



Submission to the Government of Alberta's Ministry of Children's Services to Improve the Well-being of Alberta Children and Youth

Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence

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The purpose of this submission

To provide the Ministry of Children's Services with evidence-based policy recommendations to mitigate the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the social, mental, physical, and educational well-being of Alberta children and youth.

About Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence

The purpose of [Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence](#) (Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary) is to empower others to create the social conditions that will stop domestic violence before it starts. We conduct research that informs primary prevention practices, programs, policies, and legislation; and we partner with other researchers and academics, policy-makers, community-leaders, not-for-profit organizations, community-based organizations and collectives to translate knowledge and build capacity to implement and evaluate effective primary prevention solutions. Areas of focus for Shift include engaging men and boys in violence prevention and gender equality; building the capacity of informal supports to promote healthy relationships and respond to violence; promoting transformative approaches to sexual violence; and preventing adolescent dating violence and promoting healthy youth relationships. Shift's mandate, principles, and goals directly align with the Child and Youth Well-Being Review's priority on strengthening the social, mental, physical, and educational well-being of children and youth in Alberta.

Preventing family, domestic, and sexual violence to improve the well-being of Alberta children and youth

Family, domestic, and sexual violence are complex, pervasive, connected to other forms of violence, and socially and economically costly.^{i,ii} The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the causes and impacts of these forms of violence, which has produced what researchers call a "pandemic within pandemic"ⁱⁱⁱ or a "shadow pandemic"^{iv} of family, domestic, and sexual violence – and Alberta children and youth have carried a heavy burden of risk and experienced serious negative consequences.

Due to Covid-19, many parents and guardians were more likely to be stressed by job losses, decreased incomes, and the burden of added domestic work and care responsibilities, which increased the risk of violent behaviours in the home.^v At the same time, the mandated reporters who could notice the risk signs and prevent violence, such as teachers, childcare providers, and

clinicians, had fewer interactions with children and fewer opportunities to recognize, pre-empt, and/or report signs of abuse.^{vi} Further, stay-at-home advisories increased tensions in domestic relationships and weakened social ties with friends, family, and support networks^{vii}, which made it easier for perpetrators to control and isolate their victims socially and physically.^{viii} Due to restrictions, Albertan shelters operated with limited capacity and had to turn women and children away^{ix}, increasing their vulnerability to violence, abuse, and exploitation.

Children and youth who experience and/or are exposed to family, domestic, and sexual violence experience many negative impacts, including increased developmental difficulties^x and traumatic stress symptoms,^{xi} heightened neural activity similar to that of soldiers exposed to violent combat situations,^{xii} and suicidal ideation.^{xiii} Further, children who experience and/or are exposed to family, domestic, and sexual violence are more likely to grow up to become victims and/or perpetrators.^{xiv} Thus, it is imperative that all ministries within the Government of Alberta collectively advance primary prevention efforts that build the conditions that stop family, domestic, and sexual violence before they start.

The Ministry of Children’s Services’ mandate to lead childcare, early childhood development, and improvements for children and youth means that it plays a critical role in advancing the primary prevention of family, domestic, and sexual violence. Through research, Shift has identified four areas where the Ministry of Children’s Services can play a key role in building the conditions to prevent violence and improve the well-being of children and youth:

- 1) Strengthen funding, supports, and services for Alberta parents, families, and children;
- 2) Work with other ministries to prioritize decolonization and reconciliation;
- 3) Leverage technology and artificial intelligence to predict and prevent violence; and
- 4) Focus on the prevention of sexual violence.

1 Strengthen funding, supports, and services for Alberta parents, families, and children

Investing in families improves women’s access to employment and self-reliance, boosts children’s development, and improves family dynamic, decreasing the likelihood of domestic, family, and sexual violence. Policy recommendations include:

- Strong Alberta Child and Family Benefits, including:
 - Establishing a pandemic-related enhancement to support families. Decent benefits must ensure that their base component reflects the rising living costs in the province and that the working component still provides adequate financial support. While the current program is rightfully focused on providing incentives for families to join or remain in the workforce, it is paramount to factor in pandemic-related unemployment, especially among women, and provide additional supports, taking into account that it may take longer and more effort for Albertan women to reintegrate into the labour market. Therefore, a pandemic-related enhancement would greatly support families.

