


Protecting Children from Violence in the Time of COVID-19:

Disruptions in prevention
and response services





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VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Violence is an all-too-real part of life for children around the globe – regardless of their economic circumstances and sociocultural background – with both immediate and long-term consequences. Available data indicate that children’s experience of violence is widespread, taking different forms: About half the world’s children are subjected to corporal punishment at home; roughly 3 in 4 children between the ages of 2 and 4 years receive violent discipline by parents and other primary caregivers; half of students aged 13 to 15 experience peer violence in and around school; and 1 in 3 adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 have been victims of intimate partner violence.¹

As daily lives and communities are upended by COVID-19, concern is mounting that violence against children may increase. Children with a history of abuse may find themselves even more vulnerable, both at home and online, and may experience more frequent and severe acts of violence. Others may be victimized for the first time.

Children’s exposure to increased protection risks as a result of the coronavirus crisis may occur through a number of pathways. The pandemic could result in loss of parental care due to death, illness or separation, thereby placing children at heightened risk for violence, neglect and exploitation. Added stressors placed

on families due to economic uncertainty, increased caregiving responsibilities and social isolation can exacerbate tensions at home, both in the short and long term. Additionally, many of the prevention and control measures adopted by countries to contain the coronavirus have resulted in disruptions of the reporting and referral mechanisms of child protection services, leaving many children and families vulnerable. These measures have also affected delivery of vital support and treatment services as well as contact with informal support networks.

During the current crisis, identifying children at risk is inherently more challenging, given that many adults who would typically recognize signs of abuse, such as teachers, childcare workers, coaches, extended family and community members, and child and family welfare workers, are no longer in regular contact with children. Indeed, a growing body of evidence supports the notion that school closures as well as the interruption of child protection services have inhibited child maltreatment reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic.² Understanding the current status of violence prevention and response services is therefore essential to assessing risks to children. It is also important to call attention to immediate and long-term measures that need to be put in place to ensure the safety and well-being of children amidst the pandemic’s socioeconomic fallout.

The impact of crises on services related to violence against children

Studies of past epidemics and crises have documented devastating impacts on the reporting of violence against children and the delivery of related services. During the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, for example, systems such as child welfare structures and community mechanisms were weakened, and child protection responses were delayed or otherwise affected.³ A systematic review that explored child abuse within the context of natural disasters and conflicts found that, while the level of violence against children increased after the onset of many emergencies, reporting of such violence was lower as a result of disruptions in services, infrastructure and reporting mechanisms.⁴ In the age of COVID-19, major disruptions have been reported in even the most developed countries. A survey conducted from mid-March to mid-April 2020 of a stratified random sample of 169 professional social service and child protection providers from five Swiss cantons found that nearly half (45 per cent) reported restrictions in the provision of child protection services.⁵ The greatest challenge mentioned was the inability to carry out assessments of alleged child maltreatment since home visits were, for the most part, no longer being conducted.



Methods and data sources

The data presented in this publication are derived from UNICEF's Socioeconomic Impact Survey of COVID-19 Response. The survey collected information from UNICEF's network of 157 country offices on disruptions in service provision as a result of the coronavirus, at the national level, across different sectors. The 157 programme countries where UNICEF operates include all 138 low- and middle-income countries, plus 19 high-income countries. These 157 countries are home to 90 per cent of the world's population of children. UNICEF country offices were asked to provide an assessment of the level of disruption in five services (shown on page 10) related to violence against children (VAC). As of 14 August 2020, 136 country offices had reported on these services. Thus, the results reflect the situation in 87 per cent of UNICEF programme countries, which are home to 1.9 billion children.

Latin America and the Caribbean	35	36	97	95	95
East Asia and Pacific	24	27	89	95	89
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	21	21	100	100	70
West and Central Africa	21	24	88	93	93
Eastern and Southern Africa	15	23	65	66	66
Middle East and North Africa	13	18	72	77	75
South Asia	7	8	88	100	100
Total	136	157	87	91	82
	Number of countries that reported on VAC-related services	Number of countries that received the survey	Response rate (%)	Population coverage (proportion of children covered by data out of the total number of children living in UNICEF programme countries, %)	Population coverage (proportion of children covered by data out of the total number of children living in all countries, %)

