



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Childhood overweight

A call for prevention in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Executive summary

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In Latin America and the Caribbean, about 7.5 per cent of children under the age of 5 have overweight. This translates into about 4 million children.

Today in Latin America and the Caribbean, an alarming number of children are affected by overweight, making it one of the region's greatest public health challenges. Over the last three decades, this condition has steadily increased in the region, from 6.2 per cent of children under age 5 living with overweight in 1990 to 7.5 per cent in 2020. This means an increase of 400,000 children with overweight, reaching a total of almost 4 million in 2021. Additionally, 3 out of every 10 children aged 5 to 19 years old in the region have overweight.

Childhood overweight, in addition to stunting and micronutrient deficiency, is becoming increasingly urgent. All three conditions can coexist in the same country, community, family or individual. If this trend continues, the region will not meet the target set by the World Health Assembly, which calls for no increase between 2012 and 2025 in the number of children under 5 years of age who have overweight.

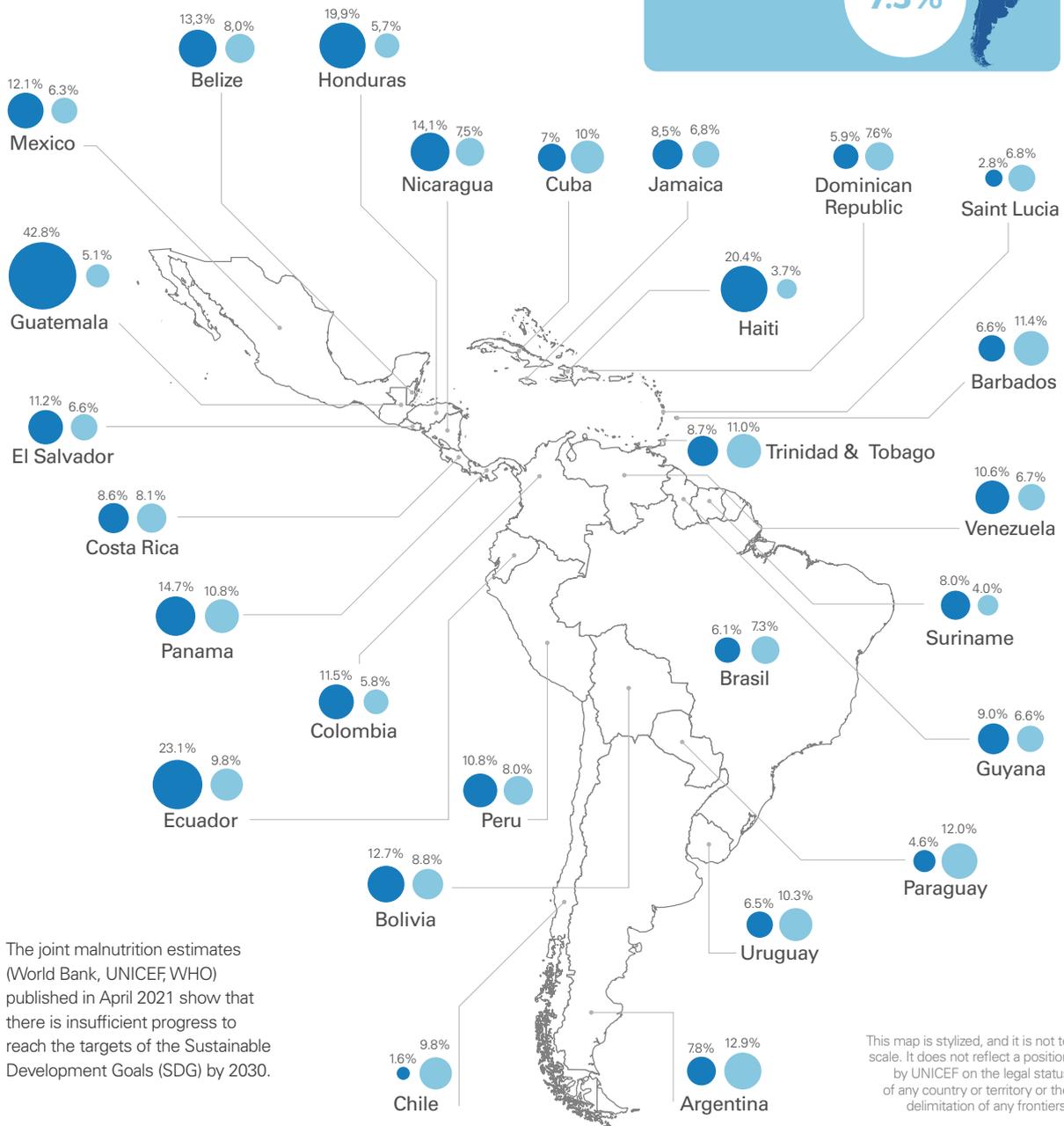
Today, countries in the region are at a particularly challenging crossroad. The condition of overweight in the childhood population has worsened in recent years. Overweight increases the risk of, cardiovascular problems, metabolic problems, chronic diseases, and increased risk of death, violating children's rights. Children who affected by overweight often experience bullying and stigma and can suffer emotional impacts.

