Even before COVID-19, over 1 billion children (aged 2–17 years) reported experiencing sexual, physical or emotional violence every year. Across their lifetimes, 1 in 3 women are subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner. Violence against children and against women are highly interconnected. Children who witness or experience violence are more likely to perpetrate it or be victimized in adulthood, thus continuing the cycle of violence.

Measures to contain COVID-19, including movement restrictions and the closure of schools, services, and businesses, have exacerbated economic insecurity, stress and uncertainty: all factors that increase the likelihood of violence against children and women, while cutting them off from social and professional support systems. The crisis has exposed the weaknesses of violence prevention and response efforts. Growing evidence shows that for certain populations — such as girls, ethnic and racial minorities, individuals with disabilities, and refugees — the risks of violence are compounded by structural inequities and historical discriminations.

The pandemic compels us to strengthen prevention and response services to help

© UNICEF/UN0403207/Ahmed Abdalkarim. On 21 November 2020, a mother and her child at the UNICEF breastfeeding room at the Hamdayet Reception Centre in Gedarif. The centre provides a relaxing atmosphere for mothers recently traumatized by the violence they fled in Tigray, Ethiopia.
VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN AND WOMEN UNDER COVID-19

Children and women not only overcome these circumstances, but also achieve physical, mental, and social well-being. Mounting evidence on what works and where there are gaps are a guide for how to do this. UNICEF Innocenti’s Evidence Gap Map visually depicts the state of the evidence, while the Solutions Summit Events provide a forum for academia, government, and actors on the ground to grapple with the latest knowledge and work collectively to end violence.

Thirteen research papers are spotlighted in this digest, including studies that focus on groups that are often underrepresented in research and others that embrace virtual platforms to identify potential victims of violence and provide reporting, referral mechanisms, and support services. By tracking violence in the home from the outset of the pandemic, these studies show the ubiquitous impact of containment measures. However, many studies faced methodological challenges, thus limiting our ability to generalize these lessons to every setting.

The fragility of global gains in gender equality and child protection are evident. Children, adolescents, and women – including those with disabilities, in conflict-affected settings, or with limited socio-economic opportunities – suffered the brunt of the pandemic. 73% of refugee and displaced women interviewed for a study in Africa said intimate partner violence had increased in their communities during the pandemic. Adolescents in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, the State of Palestine, and Jordan reported increased household stress which at times translated into verbal and physical violence. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing inequalities which, in turn, placed some groups at higher risk of contracting the virus and of suffering from its impact, including increased exposure to violence.

From these hard lessons, a few silver linings have emerged. We have unequivocal data on the need to view violence response and prevention efforts as ‘essential services’. We have learned about the role of adequately funded child protection, family welfare services, health care, education systems, and other social support services, in times of distress. Violence risk and protective factors are clearer, and promising interventions are emerging. In addition, we are compiling an ever-growing repository of tools, packages, and recommendations on how to ‘build back better’ and weather future crises.

We are still learning about the most effective violence prevention and mitigation strategies, and there is significant room to improve responses measures. One thing is clear: in order to develop effective gender transformative solutions and opportunities, we must meaningfully involve children, adolescents, activists, community respondents, and other actors on the ground. It is only through engaging their voices that we can hope to adapt programmes, plans, and policies to a radically changed world.

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Can youth empowerment programmes reduce violence against girls during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This paper shows how a youth empowerment programme in Bolivia, including training and job-finding assistance sessions, reduced the reported prevalence of violence against girls during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study conducted a randomized control trial with 600 vulnerable adolescents in four cities in Bolivia.

Findings indicate that seven months after completion, the programme increased girls’ earnings and decreased violence against girls. No reduction in violence was found for boys. The intervention combines various components to improve skills, agency, social networks, and consequently income levels. This increase in earnings could have improved girls’ economic empowerment and played a role in reducing their exposure to violence by removing financial stressors in families.

Violence against children and the COVID-19 pandemic

This evidence review of 48 studies illustrates how responses to the pandemic have changed children’s risk of violence and how the pandemic is affecting prevention and response efforts. It offers ideas for policymakers on how to address violence in the context of a protracted COVID-19 crisis.

The review highlights the need for enhanced coordination across the health, education, law enforcement, housing, child and social protection sectors. It also notes the need for policies that prioritize violence prevention and promote the role of youth in decision-making and programme design. The study recommends that violence prevention and response services should be unconditionally protected and maintained during pandemics. This requires appropriate budgets and human capital to be integrated into pandemic preparedness strategies.