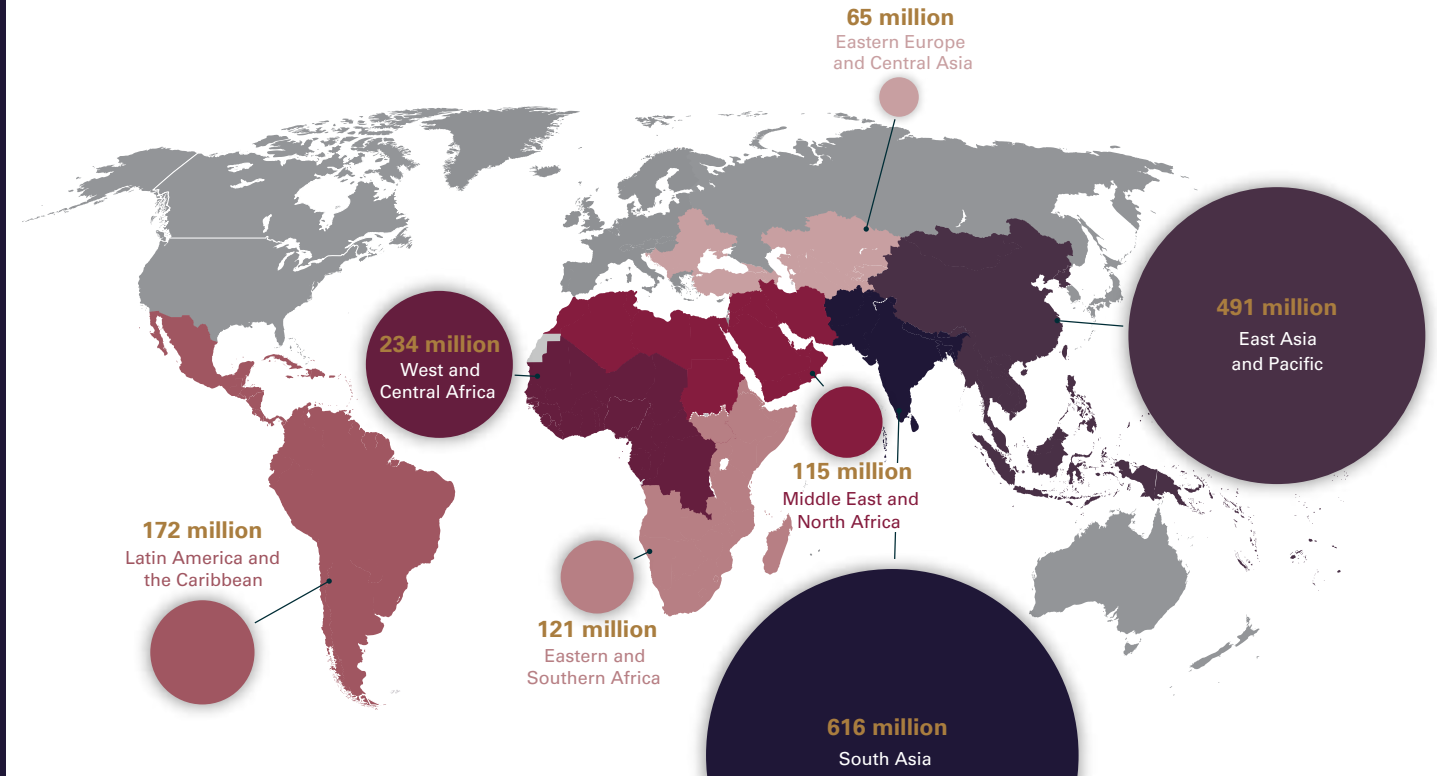
Data on child protection services were gathered between 1 May and 14 August 2020, and reflect the situation at the time the country offices submitted the survey. Although every effort was made to document and verify the type of disruption, the questions asked were left open to some level of interpretation. Also, the availability and quality of data from service providers remain weak in many countries, compromising the ability to accurately report on changes in coverage and use of services. Finally, because the types of services vary by country, respondents used their knowledge of the local context to report on what had occurred. Country office responses relied on varying sources and, in some cases, represent best estimates; therefore, figures may not capture the full national response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



A woman is seen from the back, wearing a white long-sleeved top and a pink skirt. She is standing in a room with patterned wallpaper and a bed with a floral bedspread. The scene is dimly lit, with a dark blue overlay on the right side containing text.

**WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO
VIOLENCE PREVENTION
AND RESPONSE SERVICES?**

Figure 1. Number of children aged 0 to 17 years living in countries that have reported any level of disruption in any services related to violence against children, total and by region



1.8 billion children live in the 104 countries where violence prevention and response services have been disrupted due to COVID-19

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