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Priority policies to reduce inequality in childhood and adolescence



BOX V.1 COVID-19 and its impact on children and adolescents

The negative short-, medium- and long-term impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on children are considerable. Relatively few children and adolescents have contracted COVID-19, and most of those who have come down with the disease have experienced no more than mild symptoms (PAHO, 2020). The indirect effects of the pandemic may be quite significant, however. For example, children may fail to receive other vaccines (especially those administered at school, which they may not be attending because of social distancing measures) or to attend their regular check-ups. Another possible effect may be an increase in teenage pregnancies. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2020) has estimated that there may have been as many as a half million additional early pregnancies in 2020 owing to difficulties in obtaining contraceptives or gaining access to sexual and reproductive health services and to the fact that lockdowns may have increased girls' and adolescents' exposure to domestic sexual violence and abuse.

It is also having an impact on children's educations. According to Human Rights Watch (2020), more than 91% of the world's students did not attend school during much of the first half of 2020 and, according to ECLAC/UNESCO (2020), as of mid-May 2020, more than 160 million students at all grade levels in Latin America and the Caribbean had ceased to attend in-person classes. Information on 33 Latin American and Caribbean countries up to 7 July 2020 confirms that most of them suspended in-person classes at all levels of education. With the advent of the pandemic, online learning platforms have come to the fore, but sizeable gaps in actual access to digital forms of communication remain. In 2016, around 42%, on average, of urban residents in 14 Latin American countries had Internet access in the home, but only 14% of rural residents did (ECLAC, 2019, quoted in ECLAC/UNESCO, 2020). Inequality in access to online learning opportunities will only widen existing gaps in access to information and knowledge (ECLAC/UNESCO, 2020).

In addition, the loss of so many jobs and sources of income, together with the associated economic insecurity, heightens the risk of child labour, sexual exploitation and child marriage. The pressure being felt by family members, especially in households subject to quarantines or lockdowns, may also result in an increase in domestic violence. Another risk is that, as the number of deaths caused by COVID-19 rises, more children will be orphaned and will become more vulnerable than before to trafficking and other types of exploitation, such as sexual exploitation and child labour.

Measures that governments can adopt to address these situations include providing cash transfers as a means of averting child labour, supporting the continuity of remote learning, strengthening safety nets for children who have been orphaned, tracking and addressing incidents of domestic violence and ensuring the continuity of child and adolescent health services.

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), on the basis of Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), *Social Panorama of Latin America, 2018* (LC/PUB.2019/3-P), Santiago, 2019; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean/International Labour Organization (ECLAC/ILO), "The COVID-19 pandemic could increase child labour in Latin America and the Caribbean", *Technical Note*, No. 1, 11 June 2020 [online] https://www.ilo.org/americas/publicaciones/WCMS_747662/lang-en/index.htm; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean/United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ECLAC/UNESCO), "Education in the time of COVID-19", *COVID-19 Report*, Santiago, August 2020; Human Rights Watch, "COVID-19's Devastating Impact on Children", 9 April 2020 [online] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/09/covid-19s-devastating-impact-children>; Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), "Seminario virtual: COVID-19 y el síndrome inflamatorio multisistémico en niños y adolescentes", 28 May 2020 [online] <https://www.paho.org/es/eventos/seminario-virtual-covid-19-sindrome-inflamatorio-multisistemico-ninos-adolescentes>; United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Socioeconomic Consequences of Adolescent Pregnancy in Six Latin American countries: Implementation of the MILENA Methodology in Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Paraguay*, Panama City, 2020.



²¹ See [online] at <http://equityforchildren.org/2012/12/unicef-and-eclac-present-guide-to-estimating-child-poverty/>.

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