

Quick Guide

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Part 1. Guest editorial: Children with disabilities and COVID-19

There are an estimated 240 million children with disabilities; one in ten children worldwide. These children are typically denied access to their basic rights, not least access to education in schools, due to a lack of accessibility, and to reasonable accommodation. Moreover they experience limited availability of assistive technology (including services and devices) or barriers in using transportation to schools, and in their environment.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for a significant increase in the “availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by ... disability” (target 17.18). Its follow-up and review processes are pledged to be “rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data which are high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by ... disability” (section 74g).

UN treaty bodies, including the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, have called for measures to implement article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which sets forth the obligation for Member States to collect appropriate information, including statistical and research data, to enable them to formulate and implement policies to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities.

Data disaggregation was among the key commitments agreed to at the Global Disability Summit 2018,

and was subsequently reinforced by organizations of persons with disabilities, such as the International Disability Alliance and the Global Action on Disability (GLAD) Network. Furthermore, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities not only calls for more research to inform policymaking, but also reflects a fundamental shift in research priorities from medical approaches to disability, to human rights-based approaches and disability inclusion.



Research and data on children with disabilities around the globe remains critical as these children continue to be left behind. This is despite near-universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the extensive ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Evidence is growing that the COVID-19 pandemic, through both the virus itself and the measures implemented by governments to contain its spread, have disproportionately impacted children with disabilities and their families.

This digest focuses on the emerging evidence of the impacts of COVID-19 on children with disabilities, drawing from UNICEF Innocenti's Children and COVID-19 Research Library launched in 2020. The database highlights that the number of COVID-19-related research studies collected to date is limited and underlines a critical need for more research. Even prior to COVID-19, these findings were supported by a number of reports that document significant research and evidence gaps on children with disabilities, the World Report on Disability 2011; The State of the World's Children 2013; United Nations 2018 Flagship Report on Disability and Development, the UNICEF 2020 Draft Fact Sheet on Children and Young People with Disabilities; and the 2018 Evidence and Gap Map of Studies Assessing the Effectiveness of Interventions for People with Disabilities in Low- and Middle-income Countries.

The current evidence from UNICEF Innocenti's Research Library does highlight that, despite the devastating impact of COVID-19, the pandemic has brought the promise of a potentially universal approach to learning, through open and distance learning initiatives that could allow for more equitable opportunities for all children. However, this potential is dependent on access to the necessary technologies and devices, as well as internet connectivity, and on teachers acquiring the competencies to provide remote education more readily and systematically, including for children with disabilities.

While there is promise, there is also evidence that the provision of remote learning does not always consider accessibility issues for children with disabilities. Consequently, and in those contexts, the divide has widened between those that are able to access education and those that cannot. Factors such as gender and poverty can further interact and create systemic intersectional discrimination.

The evidence highlights that gender, more broadly, acts as a social determinant of exclusion in certain contexts, which is exacerbated for women and girls with disabilities. Girls with disabilities, relative to boys with disabilities, are less likely to receive access to healthcare, food, assistive devices and vocational

training. They also face additional challenges in accessing water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. This is particularly apparent in relation to accessing appropriate facilities and services for and during menstruation.

Furthermore, poverty can be seen to constrain or preclude access to the internet and the affordability of appropriate quality technologies (e.g., cameras, screens and internet bandwidth), thereby preventing access to distance learning altogether. This is particularly (but not exclusively) challenging in humanitarian settings and for refugees.

The research in the COVID-19 Research Library also identifies the impact of COVID-19 on parents of children with disabilities and caregivers, which has also resulted in deepening poverty gaps, putting such accessible technology further out of the reach of children with disabilities and requiring that governments and development actors step in and make provisions.

The impact of COVID-19 is not limited to education. There are examples of families of children with disabilities being left behind with regards to access to appropriate and tailored health services, substantially reduced support to families, and limited or no access to personal protective equipment. These children also face continued discrimination and increased neglect and violence.