Remote evaluations of violence against women and girls’ interventions: a rapid scoping review of tools, ethics and safety
Seff et al. *BMJ Global Health*, August 2021

This scoping review of 14 studies describes remote data collection methods, reflects on safety and ethical considerations, and offers best practices for remote data collection on violence against women and girls.

Findings show that while participants were often asked to use a safe email or device, the method for verifying safety was rarely specified. Best practices around safety included creating a ‘quick escape’ button for online data collection, explaining to participants how to erase browsing history and application purchases, and asking participants to specify a safe time for researchers to call. Only eight studies offered referrals to study participants who might need such support. None of the studies took place in low- or middle-income countries or humanitarian settings. The findings are complemented with guidance on data security for those designing remote evaluations of violence interventions.
The impact of COVID-19 on women and girls with disabilities: a global assessment and case studies on sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence, and related rights
UNFPA and Women Enabled International, June 2021

This qualitative study provides an assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the rights and well-being of women and girls with disabilities around the world. The results are based on virtual consultations and written survey results from over 300 women, girls, and gender-non-conforming persons with disabilities, as well as their advocates, family members, and support persons.

Findings indicate that women and girls with disabilities experienced increased risks of violence during COVID-19 due to intersecting factors linked to discrimination, stigma, and stereotypes related to gender and disability. In addition, lockdowns make it difficult for women and girls with disabilities to escape an abusive situation and seek help, since in many settings support services became less accessible. The report stresses the importance of placing women and girls with disabilities at the centre of study and programme design and implementation.

Using social media data for assessing children’s exposure to violence during the COVID-19 pandemic
Babvey et al. Child Abuse & Neglect, June 2021

This study proposes a framework to assess changes in children’s exposure to violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, using testimonials and conversational data from over 40 million tweets collected from Twitter users in 16 countries, as well as information gathered from U.S. Reddit users.

Findings show that violence-related subreddits were among the topics with the highest growth after the COVID-19 outbreak.

Twitter data show a significant increase in abusive content during the stay-at-home restrictions. As societies’ reliance on technology grows, including for remote working and learning, greater efforts are needed to increase children’s online safety and prevent technology-facilitated violence towards children.

Violence against women and children during COVID-19—One year on and 100 papers in: A fourth research round up
Bourgault et al. Center for Global Development, April 2021

This paper takes stock of 26 studies that seek to determine whether COVID-19 and containment measures lead to an increase of violence against women and children. Fifteen studies present findings on trends of violence against women and children from pre-pandemic through various stages of the pandemic, with twelve papers finding evidence of increased violence. Ten studies explore risk and protective factors and find that being married, unemployed, losing
household income, food insecurity, and spousal substance abuse were all linked to increased risks of violence. Protective factors include higher education level for either the wife or husband and women’s employment. Gap in knowledge include the types of policies and programmes that are effective during the pandemic, the recovery period to prevent and mitigate violence against women and children, and data on cost-effectiveness.

“Some got married, others don’t want to attend school as they are involved in income-generation”: adolescent experiences following COVID-19 lockdowns in low- and middle-income countries

Jones et al. Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence, April 2021

This report identifies intersecting challenges faced by adolescents in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, the State of Palestine, and Jordan during COVID-19. Results are based on telephone surveys with almost 7,000 adolescents aged 12–19 and qualitative research with a subset of over 400 respondents, including 72 married girls, 38 adolescents with disabilities, and 60 key informants.

Findings indicate that many adolescents faced increased levels of household stress, often resulting in verbal and physical violence. Adolescents’ perception of community violence risks increased, as did reports of theft and sexual violence cases. Most girls in Bangladesh, Jordan, and Palestine described a reduced risk of early marriage due to families’ increased economic challenges and inability to afford weddings. In contrast, girls in rural Ethiopia experienced increased risks of marriage due to poverty and harmful gender norms. The absence of safety networks, including teachers and health workers, also increased risk. Recommendations include listening to adolescents’ experiences and voices, increasing access to mechanisms to seek help and report violence, and supporting caregivers in a context of increased stress and uncertainty, including strategies for positive discipline.

Emerging responses implemented to prevent and respond to violence against women and children in WHO European member states during the COVID-19 pandemic: a scoping review of online media reports

Isabelle Pearson et al. BMJ Open, April 2021

This scoping review of 187 media reports and 165 publications and grey literature provides evidence that a diverse set of measures were taken by European governments and NGOs to maintain and expand violence against women and children service provision during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most frequently reported measures were the use of media and social media to raise awareness of the issue, providing violence against women and children services through online platforms, and expanding and/or maintaining helpline services.

