

Childhood Existential Threats: Confronting the Realities of COVID-19, Structural Racism, & Climate Change

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Importance of Childhood for Long-term Health

- Investment in children's health is crucial to ensure lifelong and intergenerational economic benefits
- Early investments in health, education, and development have benefits which multiply throughout the life course, for future generations, and for society as a whole
- Successful societies invest in their children and protect their rights

Society faces a grave, existential, and unprecedented triple threat

- COVID-19
- Systemic racism
- Climate change

COVID-19

The Impact of COVID-19

Children are largely spared the most direct and severe health impacts of COVID-19, but risk being among the pandemic's greatest victims (UNICEF)

Areas of Impact

- Family socioeconomic status
- Educational
- Mental health and bereavement

True impacts on children and families may not be fully known until after the pandemic ends

- Forum for Children's Well-Being, 2021

Issues of Equity

- Harmful effects are not distributed equally
- Most damaging for children in the poorest countries and neighborhoods, and for those already in vulnerable situations



<https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/>

NASEM. 2021. Reimagining a System of Care to Promote the Well-Being of Children and Families: Proceedings of a Workshop. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

Socioeconomic Impacts

- Adults living with children consistently reported greater difficulties with daily expenses, providing adequate food for their families, and being less secure with housing payments
 - Child poverty rates have increased, particularly among Latino and Black children, and those in female-led families
- Food insecurity: Doubled to tripled in US households with children
 - Children who relied on school meals went hungry
- Housing insecurity: Exacerbates disease spread and makes it difficult to track health and vaccination status
 - Detrimental effects on physical and psychological development

<https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/a-look-at-the-economic-effects-of-the-pandemic-for-children/>

<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/child-poverty-increased-nationally-during-covid-especially-among-latino-and-black-children>

Sinha et al. (2020). Child poverty, food insecurity, and respiratory health during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Lancet Respiratory Medicine*, 8(8), 762-763.

Educational Impacts

Schools faced staff shortages, absenteeism, quarantines, rolling closures, struggles with mental health, higher rates of violence and misbehavior, and concerns about lost instruction time



Since March 2020, 97% of students have had their education disrupted
– Forum on Children’s Well-Being

Fall 2019 – Fall 2021

- Larger drop in scores than from Hurricane Katrina
- Gaps in high- and low-poverty schools grew by 15% or more

Profound impact on children with special needs

- Almost 20% regression in development
- 17% of families ceased all special needs practices
- Time spent reading books and playing decreased while screen time increased

NASEM. 2021. Back in School: Addressing the Well-Being of Students in the Wake of COVID-19: Proceedings of a Workshop—in Brief. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2022/03/03/the-pandemic-has-had-devastating-impacts-on-learning-what-will-it-take-to-help-students-catch-up>

Mete Yesil, A., Sencan, B., Omercioglu, E., & Ozmert, E. N. (2022). The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children With Special Needs: A Descriptive Study. Clinical Pediatrics, 61(2), 141-149.

Mental Health & Bereavement

Mental illness and demand for services are at an all-time high

- Crisis predates the pandemic, but has been exacerbated by COVID-19
- Many high school students report feeling much more depressed
- Mental health crises on the rise for both age groups 5-11 and 12-17
- Exacerbation of pre-existing disparities re: access to mental health care

Childhood bereavement: Over 1.5 million children globally lost a primary or secondary caregiver from March 2020 – April 2021

- One US child loses a parent or caregiver for every four COVID deaths - majority of these are children of racial and ethnic minorities
- Experience of loss can have major implications for life trajectory

<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/special-childrens-mental-health>

NASEM. 2022. Responding to the Current Youth Mental Health Crisis and Preventing the Next One: Proceedings of a Workshop—in Brief. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

Hillis et al (2021). Global minimum estimates of children affected by COVID-19-associated orphanhood and deaths of caregivers: a modelling study. The Lancet, 398(10298), 391-402.

Hillis, et al (2021). COVID-19–Associated Orphanhood and Caregiver Death in the United States. Pediatrics, 148(6), e2021053760.

Systemic & Structural Racism

Systemic & Structural Racism

Racism is a root cause of health inequities that has a profound impact on the health status of children, adolescents, emerging adults, and their families

- Racial stress during pregnancy affects children even before they are born
 - Disparities exist in infant mortality and birthweight
- Biological mechanisms and weathering: Youth of color experience higher rates of systemic inflammation linked to chronic stress



Dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism:

“As systemic racism is embedded in all of our social and environmental contexts, it is easy to conclude that systemic racism and COVID-19 are not just coexisting, they are interacting to exacerbate negative outcomes for communities of color” (Jones, 2021)

Trent et al (2019). The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health. *Pediatrics*, 144(2), e20191765.

Schmeer & Tarrence (2018). Racial-ethnic Disparities in Inflammation: Evidence of Weathering in Childhood? *J Health Soc Behav*, 59(3), 411-428.