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Part 2. Research highlights

Introduction

Each quarter, the COVID-19 Research Digest highlights new research papers selected based on criteria such as relevance to children's rights; diverse research methodologies; and insights from low- and middle-income countries. This selection is not exhaustive, and we welcome suggestions from our readers on other papers for inclusion.

Publication 01

[Children with Disabilities: Ensuring their inclusion in COVID-19 response strategies and evidence generation](#)

UNICEF, December 2020

The current pandemic is increasing vulnerabilities for children with disabilities, due to their greater health-care needs, higher dependence on community-based and specialized services, and difficulties in adopting general public-health prevention measures. Based on analysis of pre-COVID global data and case studies of UNICEF-supported interventions, this report highlights the need for more actionable evidence to inform the design of inclusive response strategies and to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on children with disabilities.

The report concludes that immediate steps can be taken by ensuring that data collection efforts during and after the pandemic incorporate inclusive methodologies and proactively engage persons with disabilities in evidence-generation processes. Monitoring and reporting on programmes during the crisis need to reflect specific outcomes and impacts for children with disabilities. Finally, the study outlines the need to invest in the validation of remote data collection methodologies and to rebuild data systems to be more inclusive and resilient in the face of unpredictable crises.

Publication 02

[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

During the pandemic, women and girls with disabilities around the world experienced higher risk factors for gender-based violence, increased barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health and/or loss of access to healthcare, education, employment and other necessary supports. Based on case studies from Malawi, England, Chile and Fiji, this report

provides an assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the exercise of rights and the well-being of women and girls with disabilities, with a specific focus on their sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR).

The report focuses on ways to ensure the full realization of the SRHR of women and girls with disabilities. It is accompanied by resources to support organizations working with women and girls with disabilities to ensure access to appropriate SRHR and to address gender-based violence in the recovery phases of the pandemic. The resource pack consists of the following tools:

- [Impact Assessment](#)
- [Compendium of Good Practices during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [Checklist for Ensuring Human Rights-Based Sexual and Reproductive Health for Women and Girls with Disabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [Checklist for Preventing and Addressing Gender-Based Violence against Women and Girls with Disabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- ['Know Your Rights!' Guide](#)
- Easy Read version: [Life for Women and Girls with Disabilities in the World during COVID-19](#)

Publication 03

[COVID-19 and Inclusive Open and Distance Learning Solutions: A rapid assessment of the development and implementation of inclusive open and distance learning solutions for students with disabilities served by inclusive, special schools and resource centres in Rwanda and Mauritius](#)

UNESCO, June 2021

This report answers the question: Are open and distance learning (ODL) solutions inclusive of learners with disabilities? Based on interviews with educators in Rwanda and Mauritius, it identifies lessons learned and good practices during the pandemic. It articulates a number of policy recommendations to encourage

the use of information and communications technology (ICT) and ODL solutions for students with disabilities.

It identifies barriers to the effective use of ODL solutions, including: teachers' and students' limited knowledge about assistive devices; limited digital skills and ICT competence; lack of access to internet connections and/or digital devices – particularly in rural areas; lack of time for teachers' professional development; and lack of support from school management and institutions for the use of ODL solutions.

A range of adjustments are recommended at different institutional levels. More attention needs to be given to teachers' ICT skills and their capacity to deliver ODL, including training instructors on accessibility issues, assistive technologies and open solutions. Further, ICT infrastructure and connectivity need to be further developed to address the digital divide, with specific efforts aimed at the inclusion of persons with disabilities – for instance, by promoting the use of simple technologies, such as TV- and radio-based learning. Accessible and quality educational resources are also recommended, including flexible curriculum delivery methods that consider learner variability. Finally, future development of learning in technology-facilitated settings will require collaboration among different government sectors, educational institutions and technical partners at both national and international level.