The strength of existing public health systems influenced the choice of strategies, highlighting the need for improving violence prevention and response services during and post-pandemic.

COVID-19 and violence against children: A review of early studies

Cappa et al. Child Abuse & Neglect, April 2021

This article reviews 48 studies on the impact of COVID-19 on violence against children. The review indicates emerging patterns in children’s exposure to violence, including an increase in child abuse-related injuries treated in hospitals and in family violence. There has been a decrease in police reports and referrals to child protective services, with mixed results regarding the number of calls to police or helplines.

The review points out that the limited availability of baseline data and the absence of established measurement standards...
hinder the generation of comparable quality data on violence against children. This is also evident in the different methods, definitions, and protocols being used to try to describe the changing patterns of violence against children. The study provides methodological recommendations on future research on COVID-19 and violence against children and suggests prioritizing the standardization of measurement tools and strengthening the quality and availability of administrative data.

**Violence against children and adolescents in the time of COVID-19**

ECLAC and UNICEF, December 2020

This report examines the exacerbation of risks and the erosion of protection factors relating to violence in the home experienced by adolescents and children, especially girls, within the context of COVID-19 in the Latin America and the Caribbean region. It highlights how pre-existing inequalities in the region—resulting from the gradual deterioration of socioeconomic conditions in the region over the past decade—place some groups at higher risk of contracting the virus and suffering greater impacts. The paper calls for the prioritization of strategies to address violence against children and adolescents within the agendas of the high-level intersectoral bodies created to respond to the COVID-19 crisis and future emergencies. It provides an additional set of specific recommendations, including via collaboration with the private sector.

**The COVID-19 pandemic and maternal mental health in a fragile and conflict-affected setting in Tumaco, Colombia: a cohort study**


The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health have been understudied among vulnerable populations, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings. This longitudinal study analyses how the pandemic is related to early changes in mental health and parenting stress among 1,376 caregivers, many of whom are...
internally displaced persons (IDP), in a conflict-affected setting in Colombia.

Results found that the likelihood of reporting at-risk anxiety, depression, and parental stress increased, suggesting that maternal mental health significantly worsened during the early stages of the pandemic. Mental health decline was stronger for IDPs, participants with lower education or pre-existing mental health conditions, and for those reporting a higher number of stressors, including food insecurity and job loss.

Policies in fragile and conflict-affected settings must mitigate further mental health and socioeconomic problems through an inclusive approach. Increased provision of mental health services and improved social protection is needed.

Immediate impact of stay-at-home orders to control COVID-19 transmission on socioeconomic conditions, food insecurity, mental health, and intimate partner violence in Bangladeshi women and their families: an interrupted time series


This paper explores the immediate impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on women and their families in rural Bangladesh. An interrupted time series was used to compare data on income, food security, and mental health from 2,424 families before the pandemic and during lockdown. The study also assessed women’s experiences of intimate partner violence during the pandemic.

Findings indicate that the lockdown reduced paid work, lowered family income, and increased food insecurity. Mothers’ depression and anxiety symptoms also increased. Among women experiencing emotional or moderate physical violence, over half reported it had increased since the lockdown. The results suggest COVID-19 lockdowns have presented significant economic, psycho-social, and physical risks to the well-being of women and their families across economic strata in rural Bangladesh.

What Happened? How the Humanitarian Response to COVID-19 Failed to Protect Women and Girls

Abwola et al. *International Rescue Committee*, October 2020

This report captures how the pandemic has affected the safety of women and girls in humanitarian emergencies and outlines how the humanitarian response to COVID-19 has largely failed to take their needs and safety into account. 852 women from refugee, displaced and post-conflict settings in 15 African countries are included in this report. These consultations corroborate reports that rates of violence against women and girls have increased. 73% of women reported an increase in intimate partner violence, 51% cited a growth in sexual violence and 32% observed a growth in the levels of early and forced marriage.

Respondents called for ensuring that gender-based violence services are available and accessible by adapting to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19. They also underlined the need for advocacy with local authorities to ensure safe access to basic services.

The findings highlight the importance of the active and meaningful participation of key stakeholders, the importance of transparent and accountable funding for GBV services in humanitarian response plans, and the need for reform of the humanitarian system to support feminist approaches to crisis response.
LIBRARY UPDATE: FACTS AND FIGURES

The UNICEF Innocenti’s Children and COVID-19 Research Library has collected almost 400 research publications exploring the impact of the COVID-19 on violence against women and children (VAWC).