Jones (2021). The dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism: Navigating our path forward. *School Psychology*, 36(5), 427-431.

Childhood Experiences of Racism

Children experience structural racism through place, education, economic means, and legal means

- Racial discrimination at the institutional level is the primary cause of group differences in social and material conditions – e.g., differences in family socioeconomic status, housing discrimination, education, employment, access to medical care, etc.

Direct effects: Direct experience of racial discrimination associated with twice the risk of developing a mental health problem

- Black and Latino youth are most likely to report negative encounters with adults in the educational system, shopkeepers, and police
- Asian youth report higher levels of personal racism from peers

Indirect effects: Children exposed to persistent indirect discrimination reported approximately two times increased odds of poor mental health and sleep difficulties

Trent et al (2019). The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health. *Pediatrics*, 144(2), e20191765.

Sanders-Phillips et al (2009). Social Inequality and Racial Discrimination: Risk Factors for Health Disparities in Children of Color. *Pediatrics*, 124(Supplement_3), S176-S186.

Educational Impacts of Systemic Racism

“[T]he fundamental cause of the achievement gap is structural racism....” (Merolla & Jackson, 2019)

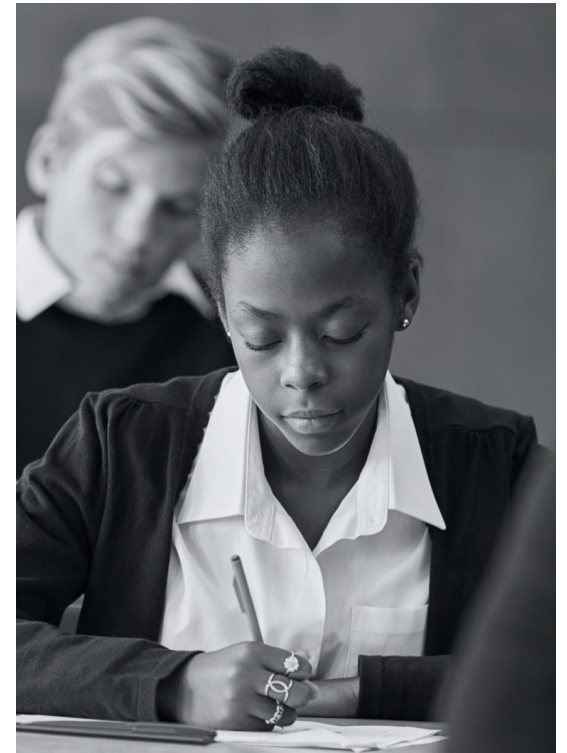
- Disparities in most educational outcomes have remained essentially unchanged since the 1970s
- Threaten economic and scientific progress in U.S. with no trend toward parity

Teacher expectations and implicit bias:

Black students often face more negative evaluations, even when objective habits, behaviors, and performance are identical

Racial inequalities in punishments are not explained when controlling for delinquent or disruptive behaviors

- Black children receive suspensions and expulsions more often
- Inequalities in school disciplinary practices may go on to produce inequalities in arrest prevalence: school-to-prison pipeline



Merolla & Jackson (2019). Structural racism as the fundamental cause of the academic achievement gap. *Sociology Compass*, 13(6), e12696.

Barnes & Motz (2018). Reducing racial inequalities in adulthood arrest by reducing inequalities in school discipline: Evidence from the school-to-prison pipeline. *Developmental Psychology*, 54(12), 2328-2340.

Climate Change

Climate Change

Approximately 1 billion children are at an ‘extremely high risk’ of impacts due to the climate crisis

- **820 million** exposed to heatwaves
- **400 million** exposed to cyclones
- **570 million** exposed to flooding
- **920 million** exposed to water scarcity
- **600 million** exposed to vector-borne diseases
- **2 billion** exposed to air pollution
- **815 million** exposed to lead pollution