Publication 04

COVID-19, Technology-based Education and Disability: Emerging practices in inclusive digital learning for students with disabilities. The case of [Bangladesh](#), [Colombia](#) and [Mauritius](#)

UNESCO, June 2021

This collection of case studies looks at emerging good practices in ODL solutions for students with disabilities in Bangladesh, Colombia and Mauritius. It explores the facilitators and barriers affecting successful implementation both during the pandemic and in post-COVID environments.

The [Bangladesh](#) case study focuses on the Accessible Reading Materials (ARM) initiative, which has contributed to ensuring disability-inclusive and accessible education during the COVID-19 pandemic. It further considers additional complementary initiatives undertaken by the government during the pandemic to distribute materials among beneficiaries via its online, offline and media platforms.

In [Colombia](#), the case study explores government-led programmes designed to ensure the inclusion of students and persons with disabilities in both formal education and as part of its lifelong learning strategy.

The case study notes that beyond this strategy, Colombia has created institutes that specialize in providing educational services to persons with hearing and vision impairment.

In the context of the educational reform in [Mauritius](#), the study shows that all the children identified as having special education needs (SEN) have the opportunity to access education according to need, including in mainstream and SEN schools, with various ODL solutions initiated at different levels.

Based on the analysis of these country case studies, recommendations are outlined for improving access to and quality of education of students with disabilities during the pandemic with the help of ODL solutions. The recommendations include: measuring the exact prevalence of children and youth with disabilities and their needs; making all learning materials accessible through a national platform for students with all types of disabilities; initiating inclusive policy reforms to improve the quality of education for children with disabilities; and ensuring addressing the key enablers of inclusive education, such as investment in teachers and accessibility of learning materials.

Publication 05

[Intersecting barriers to adolescents' educational access during COVID-19: Exploring the role of gender, disability and poverty](#)

Jones et al. *International Journal of Educational Development*, May 2021

This article examines adolescents' access to education during the COVID-19 pandemic in three diverse urban contexts – in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Jordan – drawing on 4,441 phone surveys and qualitative interviews with adolescents aged 12–19. Findings highlight that the pandemic is compounding pre-existing vulnerabilities to educational disadvantage, and that gender, poverty and disability are intersecting to deepen social inequalities. Adolescents with disabilities face greater barriers to all forms of distance education. Within these contexts, online learning programmes provided by the national education ministries are reportedly not disability-friendly, resulting in adolescents experiencing anxiety or stopping their studies altogether.

The paper concludes with policy recommendations for inclusive distance education in emergencies. First, it notes that it is critically important that governments and development partners invest in gender- and disability-responsive programming across all modalities, from no-tech and low-tech formats through to online and mobile application formats. It is also recommended that teachers and complementary non-formal education providers are equipped with

training so that they can implement distance education in ways that do not reinforce pre-existing social and educational inequalities.

Publication 06

[Deaf students' linguistic access in online education: The case of Trinidad](#)

Mohammed, N. *Deafness & Education International*, July 2021

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Caribbean countries introduced large-scale e-learning for the first time. This study investigates how the e-learning system adopted during the crisis was received by deaf students in Trinidad and Tobago. Deaf learners encountered modality-specific barriers, as available e-learning platforms did not provide a full range of communication tools tailored for sign language. Those types of barriers were exacerbated by existing social inequalities and issues relating to the affordability of quality internet services and enabling devices – for instance, high-definition cameras for optimal sign language visibility.

Policy recommendations from this study include increasing the provision of standard educational technology for deaf students and their teachers and interpreters (e.g., devices with large screens, high-quality webcams, and compatibility with e-learning software with accessibility features). It is also crucial to train educators and to create preschool-level resources designed to provide deaf children with earlier exposure to language. It is also recommended that support for sign language learning should be provided to hearing families with deaf children.

Publication 07

[The impact of COVID-19 measures on children with disabilities and their families in Uganda](#)

Mbazzi et al. *Disability & Society*, January 2021

This study looks at the impact of the COVID-19 public health response on families of children with disabilities in Central Uganda, using phone interviews with parents and children. Respondents reported that lockdown measures had a negative effect on their mental and physical health, social life, finances, education and food security. Access to medical services and medication for chronic illness had been reduced or absent due to restrictions in travel and limited financial resources.