In the context of COVID-19, the overweight situation is of particular concern. Having overweight puts children's health and nutrition at risk. For example, children who have overweight and contract COVID-19 are at greater risk of suffering severe consequences: they are more susceptible to hospitalization, to the need for intensive care and mechanical ventilation. Therefore, children who have overweight are more at risk of death, regardless of other comorbidities.

Studies carried out in different countries of the region during the pandemic show changes in consumption



The nutritional status of children under 5 years of age in Latin America and the Caribbean by 2020



The joint malnutrition estimates (World Bank, UNICEF, WHO) published in April 2021 show that there is insufficient progress to reach the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by 2030.

This map is stylized, and it is not to scale. It does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers.

Definitions

Stunting: height for age < -2 SD of the World Health Organization median child growth standards for children under 5 years of age.

Overweight - Weight-for-height above +2 SD of the World Health Organization median child growth standards for children under 5 years of age. Severe overweight - (above +3 SD) is referred to as obesity.





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The situation of childhood overweight has worsened in recent years, and in the context of COVID-19 it is particularly concerning. Having overweight puts children at a higher risk in terms of overall health and nutrition.

habits, a lack of access to healthy food and a reduction in physical activity, especially in girls, potentially caused by confinement measures and by food and beverage marketing and advertising strategies. In addition, we saw changes to food environments, disruption of health and nutrition services, and the suspension of school feeding programmes, all of which put the health and nutritional status of children at risk.

Obesogenic environments which encourage the consumption of ultra-processed products with low nutritional value and sweetened beverages, together with inadequate levels of physical activity, are the main risk factors for driving the increase in childhood overweight.

The effects of these obesogenic environments that encourage childhood overweight and promote the consumption of ultra-processed products and sweetened beverages, and a food system that does not respond to the nutritional needs of children have shown the urgent need to act and formulate public policies and programmes that address all forms of

malnutrition, with a strong overweight focus, and guarantee the rights of this population.

UNICEF acts according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which establishes that children should be guaranteed nutritious, sufficient, accessible, and safe food, as well as the right to health and information. The need to promote and support the prevention of childhood overweight from an early age is widely supported by global mandates such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the Rome Declaration on Nutrition, the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition 2016-2025, several UN General Assembly resolutions, World Health Assembly declarations, and documents on the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases. Similarly, the UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2020-2030 is aligned with these global mandates.

UNICEF's systems approach to nutrition acknowledges the central role of five systems – food, health, water and sanitation, education, and social protection – in providing nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable diets for children, adolescents and women, while

ensuring essential nutrition services and positive nutrition practices across the life cycle.

In this context, food systems are becoming increasingly central to UNICEF’s work on nutrition. The UNICEF Innocenti Framework identifies some of the key food system entry points where action can be taken to increase both the supply and demand of nutritious food for children and adolescents.