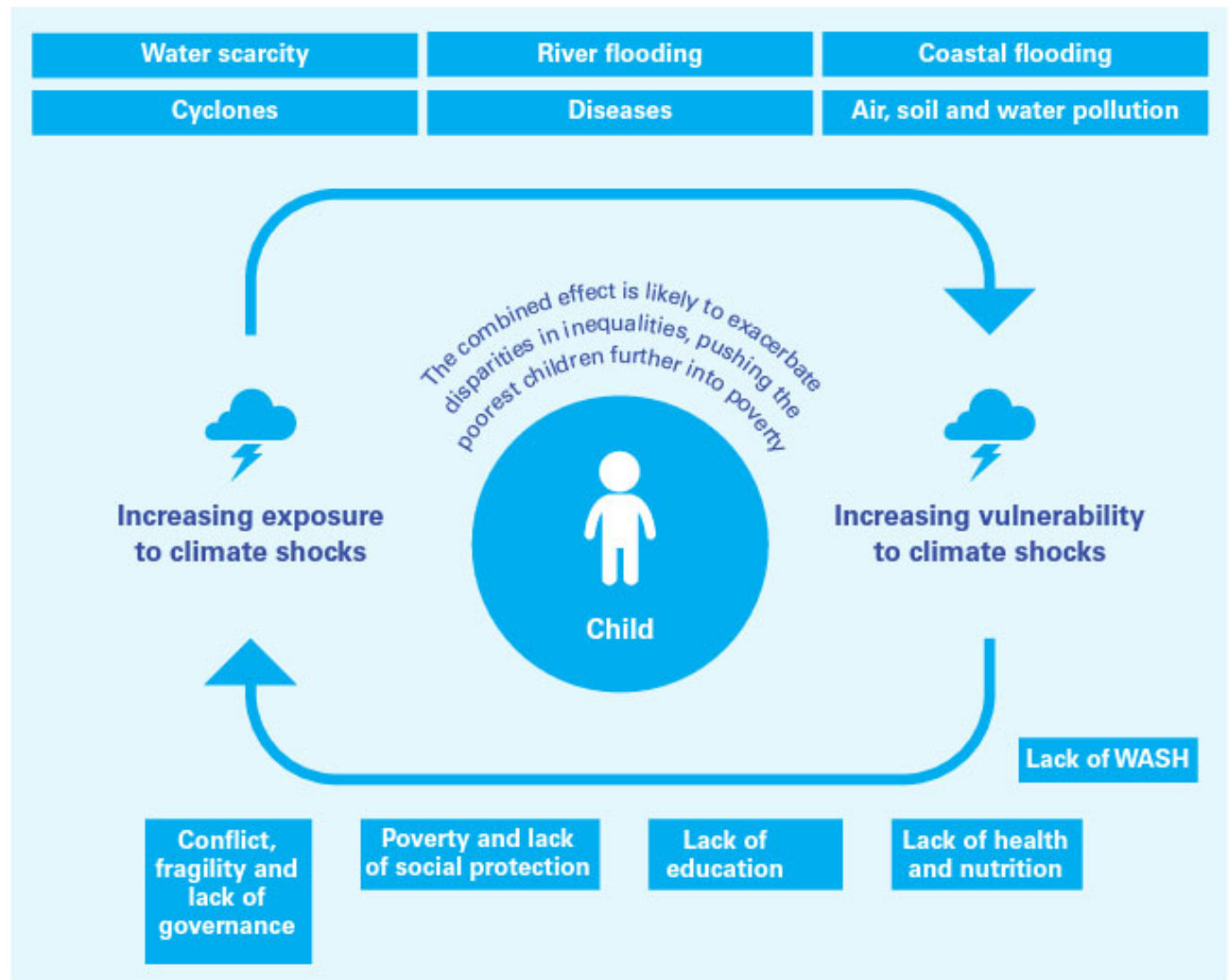
Almost every child is exposed to at least one of these major climate and environmental hazards



<https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis>

Photographs © UNICEF. Top to bottom: Bangladesh 2020, Habibul Haque; Fiji 2016, Vlad Sokhin; Zimbabwe 2020, Karel Prinsloo

Mechanism of climate impacts on child health



Children are Particularly Vulnerable Following Climate Events



Family & social structure: Care, protection, & support eroded

Physical health: More severe physical effects

- Up to 18% increase in illness in the month after weather disaster

Mental health: Half report symptoms of PTSD, many experience symptoms of depression or anxiety

- Chronic mental health symptoms observed even four years after an event

Learning after exposure: Trauma can alter brain anatomy and functioning, inhibiting learning and memory processes

- Hurricane Katrina - 196,000 public school students changed schools and 50,000 did not attend school the remainder of the academic year
- NC schools impacted by the 1999-2000 storms saw 5-15% lower achievement scores

What Can Be Done?

- Setting children up for success begins early – addressing and preventing issues in childhood has compounding effects through the lifespan
- Long-term vision is required to address existential threats and to implement the recommendations of the work done by members of this forum and BCYF
- Societies have a duty of care
 - Countries that support future generations prioritize ensuring children's needs are met by delivering on promises to families, children, and adolescents
- Multisector approaches are required
 - Investment beyond health or education
 - Partnership across disciplines



Clark et al (2020). A future for the world's children? A WHO–UNICEF–Lancet Commission. *The Lancet*, 395(10224), 605-658.

Summary & Conclusion

- Society has a responsibility to ensure children don't only survive but thrive – however, we are threatened by multiple complex and grave existential concerns
 - COVID-19
 - Systemic and structural racism
 - Climate change
- These threats have both individual and interacting, multiplier effects
 - Children are particularly vulnerable to short and long-term impacts
 - All face risk, but certain subpopulations face heightened effects
- Trauma from childhood echoes through the lifespan and into future generations
- Children are affected across a variety of domains
 - Physical, mental, social, economic, educational, legal
- Early, multisector attention and investment is required to understand and to appropriately address these issues

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