

## UNICEF Canada Report on Aboriginal Children's Health Shows Disparities Between Aboriginal Children and National Averages a Major Children's Right Challenge

### - Health of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Children Well Below National Averages -

**Toronto, ON, June 24, 2009** - UNICEF Canada is marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child with the release today of a report called *Aboriginal Children's Health: Leaving No Child Behind*- the Canadian Supplement to *State of the World's Children 2009*. UNICEF Canada partnered with the National Collaborating Centre on Aboriginal Health to produce the report, which examines the health of Aboriginal children in Canada through the perspectives of national experts and analysis of existing data. The report concludes that health disparities between First Nations, Inuit and Métis children relative to national averages is one of the most significant children's rights challenges facing our nation.

Twenty years after the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted, the UNICEF Canada report finds that despite some progress, Aboriginal children suffer from a much greater burden of poor health. The Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges governments to ensure that all children enjoy the highest attainable standard of health and access to health care services. Specifically, Aboriginal children fare at least two or more times worse than the national averages for non-Aboriginal children in almost all health status indicators (measures of child health, such as diabetes and suicide rates) and in the determinants of health and well-being (influences such as poverty and access to clean water).

"The health of Canada's Aboriginal children is a bellwether of the health of our nation," said Margo Greenwood, Academic Leader of the National Collaborating Centre on Aboriginal Health. "Their health status is not a product of biological determinants, but of social conditions and access to societal resources. We have the knowledge, the technology and the resources to ensure the highest attainable standard of health for all of our children."

The report notes that while there have been improvements in the health of Aboriginal children in recent years, inequalities persist in higher infant mortality rates, lower child immunization rates, poorer nutritional status and endemic rates of obesity, diabetes and other chronic diseases. For instance, across Canadian reserve communities, the infant mortality rate is three to seven times the national average. In Nunavut, where more than 80 per cent of the population is Inuit, the rate stands at 16 deaths per 1,000 live births – over three times the national rate and almost equal to that in Sri Lanka and Fiji. On-reserve First Nations child immunization rates are 20 per cent lower than the general population's, and 45 per cent of Métis children suffer from chronic health conditions.

"Canada promised twenty years ago to provide all of the nation's children with the best we have to give as a country," said Nigel Fisher, President and CEO, UNICEF Canada. "The health conditions of Canada's Aboriginal children are not what we would expect in one of the most affluent countries in the world. There are identifiable solutions to address this inequality. This report is for each of us who believes that Canada is only as strong as our most vulnerable children."

Experts who contributed to the report agree that the root of health problems experienced by Canada's Aboriginal children stems from the legacy of policies such as residential schooling, which severed the last few generations of families from their children and resulted in family and community breakdown.

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Today, persisting inequality in the Canadian health governance structure perpetuates health disparities between Aboriginal and other Canadian children. Federal spending for Aboriginal communities has not mirrored population growth, and a number of services routinely provided to other Canadians are underfunded or denied. Hundreds of Aboriginal children are caught in disputes between orders of government about who is responsible to provide or pay for a service – with the survival and best interests of the child a distant consideration.

As Canadians prepare to celebrate Canada Day, the report asks Canadians to reflect on what kind of country they want for all of the nation's children. UNICEF Canada is releasing this report in the hopes of helping Canadians understand why many Aboriginal children are left out of the services and good health outcomes enjoyed by other non-Aboriginal children, and how this children's rights challenge can be addressed. UNICEF has shown that extraordinary gains can be made for children even in the most impoverished and politically, economically, geographically and environmentally challenging circumstances. For example, globally, the infant mortality rate has been driven down by 30 per cent over the past two decades.

Just as a continuum of health care bridging into even the remotest communities has yielded huge gains elsewhere in the world, more community-based health services are required to ensure that Aboriginal families do not have to move far from home to find the services they need. Rather than removing children and families when they are in crisis, the early involvement of culturally appropriate health and social services to work with children and families will reduce health disparities in Canada.

The report calls for funding the same level of services for all children in Canada, and passing legislation federally and provincially to implement "Jordan's Principle" that no Aboriginal child languishes during disputes about who will provide or pay for services that other Canadian children receive without question.

"Addressing health disparities experienced by First Nations, Inuit and Métis children is a huge challenge and requires a collective Canadian effort to tackle them," said Greenwood. "These disparities will not be resolved by a single action or a "one size fits all" approach. A holistic approach that builds upon the attributes and strengths of the First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples will help build a strong and vibrant Canada."

To view the report and participate in supportive actions for Aboriginal children, visit [www.unicef.ca/leavingnochildbehind](http://www.unicef.ca/leavingnochildbehind).

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## **About UNICEF**

UNICEF is on the ground in over 150 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments. For more information about UNICEF, please visit [www.unicef.ca](http://www.unicef.ca)

### **About the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health**

The NCCAH supports First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples across the country in realizing their public health goals. The centre fulfills its national mandate by using a coordinated, holistic and comprehensive approach to the inclusion of Aboriginal peoples in the public health system, guided by a respect for Indigenous knowledge and for the diversity of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. The NCCAH is located at the University of Northern British Columbia and funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada to support public health renewal in Canada.

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