

# Media Update

9 September 2020

## UNICEF

PRESS RELEASE

### COVID-19 could reverse decades of progress toward eliminating preventable child deaths, agencies warn

*With the number of under-five deaths at an all-time recorded low of 5.2 million in 2019, disruptions in child and maternal health services due to the COVID-19 pandemic are putting millions of additional lives at stake*

**NEW YORK/ GENEVA, 9 September 2020**– The number of global under-five deaths dropped to its lowest point on record in 2019 – down to 5.2 million from 12.5 million in 1990, [according to new mortality estimates](#) released by UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the World Bank Group.

Since then, however, surveys by UNICEF and WHO reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in major disruptions to health services that threaten to undo decades of hard-won progress.

“The global community has come too far towards eliminating preventable child deaths to allow the COVID-19 pandemic to stop us in our tracks,” said Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director. “When children are denied access to health services because the system is overrun, and when women are afraid to give birth at the hospital for fear of infection, they, too, may become casualties of COVID-19. Without urgent investments to re-start disrupted health systems and services, millions of children under five, especially newborns, could die.”

Over the past 30 years, health services to prevent or treat causes of child death such as preterm, low birthweight, complications during birth, neonatal sepsis, pneumonia, diarrhea and malaria, as well as vaccination, have played a large role in saving millions of lives.

Now countries worldwide are experiencing disruptions in child and maternal health services, such as health checkups, vaccinations and prenatal and post-natal care, due to resource constraints and a general uneasiness with using health services due to a fear of getting COVID-19.

A [UNICEF survey](#) conducted over the summer across 77 countries found that almost 68 per cent of countries reported at least some disruption in health checks for children and immunization services. In addition, 63 per cent of countries reported disruptions in antenatal checkups and 59 per cent in post-natal care.

A [recent WHO survey](#) based on responses from 105 countries revealed that 52 per cent of countries reported disruptions in health services for sick children and 51 per cent in services for management of malnutrition.

Health interventions such as these are critical for stopping preventable newborn and child deaths. For example, women who receive care by professional midwives trained according to international standards are 16 per cent less likely to lose their baby and 24 per cent less likely to experience pre-term birth, [according to WHO](#).

"The fact that today more children live to see their first birthday than any time in history is a true mark of what can be achieved when the world puts health and well-being at the centre of our response," said Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. "Now, we must not let the COVID-19 pandemic turn back remarkable progress for our children and future generations. Rather, it's time to use what we know works to save lives, and keep investing in stronger, resilient health systems."

Based on the responses from countries that participated in the UNICEF and WHO surveys, the most commonly cited reasons for health service disruptions included parents avoiding health centers for fear of infection; transport restrictions; suspension or closure of services and facilities; fewer healthcare workers due to diversions or fear of infection due to shortages in personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves; and greater financial difficulties. Afghanistan, Bolivia, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Libya, Madagascar, Pakistan, Sudan and Yemen are among the hardest hit countries.

Seven of the nine countries had high child mortality rates of more than 50 deaths per 1000 live births among children under five in 2019. In Afghanistan,

where 1 in 17 children died before reaching age 5 in 2019, the Ministry of Health reported a significant reduction in visits to health facilities. Out of fear of contracting the COVID-19 virus, families are de-prioritizing pre- and post-natal care, adding to the risk faced by pregnant women and newborn babies.

Even before COVID-19, newborns were at highest risk of death. In 2019, a newborn baby died every 13 seconds. Moreover, 47 per cent of all under-five deaths occurred in the neonatal period, up from 40 per cent in 1990. With severe disruptions in essential health services, newborn babies could be at much higher risk of dying. For example, in Cameroon, where 1 out of every 38 newborns died in 2019, the UNICEF survey reported an estimated 75 per cent disruptions in services for essential newborn care, antenatal check-ups, obstetric care and post-natal care.

In May, initial modelling by Johns Hopkins University showed that [almost 6,000 additional children](#) could die per day due to disruptions due to COVID-19.

These reports and surveys highlight the need for urgent action to restore and improve childbirth services and antenatal and postnatal care for mothers and babies, including having skilled health workers to care for them at birth. Working with parents to assuage their fears and reassure them is also important.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has put years of global progress to end preventable child deaths in serious jeopardy,” said Muhammad Ali Pate, Global Director for Health, Nutrition and Population at the World Bank. “It is essential to protect life-saving services which have been key to reducing child mortality. We will continue to work with governments and partners to reinforce healthcare systems to ensure mothers and children get the services they need.”

“The new report demonstrates the ongoing progress worldwide in reducing child mortality,” said John Wilmoth, Director of the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. “While the report highlights the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on interventions that are critical for children’s health, it also draws attention to the need to redress the vast inequities in a child's prospects for survival and good health.”

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Download photos, broll, the full child mortality estimates report and data files [here](#). For the UNICEF survey on disruptions due to COVID-19, [click here](#).

These links will go live after 00.01 GMT 9 September.

Main report landing page: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/levels-and-trends-in-child-mortality/>

Datasets: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/child-mortality/>

Narrative page <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-survival/under-five-mortality/>

## About

## UN

## IGME

The United Nations Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation or UN IGME was formed in 2004 to share data on child mortality, improve methods for child mortality estimation, report on progress towards child survival goals and enhance country capacity to produce timely and properly assessed estimates of child mortality. UN IGME is led by UNICEF and includes the World Health Organization, the World Bank Group and the United Nations Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. For more information visit: <http://www.childmortality.org/>

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