As part of its contributions, working across multiple systems, UNICEF coordinates actions with governments, civil society, and private sector partners.

UNICEF supports the generation of data and evidence to guide the development of policies and actions, and the exchange of experiences and lessons learned among the countries of the region.

UNICEF supports governments by generating evidence and providing technical support in the process of developing regulatory actions such as the restriction of marketing directed to children; front of pack nutrition labeling; reformulation; implementation of fiscal measures; regulation of school food environments (foods offered, available and marketed).

The findings of studies led by UNICEF demonstrated that children are exposed to harmful food and beverage marketing practices, these results also contributed important evidence and arguments during the formulation of regulations in at least five countries.

In four of the countries where front of pack nutrition labeling was approved, UNICEF provided technical support throughout the process, by generating evidence, reviewing international experiences,

UNICEF Innocenti Framework. Influence of food systems on children and adolescents’ food consumption.





A key regulatory measure implemented successfully in this region is the front-of-package warning labeling on ultra-processed products. Evidence shows that such labels contribute to healthier consumer choices.

analyzing scientific data and other actions to support the argument about the advantages of using this kind of labeling with a strong focus on the rights and protection of children, while implementing advocacy and communication campaigns.

With regards to the school environments, UNICEF has supported the ministries of health and education in at least nine countries of the region with the implementation of SBCC interventions, promotion of healthy eating and physical activity, inclusion of nutrition in the school curriculum, training courses for teachers and staff who serve in school canteens. UNICEF also supported the generation of evidence on the quality of food offered in the school environment, and the development of regulatory frameworks that regulate the sale of food and beverages in schools and that limit the promotion and availability of unhealthy products.

In twenty countries of the region, UNICEF supported actions to promote, protect and support

breastfeeding. These actions include monitoring the International Code of Breastmilk Substitutes, strengthening the capacities of health personnel at the first level of care and at the community level, and strengthening the regulatory frameworks. UNICEF also leads actions to protect and promote breastfeeding in the workplace, as well as awareness campaigns directed to mothers, fathers and the community.

In at least eight countries, UNICEF provided technical assistance to promote better nutrition for children between 6 and 23 months of age, through the development of guidelines for decision makers and other publications with recommendations for caregivers.

In several countries in the region, UNICEF supported governments with the development of protocols for breastfeeding in the context of the pandemic, and communication campaigns to promote them, while emphasizing breastfeeding as a safe practice.

In the context of COVID-19, UNICEF has supported governments for the generation of data on the effects of the pandemic, which can be used for decision-making and the development of information campaigns. An example is the regional survey among nearly 9,000 adolescents and young people in eight countries of the region, on their consumption practices and levels of physical activity. The results were used to drive a regional campaign to promote healthy eating and physical activity in the context of COVID-19.

Recommendations

National and local governments, civil society organizations, academic institutions, international organizations, and the private sector have a great opportunity to contribute to the prevention of overweight to guarantee children's right to nutritious and adequate food.

We recommend the following actions to support the prioritization and implementation of strategies for the prevention and control of overweight:

1. Recognize the central role of five systems – food, health, water and sanitation, education, and social protection – in providing nutritious, safe, affordable, and sustainable diets for children
2. Strengthen legal and regulatory frameworks
3. Support actions with scientific evidence generated by institutions that have no conflict of interest
4. Accelerate actions in the school environment
5. Apply a rights based approach
6. Prioritize interventions during the first years of life, including healthy complementary feeding initiatives
7. Shift the narrative from an individual approach to a systems approach, considering the key role of food environments.
8. Give priority to the countries with the highest prevalence, and support the dissemination of successful strategies and experiences throughout the region
9. Encourage and strengthen the important role played by civil society actively advocating for public policies and children's rights
10. Advocate with the private sector to contribute to child overweight prevention, ensuring that there are no conflicts of interest and in compliance with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, Children's Rights, and Business Principles.



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