

## **Latin America and Caribbean face an “avalanche of worsening health issues” if COVID-19 disruption of health services continues, PAHO warns**

*Director reports that more than 300,000 children have missed routine immunization. PAHO works to help regional countries find new strategies for delivering vital services and care.*

**WASHINGTON, D.C., July 28, 2021 (PAHO)** --The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted essential health services in most countries and territories in Latin America and the Caribbean, threatening immunization of children and care of expectant mothers and people with chronic conditions, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director Carissa F. Etienne warned.

“We therefore urge countries to ensure their COVID-19 responses do not leave other essential health services, like routine immunizations, behind,” Dr. Etienne said at her weekly press briefing. “These services are not optional,” she said, adding that PAHO is helping countries “adjust and rethink how essential care is delivered at the first level.”

She said that more than 300,000 children, mostly in Mexico and Brazil, have missed routine immunizations, “leaving them vulnerable to deadly yet preventable infections.”

“Coverage of the first dose of measles vaccines dropped by 10% in eight countries in the Americas, including Venezuela, Panama, and Brazil, and dropped as much as 20% in Suriname,” she continued. “If we do not reverse these trends, we risk an avalanche of worsening health issues.”

She added that in a recent survey of health services in the region, 97% of participating countries and territories

reported disrupted health services while 45% reported disruptions in at least half of their health services.

“Soon, COVID-19 will not be the only health crisis demanding countries’ attention,” Dr. Etienne said.

PAHO is supporting countries in finding alternatives for delivering health services. Many health systems, including in Chile and Peru, have embraced telemedicine, while others have launched community outreach programs so patients can get medical care while they’re in their homes.

The PAHO Director advised countries to hire and train additional staff so that all health workers have the tools and resources to safely provide care. Asserting that health workers must be “fairly compensated for their extraordinary efforts,” she said Chile recently approved a pay increase to providers who have been critical to the COVID-19 response.

“We know that the economic blowback of this pandemic is forcing countries to make difficult choices on where to prioritize spending, but we cannot afford to cut corners on health,” she said.

“That is why investing in the first level of care now is a smart choice so we can reverse trends more efficiently and equitably than if we wait for health crises to surface,” she said. “As the adage goes: ‘an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.’”

### **Epidemiological situation**

Turning to the pandemic’s continued “devastating toll in our region,” she said that Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, and Paraguay are among countries reporting the world's highest weekly death rates.

The Mexican states of Baja California Sur, Quintana Roo and Yucatan are reporting a rise in new infections. In Central America, cases are reportedly accelerating in Guatemala and remain high in Panama. Cuba is experiencing higher COVID-19 infection and death rates than at any point in the pandemic, and all age groups are affected.

Cases are decreasing among several South American countries, although hotspots have been reported in Argentinian provinces bordering Bolivia and Chile, and in Colombia's Amazon region.

In total, over 1.26 million COVID-19 cases and nearly 29,000 deaths were reported in the Americas in the past week, Dr. Etienne said.

While infections mount, "our region has yet to access the vaccines it needs to keep our populations safe," she said. "So far, just 16.6% of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean has been fully vaccinated against COVID-19."

She also called attention to World Hepatitis Day, celebrated July 28. The survey reporting broad disruption of essential health services also reported that diagnosis and treatment of hepatitis B and C have been interrupted by the COVID-19 response.

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The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) works with the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of its population. Founded in 1902, it is the world's oldest international public health agency. It serves as the Regional Office of WHO for the Americas and is the specialized health agency of the Inter-American system.

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