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A new report released by UNICEF finds that 67 million children across the

world missed out on either some or all routine vaccinations between 2019

and 2021, and 48 million children didn't receive a single dose during this

"We've seen the largest sustained decline in the number of children reached

with their basic childhood immunizations," says Lily Caprani, chief of global

"And the consequences of that will be measured in children's lives. It's the

But preliminary data from 2022 (not included in the report) suggests some

The unvaccinated children born just before the COVID-19 pandemic, or

received these vaccines, typically Hepatitis B, polio, measles, rotavirus,

It's a reflection of how the pandemic disrupted basic health services, says

Brian Keeley, editor-in-chief of UNICEF's annual report, State of the World's

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of fear of visiting a health facility during a pandemic."

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"Clinics were closed," says Keeley. "Families were on lockdown, they may not

[have] been able to travel or they may not have been willing to travel because

And countries had to make tough choices about how best to prioritize funds

and health resources, he adds. In some cases, that resulted in "resources

"We saw that hospitals, the health facilities were overloaded with COVID

office in the Philippines. "In the meantime, the resources also had to be

cases," says Dr. Malalay Ahmadzai, chief of health and nutrition at UNICEF's

shifted to address the needs of hospitals in terms of the equipment, in terms

Routine health services for women, children and adolescents were disrupted

Countries in Africa and South Asia have the highest number of under-

vaccinated kids and those with zero doses. The totals in West and Central

Africa come to 6.8 million children. India leads the world with the largest

number of children with zero doses – 2.7 million – followed by Nigeria with

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"This is really a crisis within a crisis," says Kate O'Brien, director of the

"The backsliding of the immunization program is a direct result of the

That's because many countries are already seeing rising cases of the

"We're seeing a pretty unprecedented number of measles outbreaks," says

Last year, 33 countries reported "large or disruptive cases of measles," he

And the total number of measles cases doubled from 2021 to 2022, says

Keeley, with major outbreaks in India, Somalia, Nigeria, Afghanistan and

Measles usually results in a high fever followed by a rash. The disease can

cause serious complications, like blindness, encephalitis, severe diarrhea,

dehydration and pneumonia. According to the WHO, there were almost 10

million cases of measles around the world in 2018, and more than 140,000

"When you look at the numbers for 2022, the number of children paralyzed

by polio was up 60% [compared to] the previous year," he says. Some 800

"For my generation, we thought [polio] was over. We thought it was dealt

with. It isn't. If we don't keep up efforts to vaccinate every child, this will

There have also been outbreaks of yellow fever in 15 countries, says O'Brien.

countries are countries that in the past had actually conducted preventive

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"All of the diseases we're talking about that are vaccine preventable, the more

you miss children in that community, the more the entire community and

wider society is then vulnerable to a public health emergency," she adds.

The WHO's O'Brien is hopeful that many countries managed to get back on

track with childhood vaccinations in 2022. At least that's what preliminary

"So based on those countries, it looks like we've gotten back to roughly a 2019

The country had "a strong commitment" to the immunization program, she

says. A program called Mission Indradhanush targeted parts of the country

"We know that in 2022 they've had a very good recovery of their program and

Keeley says UNICEF is currently analyzing vaccination data for 2022 and will

But the new UNICEF report finds another troubling trend that will need to be

addressed by public health programs – a decline in people's perception of the

Of the 55 countries surveyed, 52 showed a decline in vaccine confidence. The

remaining three — China, India and Mexico — saw a rise in vaccine

"Given the context of backsliding and escalating outbreaks, we're really

There's been a rise in misinformation about vaccines during the pandemic,

she says, and that needs to be tackled both by social media platforms and

"At the country level," adds Caprani, "it's very important that parents,

nigeria

polio

families and communities have access to reliable, strong, evidence-based

information about the risks of illnesses like measles, polio, diphtheria, and

india

UNICEF estimates at least 200,000 lives have been lost due to these

disruptions in childhood vaccinations, says Caprani.

data from 72 countries suggests, she says.

level, possibly with some improvement."

are really a global leader in this area," adds O'Brien.

have a clearer picture to report later this summer.

One good example is India.

where zero-dose children live.

Losing faith in vaccines

importance of vaccines.

concerned," says Caprani.

health-care providers.

about the benefits of vaccines."

measles

unicef

confidence.

vaccinations

① X

"This is an increased number of countries," she says. "Some of these

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infectious diseases that these childhood vaccines protect against.

says. "That's compared to 22 countries in the previous year."

individuals died. Most were children under the age of 5.

Diseases as infectious as measles can spread quickly in

"So it can very quickly put great strain on health-care

Polio cases also saw a troubling trend, says Keeley.

in a very vulnerable population," she says.

providers trying to treat the consequences of the illness

communities, says Caprani.

cases were reported.

vaccine campaigns" for youngsters.

come back."

Department of Immunization, Vaccines and Biologicals at the World Health

pandemic, and it should be responded to with the same urgency as we have to

as a result, she adds, including childhood immunizations.

being diverted to treat people who were sick with COVID or provide

during it, are now 3 years old — approaching the age when they would have

diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis. So these kids are "completely unprotected,"

largest continuous decline in childhood vaccinations in 30 years."

encouraging signs of an uptick in vaccinations in the past year.

time period.

says Caprani.

Children.

The cost of COVID

emergency services.

of the testing capacity and all that."

2.2 million unvaccinated children.

Organization.

the pandemic."

O'Brien.

Ethiopia.

advocacy at UNICEF.

By Rhitu Chatterjee

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