

Media Update

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UNICEF & WHO

JOINT PRESS RELEASE

COVID-19 pandemic fuels largest continued backslide in vaccinations in three decades

WHO and UNICEF sound the alarm as new data shows global vaccination coverage continued to decline in 2021, with 25 million infants missing out on lifesaving vaccines

GENEVA/NEW YORK, 15 July 2022 – The largest sustained decline in childhood vaccinations in approximately 30 years has been recorded in official data published today by WHO and UNICEF.

The percentage of children who received three doses of the vaccine against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis (DTP3) – a marker for immunization coverage within and across countries – fell 5 percentage points between 2019 and 2021 to 81 per cent.

As a result, 25 million children missed out on one or more doses of DTP through routine immunization services in 2021 alone. This is 2 million more than those who missed out in 2020 and 6 million more than in 2019, highlighting the growing number of children at risk from devastating but preventable diseases. The decline was due to many factors including an increased number of children living in conflict and fragile settings where immunization access is often challenging, increased misinformation and COVID-19 related issues such as service and supply chain disruptions, resource diversion to response efforts, and containment measures that limited immunization service access and availability.

“This is a red alert for child health. We are witnessing the largest sustained drop in childhood immunization in a generation. The consequences will be measured in lives,” said Catherine Russell, UNICEF Executive Director. “While

a pandemic hangover was expected last year as a result of COVID-19 disruptions and lockdowns, what we are seeing now is a continued decline. COVID-19 is not an excuse. We need immunization catch-ups for the missing millions or we will inevitably witness more outbreaks, more sick children and greater pressure on already strained health systems.”

18 million of the 25 million children did not receive a single dose of DTP during the year, the vast majority of whom live in low- and middle-income countries, with India, Nigeria, Indonesia, Ethiopia and the Philippines recording the highest numbers. Among countries¹ with the largest relative increases in the number of children who did not receive a single vaccine between 2019 and 2021 are Myanmar and Mozambique.

Globally, over a quarter of the coverage of HPV vaccines that was achieved in 2019 has been lost. This has grave consequences for the health of women and girls, as global coverage of the first dose of human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine is only 15%, despite the first vaccines being licensed over 15 years ago.

It was hoped that 2021 would be a year of recovery during which strained immunization programmes would rebuild and the cohort of children missed in 2020 would be caught-up. Instead, DTP3 coverage was set back to its lowest level since 2008 which, along with declines in coverage for other basic vaccines, pushed the world off-track to meet global goals, including the immunization indicator for the Sustainable Development Goals.

This historic backsliding in rates of immunization is happening against a backdrop of rapidly rising rates of severe acute malnutrition. A malnourished child already has weakened immunity and missed vaccinations can mean common childhood illnesses quickly become lethal to them. The convergence of a hunger crisis with a growing immunization gap threatens to create the conditions for a child survival crisis.

Vaccine coverage dropped in every region, with the East Asia and Pacific region recording the steepest reversal in DTP3 coverage, falling nine percentage points in just two years.

“Planning and tackling COVID-19 should also go hand-in-hand with vaccinating for killer diseases like measles, pneumonia and diarrhea,” said Dr Tedros

¹ Of countries with at least 10,000 zero-dose children in 2021

Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General. “It’s not a question of either/or, it’s possible to do both”.

Some countries notably held off declines. Uganda maintained high levels of coverage in routine immunization programmes, whilst rolling out a targeted COVID-19 vaccination programme to protect priority populations, including health workers. Similarly, Pakistan returned to pre-pandemic levels of coverage thanks to high-level government commitment and significant catch-up immunization efforts. To achieve this in the midst of a pandemic, when healthcare systems and health workers were under significant strain, should be applauded.

Monumental efforts will be required to reach universal levels of coverage and to prevent outbreaks. Inadequate coverage levels have already resulted in avoidable outbreaks of measles and polio in the past 12 months, underscoring the vital role of immunization in keeping children, adolescents, adults, and societies healthy.

First dose measles coverage dropped to 81 per cent in 2021, also the lowest level since 2008. This meant 24.7 million children missed their first measles dose in 2021, 5.3 million more than in 2019. A further 14.7 million did not receive their needed second dose. Similarly, compared to 2019, 6.7 million more children missed the third dose of polio vaccine and 3.5 million missed the first dose of the HPV vaccine- which protects girls against cervical cancer later in life.