- Making benefits more accessible. It is important to make the benefits more accessible by lowering the qualifying income criteria to capture families on the verge of vulnerability and by simplifying the application process, such as helping people with learning disabilities and low literacy submit successful applications.
- Ensuring that families that receive child and family benefits are not disqualified from other vital benefits. This includes ensuring that receiving child and family benefits does not lower the total payments received at the time when more families struggle with poverty.
- Offering pro-active advice to apply and practical support for applying. This will help ensure that vulnerable families likely to miss out on the benefits, such as recent immigrants and families affected by homelessness, severe mental health problems or addictions, will still benefit.
- Ensuring payment is made in ways that are appropriate for families. Offering a range of payment options will help to ensure that payments are appropriate for diverse families' unique circumstances.
- Access to safe and affordable childcare, including free licensed childcare with education professionals trained specifically to work with vulnerable populations, such as children with disabilities.
- Education campaigns on healthy norms around parenting and care, and equitable distribution of unpaid care work in families.
- Awareness raising about the positive effects of formal childcare among populations unlikely to use it.
- Quality health, education, and leisure institutions that prioritize equity, healthy relationships, social-emotional learning, and safety within their policies, practices, professional development, curriculums, and leadership. This includes an explicit focus on preventing adolescent dating violence in schools and community settings to prevent violence in adulthood.
- Support for single-parent families, especially those headed by women and populations at higher risk of violence, affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes:
 - Prioritizing female-headed families, LGBTQ+ families, and families with members living with disability for safe and affordable housing programs.
 - Helping single parents working in low-paying jobs transition into better-paying fields, such as trades that require relatively short training or re-training.
 - Improving food and nutrition security and health of such families by providing free meals; developmental toys, games, and equipment; and subsidized accessible sports and entertainment opportunities.
- Work with other ministries to:
 - Build family-friendly neighbourhoods with green spaces, affordable transportation, recreation facilities, and limited alcohol outlet density to facilitate social interactions and build strong communities.
 - Ensure women can stay in the labour market or return to the appropriate job level after giving birth or taking care of seniors or sick family members.
 - Improve parental leaves for both parents.

- Work with employers to ensure adequate wages, equal pay, and leave allowances, as well as flexible working arrangements for single parents.
- Provide long-term targeted funding and additional training for single mothers and single parents with disability to start or develop their businesses.
- Strengthen affordable housing and access to safe housing, including housing on and off-reserve for Indigenous people.
- Improve food security for populations at higher risk of experiencing violence.

2 Work with other ministries to prioritize decolonization and reconciliation

Respecting the rights of Indigenous peoples and ensuring their access and fair treatment in all social systems and structures will improve their socioeconomic status and lower the likelihood of violence. Some examples of policy reforms include implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the calls for justice by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, the calls for action by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, and other recommendations by national, provincial, and territorial Indigenous organizations. Specific measures can include:

- Reforming the child welfare system to support Indigenous families by, as one example, developing culturally appropriate parenting programs for Indigenous families, and reducing the number of Indigenous children in care.
- Co-developing an effective provincial strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Albertans.
- Recognizing the value of Indigenous healing practices and using them in the treatment of Indigenous patients and increasing the number of Indigenous medical professionals.
- Eliminating the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in custody over the next decade and issuing detailed annual reports that monitor and evaluate progress in doing so.
- Providing education to public servants on the history of Indigenous peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations.

3 Leverage technology and AI to prevent family, domestic, and sexual violence

Online violence and violence facilitated by technology is an emerging threat to safety and wellbeing, which has been aggravated by the pandemic. However, digital technology can also be leveraged to prevent violence. Some examples of policy recommendations include:

- Awareness raising about what constitutes digital violence and public education campaigns about legally punishable digital and online behaviours.
- Awareness raising about the use of digital technology for human trafficking and other forms of exploitation and abuse.
- Promotion of the bystander approach to cyberviolence.

- Media literacy on pornography among adolescents and youth.
- Support for parents in protecting their children from cyberviolence perpetration and victimization.
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) use to gather real-time data on violence and inform violence prevention efforts.
- Technology and social media use to promote equality and pro-social norms and behaviours.
- Work with other ministries to:
 - Enforce due diligence among digital service providers to ensure their services cannot be used for digital violence.

4

Focus on the prevention of sexual violence

Addressing unhealthy norms and eliminating the enabling structural factors that put certain populations at risk of sexual victimization is important for reducing this prevalent type of violence. Some examples of policy recommendations include:

- Zero tolerance of sexual violence in society and all its institutions.
- Support for communities in providing strong sanctions against violence.
- Awareness raising about the dangerous impact of stereotypes around sexuality and myths around sexual violence.
- Men and boys' involvement into sexual violence prevention as allies, champions of change, and mentors.
- Challenging the normalization of violence in mass media.
- Work with other ministries to:
 - Improve safety of rental places and shared accommodation for women and populations at higher risk of violence.
 - Improved safety and accessibility of public places for women and populations at higher risk of violence as the province reopens after the pandemic.

Additional resources:

- Canadian Women's Foundation: <https://canadianwomen.org/the-facts/gender-based-violence/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, VetoViolence: <https://vetoviolenecdc.gov/apps/main/home>
- Western University's Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children: <http://www.learningtoendabuse.ca/>
- World Health Organization, Violence Against Children: https://www.who.int/health-topics/violence-against-children#tab=tab_1

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