The paper suggests that greater attention needs to be paid to children with disabilities and their families when implementing mitigating and long-term responses to the pandemic, and tailoring responses so that they are country specific. Persons with

disabilities should be included in any COVID-19 response efforts, explicitly considered in risk communication campaigns, and prioritized when developing health and rehabilitation responses. Equally, the authors recommend that educational and home learning approaches take into consideration the absence of learning support staff at home, and develop creative support through phone calls and, where possible, parental, peer or sibling support in the home instead.

Publication 08

[Challenges facing family caregivers of children with disabilities during COVID-19 pandemic in Palestine](#)

Zahaika et al. *Journal of Primary Care & Community Health*, August 2021

In Palestine, about 20 per cent of persons with disabilities, including physical, mental and psychological disabilities, are children under the age of 18. Children with disabilities are mainly taken care of by their parents and families, where the caregivers are usually unpaid family members. This survey examines the challenges facing caregivers of children with disabilities during the pandemic in Palestine, including additional challenges such as electricity outages. Caregivers reported an increased caregiving burden associated with enhanced physical, social, psychological and financial challenges. In particular, families reported difficulties in accessing healthcare services and medication, and in engaging in meaningful home learning.

Policy recommendations from this study include the development of strategic health and rehabilitative plans for children with disabilities, as well as adequate psychosocial support for family caregivers during lockdown and times of restricted movement.

Publication 09

[Disability Rights During the Pandemic: A global report on findings of the COVID-19 Disability Rights Monitor](#)

COVID-19 Disability Rights Monitor, October 2020

Based on the testimonies of 2,152 respondents from 134 countries, this report argues that countries have overwhelmingly failed to take sufficient measures to protect the rights of persons with disabilities in their responses to the pandemic.

The results show that persons with disabilities report: being left behind, in terms of access to necessities, essential life and health services; facing discriminatory treatment; and being exposed to increased risks of violence in all countries, regardless of their level of economic development. In particular, evidence

indicates that little action has been taken to protect children with disabilities, including lack of distribution of appropriate personal protective equipment, the withdrawal of the limited disability supports provided to families, the inaccessibility of online learning, and a dramatic increase in gender-based violence against women and girls with disabilities.

The recommendations include that policies need to ensure that all persons with disabilities have immediate access to essential supplies without discrimination, including inclusive education, accessible information in a variety of formats, and justice services. The report also recommends that emergency responses be disability-inclusive and meet the diverse needs of persons with disabilities, particularly those experiencing intersectional forms of discrimination and marginalization, for instance women and girls.

Publication 10

[Policy Brief: A Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19](#)

United Nations, May 2020

This policy brief highlights the impact of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities, and outlines key actions and recommendations to make the pandemic response and recovery inclusive. Four overarching areas of action are identified and recommended: mainstreaming disability in all COVID-19 plans and efforts; ensuring accessibility of information, facilities, services

and programmes for the targeted population; meaningful consultation with persons with disabilities at all stages of the response; and accountability mechanisms underpinned by disaggregating data by disability, to secure disability inclusion in the COVID-19 response.

Publication 11

[The Impacts of COVID-19 on People with Disabilities: A rapid review](#)

Meaney-Davis et al. Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Query, April 2020

This rapid review indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has: increased the prevalence of mental health conditions; worsened pre-existing psychosocial disabilities; reduced access to essential and routine health services; exacerbated barriers to social protection; and increased the risk of stigma, discrimination, neglect, violence and abuse among persons with disabilities.

It calls for an inclusive COVID-19 response, ensuring accessibility of information, healthcare and social protection schemes. It suggests that disability-focused organizations should be better funded, to build capacity on disability inclusion, particularly at the intersection of age, gender and disability. It also recommends gathering lessons learned to strengthen programmes and partner capacity, and expanding the evidence base.