The sharp two-year decline follows almost a decade of stalled progress, underscoring the need to not only address pandemic-related disruptions but also systemic immunization challenges to ensure every child and adolescent is reached.

WHO and UNICEF are working with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance and other partners to deliver the global Immunization Agenda 2030 (IA2030), a strategy for all countries and relevant global partners to achieve set goals on preventing diseases through immunization and delivering vaccines to everyone, everywhere, at every age.

“It’s heart-breaking to see more children losing out on protection from preventable diseases for a second year in a row. The priority of the Alliance must be to help countries to maintain, restore and strengthen routine immunization alongside executing ambitious COVID-19 vaccination plans, not

just through vaccines but also tailored structural support for the health systems that will administer them,” said Dr Seth Berkley, CEO of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.

The IA2030 partners call on governments and relevant actors to:

- Intensify efforts for catch-up vaccination to address backsliding on routine immunization, and expand outreach services in underserved areas to reach missed children and implement campaigns to prevent outbreaks;
- Implement evidence-based, people-centred, and tailored strategies to build trust in vaccines and immunization, counter misinformation and increase vaccine uptake particularly among vulnerable communities;
- Ensure current pandemic preparedness and response and the global health architecture strengthening efforts lead to investment in primary health care (PHC) services, with explicit support to strengthen and sustain essential immunization;
- Ensure political commitment from national governments and increase domestic resource allocation to strengthen and sustain immunization within PHC;
- Prioritize health information and disease surveillance systems strengthening to provide the data and monitoring needed for programmes to have maximum impact; and
- Leverage and increase investment in research to develop and improve new and existing vaccines and immunization services that can achieve community needs and deliver on IA2030 goals.

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Notes for editors:

Please note – some links will not be available until the embargo lifts

Access the UNICEF dataset (data will be updated to reflect the new WUENIC release once embargo lifts): [Overview page](#), [Full datasets](#), [Data visualisation](#), [Country profiles](#)

Access the WHO dataset (data will be updated to reflect the new WUENIC release once embargo lifts): [Global dashboard](#), [Full datasets](#), [information page](#)

Download content: WHO [photo gallery](#) and [social media content](#), [immunization page](#), [coverage fact sheet](#) and [WUENIC Q&A](#), [UNICEF multimedia](#) and [immunization page](#)

Read the Guiding Principles for recovering, building resiliency, and strengthening of immunization in 2022 and beyond here

About the data

Based on country-reported data, the official WHO and UNICEF estimates of national immunization coverage (WUENIC) provide the world's largest and most comprehensive data-set on immunization trends for vaccinations against 13 diseases given through regular health systems - normally at clinics, community centres, outreach services, or health worker visits. For 2021, data were provided from 177 countries.

About WHO

Dedicated to the well-being of all people and guided by science, the World Health Organization leads and champions global efforts to give everyone, everywhere an equal chance at a safe and healthy life. We are the UN agency for health that connects nations, partners and people on the front lines in 150+ locations – leading the world's response to health emergencies, preventing disease, addressing the root causes of health issues and expanding access to medicines and health care. Our mission is to promote health, keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable.

For more information about WHO and its work, visit: www.who.int

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About UNICEF

UNICEF works in some of the world's toughest places, to reach the world's most disadvantaged children. Across more than 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone. For more information about UNICEF and its work, visit: www.unicef.org

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About Immunization Agenda 2030:

[The Immunization Agenda 2030 \(IA2030\)](#) is an ambitious global strategy to maximize the lifesaving impact of vaccines -one of the most successful and cost-effective public health interventions of all time. IA2030 aims to reduce by half the number of children who still miss out on essential vaccines, achieve 500 introductions of new or under-used vaccines in low- and middle-income countries, and achieve 90 per cent coverage for key life-saving vaccines. Achieving these goals would avert over 50 million deaths and help build healthcare systems that can withstand the impact of pandemics and deliver

rapid vaccination response. The strategy was endorsed by all countries through the 73rd World Health Assembly and is a commitment of IA2030 partners comprised of UN agencies, global health initiatives (such as [Gavi](#), [the Vaccine Alliance](#), [the Global Polio Eradication Initiative](#), [the Measles & Rubella Initiative](#)), non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, faith-based organizations and academia. For more information on IA2030 partners, please visit the [partners commitment page](#).

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