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News release

New UN report: 43.2 million people suffer from hunger in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the region has higher levels of overweight and obesity than the global estimate.

The Regional Overview 2023 indicates that, despite halting the upward trend in the last period, hunger levels in the region remain above the 2019 figures prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. In addition, 8.6% of children under five years of age are overweight.



Washington, DC./Santiago de Chile, 9 November 2023 (PAHO) – The new United Nations report, [Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2023](#), states that 6.5% of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean suffers

from hunger, or 43.2 million people.

Although this figure represents a slight improvement of 0.5 percentage points over the previous measurement, the prevalence of hunger in the region is still 0.9 percentage points above the 2019 records prior to the outbreak of COVID-19.

Moreover, the scenario is disparate at the sub-regional level. In South America, the number of hungry people declined by 3.5 million between 2021 and 2022. However, there are 6 million additional undernourished people compared to the pre-COVID-19 scenario.

In Mesoamerica, 9.1 million people were hungry in 2022, which means a prevalence of 5.1%. This figure does not reflect any significant variation from the previous measurement.

The scenario is different in the Caribbean. In this subregion, 7.2 million people experienced hunger in 2022, with a prevalence of 16.3%. Compared to 2021, this number increased by 700,000. Between 2019 and 2022, the increase was one million people, with the highest prevalence in Haiti.

"The hunger figures in our region continue to be worrying. We see how we are moving further and further away from meeting the 2030 agenda, and we have not yet managed to improve the figures before the crisis unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our region has persistent challenges such as inequality, poverty, and climate change, which have reversed progress in the fight against hunger for at least 13 years. This scenario obliges us to work together and act as soon as possible," said Mario Lubetkin, FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Lola Castro, Regional Director of the World Food Programme (WFP), said that "it is necessary to keep people at the center of all solutions to food insecurity and malnutrition, particularly in the current context of climate emergency. In support of regional governments, we are promoting actions that protect the most vulnerable people and transform food systems to make them more resilient, as well as accompanying efforts through holistic public policies to promote healthy and affordable diets".

Food insecurity continues to rise in the region

The report also informs that, in 2022, 247.8 million people in the region experienced moderate or severe food insecurity. That is, they were forced to reduce the quality or quantity of the food they consumed or even went without food, went hungry, and, in the most extreme case, went days without eating,

putting their health and well-being at serious risk. This figure represents a decrease of 16.5 million from 2021.

In South America, more than a third (36.4%) of the population suffered moderate or severe food insecurity. In Mesoamerica, the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity reached 34.5 % in 2022, which represented an increase of 0.4 percentage points, or 1.3 million additional people, compared to 2021. In the Caribbean, meanwhile, during 2022, 60.6 % of the population experienced moderate or severe food insecurity.

The United Nations report notes that inequalities in Latin America and the Caribbean significantly impact the food security of the most vulnerable people. The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity continues to affect women more than men. Although the gap narrowed in the region, it is still 9.1 percentage points, with Latin America and the Caribbean being the region with "In 2022, moderate or severe food insecurity in rural areas was 8.3 percentage points higher than in urban areas. Once again, it is the rural populations who are left behind, and that is why we must prioritize them in programs and public policies," said Rossana Polastri, Regional Director of the United Nations International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) for Latin America and the Caribbean.

The region faces the challenge of malnutrition

Latin America and the Caribbean is increasingly facing the complex problem of malnutrition, which encompasses both undernutrition - stunting, childhood wasting, and vitamin and mineral deficiencies - and overweight and obesity.

According to the report, the region experienced an increase in the prevalence of overweight in children under 5 between 2000 and 2022 and the prevalence of obesity in adults between 2000 and 2016, in both cases exceeding the global average.

Between 2020 and 2022, in the context of the pandemic, the prevalence of overweight in children under 5 years of age increased slightly from 8.3 % to 8.6 %, with a more significant increase in South America, a milder increase in Mesoamerica and remaining stable in the Caribbean. In 2022, the prevalence of overweight in children under 5 years of age was 9.7 % in South America, 6.7 % in Mesoamerica, and 6.6 % in the Caribbean.

"Overweight and obesity are a growing challenge, responsible for approximately 2.8 million deaths" from noncommunicable diseases in 2021 in the Americas, said Dr. Jarbas Barbosa, PAHO Director. "In the last 50 years, overweight and obesity rates tripled, affecting 62.5% of the population in the region," he added

and considered the regional prevalence of overweight in children and adolescents at 33.6%, higher than the world average. "It is urgent to advance in the transformation of food systems to ensure healthy eating for all."

Obesity is not the only challenge in this area. Some countries still have a high prevalence of stunting in children under 5 years of age. At the regional level, this figure reached 11.5%. Although a significant reduction has been achieved since 2000, the decline has slowed recently. Between 2000 and 2012, the prevalence decreased by nearly 5 percentage points; between 2012 and 2022, the drop was only 1.2 percentage points.

"In Latin America and the Caribbean, child malnutrition is a problem that, in its different forms, continues to impact children and adolescents. Child undernutrition and overweight are two sides of the same coin and require a comprehensive approach. Childhood overweight has increased alarmingly in the last two decades, threatening the health and well-being of children. At the same time, child malnutrition is prevalent in the region, affecting mostly undeserving, Afro-descendant, and rural populations. UNICEF calls on countries to promote public health policies that protect children's right to nutrition, ensuring their access to nutritious food and adequate services and practices," said Garry Conille, UNICEF Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean.

The high cost of a healthy diet

Latin America and the Caribbean has the highest healthy diet costs worldwide. Between 2020 and 2021, the cost of a healthy diet increased by 5.3% in the region, which can be explained by rising food inflation driven by confinements, global supply chain disruptions, and human resource shortages.

According to Panorama 2023, the average cost of a healthy diet globally is US\$3.66 per person per day. Latin America and the Caribbean is the region with the highest healthy diet cost, reaching US\$4.08 per day. It is followed by Asia, with US\$3.90; Africa, with US\$3.57; North America and Europe, with US\$3.22; and Oceania, with US\$3.20.

The Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2023 is a joint publication of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Links

[Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2023](#)

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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.