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Part 3. Resources

Introduction

While not contained in the Research Library, a number of published guidelines, checklists, policy briefs and other non-research-based resources on COVID-19 and individuals (particularly children) with disabilities are worthy of reference here. These practical materials are intended for use by field practitioners, public health personnel, as well as national and local governments and the wider development and humanitarian community. This includes those service- and advocacy-based organizations of persons with disabilities, involved in the decision-making and implementation of multisectoral COVID-19 outbreak readiness and response activities for persons with disabilities in various settings. These materials have been added to this digest as they can serve as an important resource for researchers when considering and framing new research with children with disabilities.

1. [Seen, Counted, Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities](#)

UNICEF, November 2021

This report provides the most recent available data on children with disabilities, covering more than 60 indicators of child well-being – in areas including nutrition and health, access to water and sanitation, protection from violence and exploitation, and education. It also includes the first-ever global and regional estimates of children with disabilities.

2. [COVID-19, Gender, and Disability Checklist: Ensuring Human Rights-Based Sexual and Reproductive Health for Women, Girls, and Gender Non-conforming Persons with Disabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

UNFPA and Women Enabled International, June 2021

This checklist is intended to guide states, healthcare providers and other stakeholders on measures to ensure the provision of rights-based and gender- and disability-responsive sexual and reproductive health programmes and services for women, girls and gender non-conforming persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergencies.

3. [Disability Considerations for COVID-19 Vaccination: WHO & UNICEF Policy Brief](#)

WHO and UNICEF, April 2021

This brief presents considerations and actions for governments and other stakeholders to ensure equity in access to COVID-19 vaccinations for persons with disabilities.

4. [Key Messages - COVID-19 Response: Applying the IASC Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action](#)

IASC, July 2020

This note provides an overview of the factors that may put persons with disabilities at heightened risk in the COVID-19 pandemic and response in humanitarian settings; and proposes actions to address these risks.

5. [COVID-19 Response in Humanitarian Settings: Examples of good practices for including persons with disabilities](#)

OCHA and UNICEF, July 2020

This guide illustrates some existing good practices being implemented by parts of the United Nations system to promote a disability-inclusive response to COVID-19 pandemic and support implementation of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy.

6. [Disability Considerations in GBV Programming during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility Helpdesk, May 2020

This helpdesk provides information and practical guidance to support gender-based violence (GBV) practitioners to integrate attention to disability into GBV prevention, risk mitigation and response efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

7. [How-to note: Making life-saving materials on COVID-19 accessible for all, including adults and children with disabilities](#)

UNICEF, May 2020

This 'how to' note contains guidance on producing materials in disability-accessible formats. (Access available to UNICEF staff only)

8. [Initial Overview of Specific Social Protection Measures for Persons with Disabilities and their Families in Response to COVID-19 Crisis](#)

ILO and UNICEF, May 2020

This guidance includes an [online living dashboard](#) which contains information on COVID-19 social protection responses across the world.

9. [Disability Inclusive Social Protection Response to COVID-19 crisis](#)

ILO, UNICEF et al., April 2020

This guide presents several elements that can help make the most of the social protection system's response to COVID-19 to support persons with disabilities.

10. [COVID-19 Response: Considerations for Children and Adults with Disabilities](#)

UNICEF, April 2020

This UNICEF brief articulates the importance and need for governments and stakeholders to reach out to local organizations of persons with disabilities and engage them at every stage of the COVID-19 pandemic response. It highlights the need to identify persons with disabilities and to build capacity for disability inclusion among national and local responders.

