

Submission by Starlings Community INC ([www.starlings.ca](http://www.starlings.ca)) for the:

## CALL FOR INPUT | OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Substance use stigma prevents the inclusive social protection of children in Canada.

According to the United Nations Convention on the rights of a child, every child has a right to be supported to reach their full potential and every parent has a right to be supported in their caregiving responsibilities (United Nations. 1989). These rights include: access to culture, information, health supports, and resources that support healing, as well as a right to be protected from discrimination and harm. However, in Canada, parents who are affected by substance use challenges, and their children, are at increased risk of losing access to their right to social protection factors, including mental health supports, information, community, culture, and healthcare, as made evident by the number of parents and children who cannot access support and the number of families separated via criminalization and child welfare involvement.

In Canada, approximately one in five children are exposed to a parent's substance use disorder (SUD), along with the stigma and discrimination society imposes on such families (Langlois & Garner, 2013; McDonald & Tough, 2014). This social environment places impacted youth up to double or even triple the risk for addiction, mental illness, and suicide (Anda et al., 2002; Leyton & Stewart, 2014; Parolin et al., 2016; Titlestad et al., 2020; Meulewaeter et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2021). In addition, "children affected by parental SUD are at higher risk for nearly every childhood disorder [including] eating disorders, behavior disorders, anxiety disorders, depression, [and] post-traumatic stress disorder" (Lander et al., 2013). Despite this risk, and the well-documented stigma that affects substance-using parents, the mental well-being of impacted youth has not been acknowledged or prioritized by leaders, and discrimination towards parents with substance-use challenges continues to threaten their well-being.

To start, youth who grow up with parental substance use challenges and associated behaviours, are at increased risk of child welfare involvement, parental criminalization, and discrimination if they reach out for mental health support. For example, a 2014 report on the circumstances of youth involved in Canada's child welfare system found that "substance use was the most frequent root problem in caregiver-related cases" (Barker et al., 2014).

Furthermore, a 2014 report indicates that 80% of individuals involved in the criminal justice system have reported problems with their substance use (Canadian Friends Service Committee, 2020), with additional data suggesting that parents compose up to 70% of incarcerated individuals (Withers & Folsom, 2008). Although it is not apparent exactly how many children in Canada have an incarcerated parent, a report from 2018 suggests that 70% of federally incarcerated women were parents of minor children (Canadian Friends Service Committee, 2020), with additional data from 2008 stating that 52% of male prisoners were fathers (Withers & Folsom, 2008).

However, data indicates that children involved in Canada's child welfare system, as well as with parents who have been criminalized, are at risk of adverse health outcomes. For example, youth whose parents have been criminalized have earlier initiation of substance use, as well as increased rates of SUD themselves (Barker et al., 2014). Over the past few years, in the province of Alberta Canada, similarly in other parts of the country, youth have been neglected and died by suicide or substances when involved in child protection services (Alberta Government, 2022). Similarly, having a parent who has been incarcerated increases youth risk of "developing mental illness, engaging in delinquent behaviour, having negative social experiences and damaging their parent-child relationship." (Hardy, J. 2018). In addition, "numerous studies have shown that the fear of child welfare involvement and having their children removed from their care is one of the greatest barriers for pregnant women when considering accessing addiction treatment and prenatal care." (Canada FASD Research Network, 2010). In general, active

substance use by a parent can increase the risk of discrimination when attempting to access supports (McQuaid et al., 2017, p. 46) including by health services, decreasing the protection offered to parents and their children (Livingston, J. D. (2020)).

Although Canada is taking some steps to decrease substance use stigma, such as commitment to changing the language around substance use, defining stigma as an important social determinant of health, addressing the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action, and increasing some funding to harm reduction and abstinence-based supports within community groups, families continue to be separated and criminalized at high rates, particularly families already navigating challenging circumstances, including poverty and racism.

We are requesting that the OCHR consider substance use **stigma** as a child's rights issue, as indicated by its influence on the social protection of children in Canada. Please see the report by Starlings Community (2021) here:

[https://www.starlings.ca/files/ugd/990b28\\_a03230d1ce014614be88758d1e3cb3d4.pdf](https://www.starlings.ca/files/ugd/990b28_a03230d1ce014614be88758d1e3cb3d4.pdf)

Submission by Agnes Chen, Registered Nurse and founder of Starlings Community.

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