The research covers a range of themes, including domestic violence, physical and mental abuse, violence against children on the move, cyberbullying, youth perspectives, adverse parenting practices, substance use, child marriage, child labour, and disabilities. Much of this research covers low- and middle-income countries and draws on primary data collected during the pandemic.

Overall, the Children and COVID-19 Research Library contains almost 3,000 records. 636 new records have been added in the last quarter (July to mid-September 2021). Beyond VAWC, trending topics in the library include the impact of COVID-19 on health and well-being (including over 1,000 records on mental health), education, and social protection and equity, with less research on nutrition, refugee and migrant youth and children and adolescents with disabilities.

The library includes research from 116 countries with over 600 studies from low- and middle-income countries. Few studies have been collected from conflict-affected or fragile contexts.

Figure 1: number of records to date by content type

- Journal articles: 1,794 (64%)
- Policy reports and briefs: 505 (18%)
- Evidence syntheses and reviews: 208 (8%)
- Others: 273 (10%)

Records updated as of 15 September 2021
EDITORS’ PICK: WHAT’S TRENDING?

Physical activities
The pandemic disproportionally reduced levels of physical activity among youth. In the last quarter we have noticed an increase in research that investigates physical activity and screen-based activity among children and adolescents, notably showing how closures, cancellations, and restrictions on schooling affected the engagement of school-aged children in healthy physical movement. A systematic review protocol synthesized evidence on the effects of lockdowns, social distancing, and other preventive measures on declining physical activity among school-aged children.

Substance use
Increasing evidence is pointing to an alarming increase of substance use among youth during the pandemic. In young adolescents with high impulsivity, low parental monitoring, or specific behavioural traits, the COVID-19 pandemic increased use of nicotine and misuse of prescription drugs. New research has also linked substance use to other serious mental health issues among adolescents, including suicidal ideation and deliberate self-harm.

Race and inequality
Children from historically disadvantaged groups, such as racial minorities and lower socioeconomic status, are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Children with lower socioeconomic status in the US report lower mental health compared to their higher socioeconomic status counterparts, while increased medical mistrust has been shown among the urban youth of colour. Racial discrimination has also been associated with higher parental stress.

Evidence on how educational and socioeconomic inequalities (including gender inequalities) among children have been exacerbated by COVID-19 is also identified in Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Turkey, Barbados and Jamaica, Vietnam, India, Nigeria, Jordan, and other developing countries.

Vaccine hesitancy
Several new pieces of evidence are exploring the determinants of parents hesitancy to vaccinate children against COVID-19. Vaccine hesitancy tends to be linked to concerns about the safety and the efficacy of vaccines, and confusion over conflicting information, implying the need for clear communication, comprehensive assessment of vaccination systems and health education programmes.

Children in disadvantaged and marginalized settings
In the last quarter, a limited number of studies focused on the impact of the pandemic on the well-being of marginalized and disadvantaged children and adolescents, particularly LGBTQ+ teens, children on the move, children of prisoners.

Young LGBTQ+ people were found to be at increased risk of violence and abuse, health conditions, limited access to services, as well as economic vulnerability during the COVID-19 outbreak.

New research has provided insights on the heightened risks faced by forcibly displaced and refugee youth during the pandemic in Jordan, Palestine, and the Eastern Mediterranean region.
USEFUL RESOURCES

- UNICEF Innocenti’s Children and COVID-19 Research Library
- Global Tracker of Studies on COVID-19 and Violence Against Children and Women
- UNDP COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker
- COVID-END COVID-19 Evidence Network to support Decision-making
- Campbell Collaboration COVID-19 response database on public health, economics and social science
- EPPI-Centre’s living map of COVID-19 evidence
- EPPI-Centre’s Living map of systematic reviews of social sciences research evidence on COVID-19
- Evidence Aid COVID-19 collection of systematic reviews
- COVID-19 and children from UNICEF Data
- Save the Children Resource Centre searchable for COVID-19 practitioner and policy content
- SSHAP Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform
- Epistemonikos L*OVE platform on COVID-19 focusing on biomedical and health-related research
- PubMed LitCovid hub focusing on biomedical/clinical and health-related research
- WHO COVID-19 database focusing on biomedical/clinical and health-related research
- Cochrane COVID Rapid Reviews focusing on biomedical/clinical and other health-related research
- University of Oxford’s COVID-19 Government Response Tracker
- Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Centre
- The COVID-Minds Network of longitudinal studies to explore the effects of the pandemic on mental health

© UNICEF/UN0379948/Vinay Panjwani. Rajvi -CSO Volunteer in partnership engages with adolescents to discuss perceptions and experiences on violence and safety with focus on gender based violence in Navranpura, India.