11. [Toward a Disability-Inclusive COVID-19 Response: 10 recommendations from the International Disability Alliance](#)

International Disability Alliance, March 2020

This paper is based on input received from member organizations around the world and aims to assist advocacy efforts at the global, regional, national and local levels by highlighting the range of risks persons with disabilities face during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

12. [Guidelines – Consulting Persons with Disabilities](#)
UNDIS, May 2021

When persons with disabilities participate in research, it provides strong support towards ensuring that evidence is effective in addressing barriers to inclusion. These guidelines outline approaches to consulting with and actively involving persons with disabilities and their representative organizations.

13. [10 Things You Should Know About COVID-19 and Persons with Disabilities](#)

Save the Children, March 2020

This checklist provides 10 relevant facts on COVID-19 and disability.

14. [COVID-19: How to include marginalized and vulnerable people in risk communication and community engagement](#)

UN Women and Translators without Borders, March 2020

This guidance provides actions that should be taken to engage potentially vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, in developing risk communication materials and messaging and undertaking broader community engagement activities in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Part 4. Library update: Facts and figures

UNICEF Innocenti’s Children and COVID-19 Research Library has collected over 110 research publications exploring the impact of COVID-19 on [children with disabilities](#).

The Children and COVID-19 Research Library contains over 3,600 records, updated daily. More than 700 new records have been added in the last quarter (October 2021 to mid-January 2022).

Figure 1: Number of records to date by month

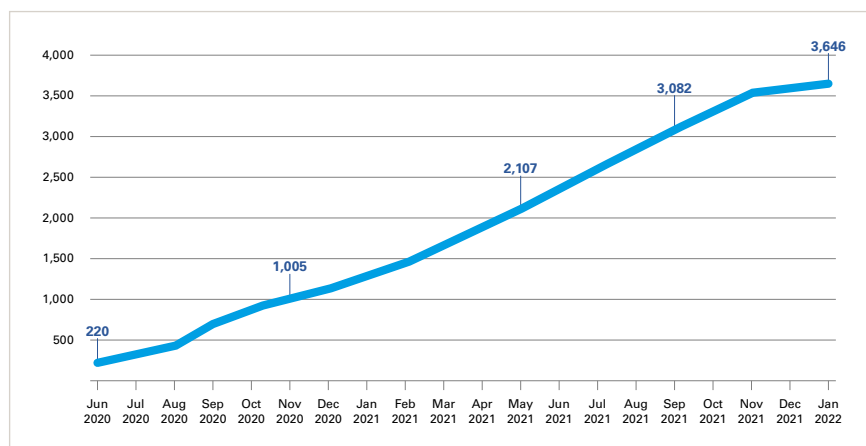
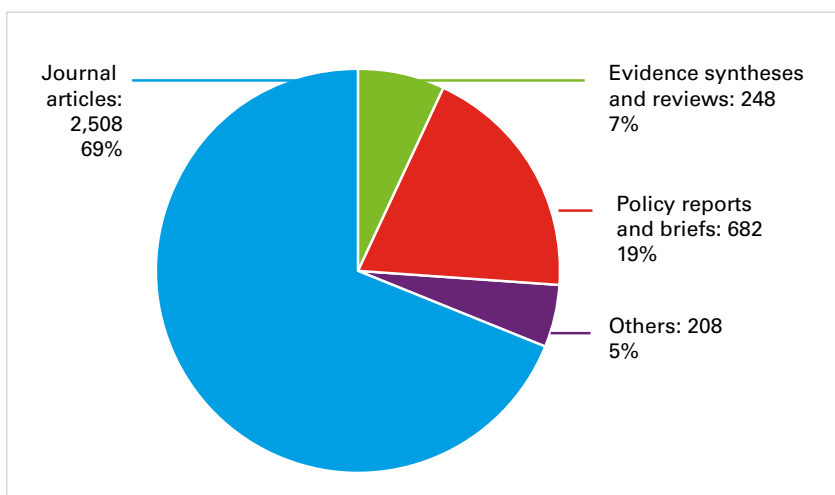
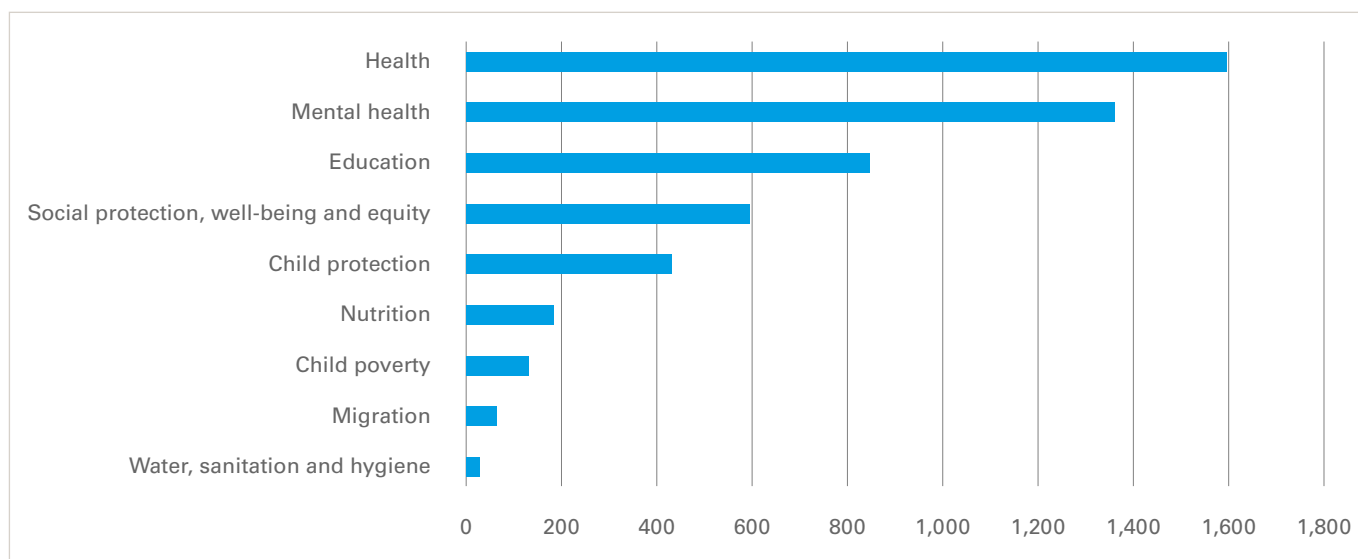


