (2021, March 2). *Children and Family Services Act: 4-year review*. <https://nscsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CFSA-Review-Submission-Final.pdf>
- Pavey, L., Hopson, J., & Gagnon, C. (n.d.). *Hearing them: Exploring the vulnerabilities and risk factors for commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth in Nova Scotia*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/615b42b67a44671f61b7f0c8/t/6346e16f9ce1ec7093794c09/1665589615819/Hearing+them++Risks+Prevention.pdf>
- Public Health Agency of Canada. (2021, November 5). *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: An overview for children and teenagers*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/national-child-day/united-nations-convention-rights-of-the-child.html>
- Stratford, A. (n.d.). Our vulnerable children, youth, and families deserve better. *Nova Scotia College of Social Workers Blog*. Retrieved July 3, 2022, from <https://nscsw.org/our-vulnerable-children-youth-and-families-deserve-better/>
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, November 20, 1989, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>