Backslide in Global Childhood Vaccinations

Worldwide childhood vaccinations continued to decline in 2021, fueled by a multitude of factors from COVID-19 to challenging immunization settings, according to a statement by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

The percentage of children who received 3 doses of the vaccine against diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTP)—a marker for immunization coverage within and across countries—fell 5 percentage points to 81% in 2021 from 86% in 2019, the statement reported. An estimated 25 million children missed out on 1 or more DTP doses in 2021, which is 2 million more than those who missed out in 2020 and 6 million more than in 2019.

First-dose measles coverage dropped to 81% in 2021, the lowest level since 2008. This meant that 24.7 million children missed their first measles dose in 2021 (5.3 million more than in 2019) and 14.7 million did not receive their needed second dose, the statement reported. Additionally, compared with 2019, 6.7 million more children missed the third dose of the polio vaccine and 3.5 million missed the first dose of the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine. Globally, overall first-dose coverage of the HPV vaccine stands at just 15%, according to the statement.

Factors driving these declines, the statement noted, include increasing numbers of children living in conflict and settings where immunization access is challenging, increased misinformation, and COVID-19–related issues such as service and supply chain disruptions and containment measures that limited immunization services.

“This is a red alert for child health,” Catherine Russell, UNICEF executive director, said in the statement. “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.”

Transport and Unintentional Injuries Among Adolescents and Young Adults

A combination of transport-related and unintentional injuries accounted for one-quarter of deaths among adolescents and young adults worldwide in 2019, showing little improvement from 3 decades earlier, according to a study in The Lancet Public Health.

Researchers analyzed deaths and disability-adjusted life-years (DALYs) attributed to transport and unintentional injuries for young people aged 10 through 24 years in 204 countries using the Global Burden of Disease, Injuries, and Risk Factors 2019 Study. The study reports changes from 1990.

In 2019, 369,061 deaths were caused by transport and unintentional injuries combined, of which 214,337 or 58% were transport-related, and 31.1 million DALYs, of which 16.2 million or 52% were transport-related. These accounted for approximately 25% of deaths and 14% of DALYs in the age group in 2019 compared with 26% of deaths and 17% of DALYs in 1990.

From 1990 to 2019, global mortality rates for transport injuries declined 34.4%, from 17.5 to 11.5 per 100,000, and for unintentional injuries by 47.7%, from 15.9 to 8.3 per 100,000. However, the absolute number of deaths increased in low-sociodemographic index (SDI) nations by 80.5% to 42,774 for transport injuries and by 39.4% to 31,961 for unintentional injuries.

“As other causes of mortality are addressed, inadequate progress in reducing transport and unintentional injury mortality as a proportion of adolescent deaths becomes apparent. The relative shift in the burden of injury from high-SDI countries to low- and low-middle-SDI countries necessitates focused action, including global donor, government, and industry investment in injury prevention,” the authors wrote.

COVID-19 Health Policies and Economies in Nordic Countries

Looser COVID-19 health policies in Sweden during the pandemic did not translate into better short-term economic performance, according to a study in the Journal of Global Health.

Early in the pandemic, other Nordic countries implemented stricter measures such as lockdowns and took more protective actions to try to limit COVID-19.

The study examined epidemiological, health system utilization, health policy, and economic data from the 5 countries in the Nordic region (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) for January 2020 through January 3, 2021. Minimal socioeconomic, cultural, and geographical differences between the countries allow for comparative analysis.

Researchers reported Sweden had the largest COVID-19 incidence and mortality, and the highest average weekly percent change for both indicators; Denmark had the highest number of COVID-19 tests per capita; and Norway had a significant increase in unemployment while the percentage change in real gross domestic product (GDP) was insignificant for all countries.

“Although Sweden had chosen looser COVID-19 health policies to benefit its economy, there is no evidence that this had any short-term economic benefits, while costing disproportionate disease transmission and mortality numbers compared to neighboring countries,” the authors wrote. – Howard D. Larkin

Note: Source references are available through embedded hyperlinks in the article text online.