Figure 2: Number of records to date by content type



Trending topics in the library include the impact of COVID-19 on health and well-being (including over 1,200 records on [mental health](#)), [education](#), and social protection and [equity](#), with less research on [nutrition](#), [refugee and migrant youth](#), and [water, sanitation and hygiene](#).

Figure 3: Number of records to date by topic



(All numbers updated 10 January 2022)

Part 5. Other useful links

- UNICEF Innocenti's [Children and COVID-19 Research Library](#)
- [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 systematic map](#) of COVID-19 evidence
- EPPI-Centre's [living map of systematic reviews of social sciences research evidence on COVID-19](#)
- [Evidence Aid's](#) COVID-19 collection of summaries of systematic reviews
- [COVID-19 and children](#) from UNICEF Data
- [Save the Children Child Rights 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
- Centre for Global Development's [Evidence Tracker on COVID-19 and Violence Against Children and Women](#)
- UNDP's [COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker](#)
- University of Oxford's [COVID-19 Government Response Tracker](#)
- Johns Hopkins University [Coronavirus Resource Center](#)
- [The COVID-Minds Network](#) of longitudinal studies to explore the effects of the pandemic on mental health



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More publications on [UNICEF Innocenti's Children and COVID-19 Research Library](#)

More on UNICEF Innocenti's [COVID-19 & Children Rapid Research Response](#)

About this digest

Each quarterly thematic digest features the latest evidence drawn from UNICEF Innocenti's Children and COVID-19 Research Library on a particular topic of interest.

Updated daily, the library is a database collecting research from around the world on the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, with the potential to inform programmatic and policy work for children and adolescents.