

PAHO



Pan American
Health
Organization



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REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE
Americas

News release

PAHO Director calls for immunization gaps to be closed for all vaccines, including COVID-19

2.7 million children in the Americas did not receive the vaccines needed to keep them healthy in 2020, while around 230 million people have still not received a single dose of COVID-19 vaccine in the region.



Roseau, Dominica, DC, 25 April 2022 (PAHO) – In 2020, 2.7 million children in the Americas did not receive the essential vaccines needed to keep them healthy due to interruptions in health services caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, warned Director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), Carissa F. Etienne. Gaps in vaccination coverage, including for COVID-19 vaccines, must be closed, she said.

“While we labored arduously to protect our populations against COVID-19, our routine

immunization programs were severely affected,” Dr. Etienne said at the launch of the 20th Vaccination Week in the Americas in Roseau, Dominica. “But even before COVID-19 brought the world to a sudden halt, our coverage for routine vaccines had fallen below optimal levels,” she added.

According to the PAHO Director, the last two years have set back almost three decades of vaccination progress against polio and measles, creating a real risk for their reintroduction. “Today we are again at the same vaccination coverage levels that we reported in 1994, when these diseases still posed a serious threat to our children, families, and communities,” she said.

Dr. Etienne warned that “if this situation continues, we will pay an extremely high price in loss of life, increased disabilities, and enormous financial costs.”

Since the introduction of COVID-19 vaccines in the region 15 months ago, more than 66% of people in Latin America and the Caribbean have been fully vaccinated. “This seminal achievement is, however, not sufficient,” Dr. Etienne said. “There is still a long way to go to ensure that all populations at risk receive the doses that they need for protection.”

“The inequitable access to COVID-19 vaccines, and widespread vaccine hesitancy, have unmasked concerning fault lines along our regional landscape,” she said, adding that “this is a dilemma that must be addressed sooner rather than later.” Vaccination Week is an opportunity to “dispel doubts and promote the benefits of vaccination.”

The Americas have led the fight in the eradication of smallpox, the elimination of polio, measles and rubella, and in the early introduction of new vaccines such as pneumococcal, human papilloma virus (HPV), and rotavirus, among others. This year, the countries and territories of the region plan to immunize around 140 million people for Vaccination Week, which celebrates its 20th anniversary.

Quotes from presidents, ministers and partners of the Americas at the Vaccination Week launch event

Reginald Austrie, Acting Prime Minister of Dominica

“The support from PAHO during the past two years and before has been invaluable. Dominica has been able to fight against COVID-19, limiting the number of deaths and reducing the impact of the virus. Dominica has vaccinated more than 41% of the population but we acknowledge that more of our people should have already received their shots. Dominica was one of the first countries in our region to receive a significant number of donations of vaccines, as well as from the COVAX Facility. Vaccines have, from early on, been available to every eligible Dominican. Access to vaccines therefore has never been a problem during this pandemic but we recommit to increasing our vaccination numbers this week and in the coming months.”

Gabriel Boric, President of Chile

"There is no doubt that vaccines have had tremendous importance in our history and particularly in recent years because of the pandemic. In the face of movements that sometimes question the efficacy and meaning of these mass vaccination processes, we can only defend the achievement of science which, thanks to the collaboration of scientist all over the world, has led to the development of mechanisms to combat terrible situations like the pandemic. However, vaccination rates in countries of the Americas remain very different. We are in a situation where we can either work together to save ourselves or sink on our own."

Guillermo Lasso, President of Ecuador

"After facing the COVID pandemic, the world has understood the importance of vaccines. Not only because they have saved lives but because they have been key to us returning to normal life. Vaccination is our best ally for preventing and protecting us from diseases. This has been proven with the dramatic reduction in COVID-19, the uncrowded hospitals and the empty ICU beds. This has been possible because of our vaccination coverage against COVID-19, which has immunized almost 9 out of 10 Ecuadorians."

Xiomara Castro, President of Honduras

"During the pandemic, regular vaccination coverage declined, which is why I have called for our national immunization programs to be strengthened and for the necessary investment to be made to ensure quality, free and universal health in our territories, particularly in areas of greater vulnerability. I join PAHO and WHO in committing to make all possible efforts to bring vaccination to all corners of the country, without discrimination and leaving no one behind."

Dr. Irving McIntyre, Minister of Health, Wellness and New Health Investment of Dominica

"Dominica's Expanded Program of Immunization offers vaccines free of charge, at the primary health care level, throughout the life course, against diseases that include diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, measles, mumps, rubella, tuberculosis, poliomyelitis and hepatitis. In 2019, we also saw the successful introduction of the HPV vaccine for adolescents which had one of the highest introductory coverage in the region, reaching approximately 92% of adolescents. More recently, we introduced the COVID-19 vaccines with a current coverage of over 43% of the total population being fully vaccinated. In order to make the best use of COVID-19 vaccines and to accelerate vaccination uptake, we need to implement unconventional and non-traditional concepts in these unprecedented times, including the mobile vaccination team and the launch of a digital vaccination certificate."

Dr Rochelle Walensky, Director of the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

"The decades of effort put into building immunization programs around the world, done in partnership with the countries' public health programs, helped lay the foundation for our ability to vaccinate the world against COVID-19. Capitalizing on the work put in

place to rapidly scale-up vaccination support for COVID-19 will provide many future dividends as we vaccinate against other diseases. We will only achieve our goals by working together. You have the United States government as your partners in this work.”

Dr Carla Barnett, Secretary-general of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)

“Vaccination has allowed the Caribbean to eliminate measles, smallpox, poliomyelitis, and rubella and congenital rubella syndrome. Unfortunately, according to PAHO, there is a less than average uptake of COVID-19 vaccines as well as an observable change in the trajectory of childhood immunizations. In order to address the issue of vaccine hesitancy, the CARICOM Secretariat is collaborating with CARPHA, PAHO, civil society and others to redouble and accelerate public information and education efforts to address disinformation, myths and other drivers and enablers of vaccine hesitancy.”

Links

[Vaccination Week in the Americas](#)

[Video of Launch event](#)

[20th Vaccination Week in the Americas aims to vaccinate nearly 140 million people](#)

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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.