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'The Big Catch-Up:' The WHO to Vaccinate Millions of Children

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5-7 minutes

Millions of children who missed routine vaccinations during the pandemic may be vaccinated as part of “The Big Catch-up,” a global initiative launched by the World Health Organization (WHO) and its partners.

“The pandemic saw essential immunization levels decrease in over 100 countries, leading to rising outbreaks of measles, diphtheria, polio, and yellow fever,” wrote the WHO in its media statement [published on April 24](#). The WHO previously reported that more than 25 million children missed routine vaccination in 2021 ([pdf](#)).

Though the WHO attributes the rise in infectious diseases to fallen immunization rates, [some studies have reasoned](#) that the lockdowns reduced people’s exposure to infectious diseases and may have left individuals to

emerge from the pandemic with [compromised immune systems](#). Another reason put forward is that the COVID-19 vaccinations may have led to [immune suppression](#), making people more susceptible to future infections.

Nevertheless, with “The Big Catch-up” launched in April, the health organization aims to boost vaccination levels in children to “at least pre-pandemic levels and endeavors to exceed those.”

Many global health organizations are involved with the initiative, including the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI).

Speaking at the Fortune’s Brainstorm Health Conference in April, Chelsea Clinton, vice chair of the CHAI, said that the program [would last 18 months](#) and hoped it would be one of the “largest childhood immunization effort ever.”

The WHO listed pandemic restrictions, health care burdens, and limited financial and human resources as reasons for fallen vaccination rates.

“Ongoing challenges like conflicts, climate crises, and vaccine hesitancy also contributed to the decline in coverage rates,” the WHO added.

“I spent a lot of time thinking about the really unfortunate

... rise in not only, kind of, vaccine hesitancy and questioning, but outright, kind of, rejection of vaccines and science, and the scientific, kind of, process,” Clinton said at the presentation, warning in April 2023 that compared to January 2020, “We’re less prepared today.”

A research letter published in June 2022 in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#) observed that safety concerns and mistrust of COVID-19 vaccines or the government may have caused a spillover effect in influenza vaccination rates.

Data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showed that vaccination rates in kindergarteners have steadily dropped from 95 percent in the 2019–20 school year [to 94 percent in 2020–21](#), then to [93 percent in 2022](#).





Clinton has been vocal about COVID-19 vaccine misinformation. In August 2021, Clinton [posted on Twitter](#) [that](#) “vaccines save lives,” adding that this statement has become controversial in “an era rife with disinformation.”

The safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines have come under question after an unprecedented rise in [reported vaccine adverse events](#). According to a December 2022 survey by Rasmussen Reports, over half of the [1,000 people surveyed](#) were concerned that the COVID-19 vaccines had major side effects.

[Several studies showed](#) that repeat COVID-19 vaccinations are linked with a higher risk of [subsequent COVID-19 infection](#).

Clinton also participated in an April 10 podcast alongside Dr. Paul A. Offit, the director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and co-inventor of the RotaTeq rotavirus vaccine.

On the podcast, Clinton and Offit discussed “challenges

in closing the gap in adolescent vaccination and talk[ed] with teen advocates about their needs and challenges in helping adolescents advocate for their health.”

Dr. Chris Elias, president of global development at the Gates Foundation, said, “We must double-down to reach all children with the vaccines they need to live healthier lives and ensure that future generations live free of preventable diseases like polio.”

Other partners involved with “The Big Catch-up” include Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and the WHO’s Immunization Agenda 2030.

Dr. Seth Berkley, CEO of Gavi, commented on the WHO’s statement: “We cannot allow a legacy of the pandemic to be the undoing of many years’ work protecting more and more children from deadly, preventable, preventable diseases. Global health partners, working with governments and communities, must do everything we can to protect the life of every child.”

Berkley has previously praised efforts to [combat](#) [“misinformation”](#) on the internet and the WHO’s decision to extend the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency of International Concern.