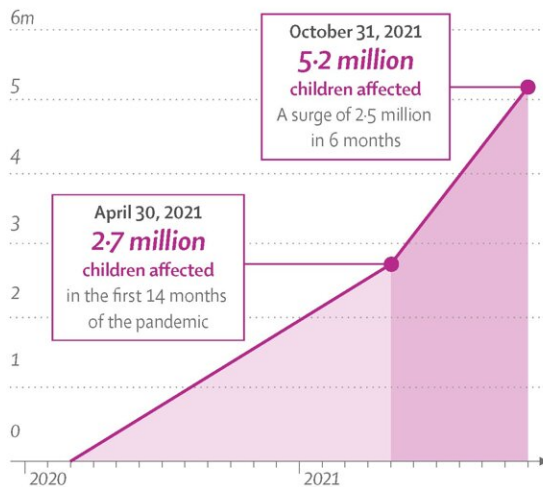


At least 5 million children have lost a parent or caregiver due to COVID-19 since March 2020, updated figures suggest

February 25 2022

At least 5.2 million children worldwide have lost a parent or caregiver¹ due to COVID-19

The number of children who have lost a primary caregiver¹ due to COVID-19 has nearly doubled in 6 months



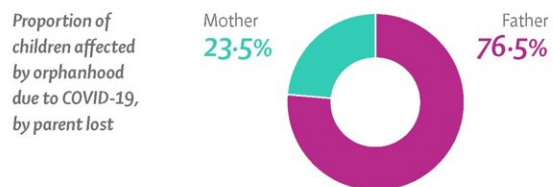
The number of **children affected by pandemic-associated caregiver¹ death** now exceeds the total number of **reported COVID-19 deaths**



Adolescents have been worst affected



Children affected by orphanhood are three-times more likely to have lost a father than a mother



An evidence-based emergency response is increasingly urgent

- >> **Prevent** death by accelerating COVID vaccines, containment, and treatment.
- >> **Prepare** families to provide safe and nurturing care.
- >> **Protect** children to reduce risks of poverty, childhood adversity, and violence, and to strengthen their recovery.

Explore the Imperial College London COVID-19 Orphanhood Calculator at:
<https://tinyurl.com/orphanhood-calculator>

¹ Study defines "caregiver" as a parent or custodial grandparent

Read the full paper: Unwin HJ, Hillis S, Cluver L, Flaxman S, Goldman P, Butchart A, et al. More than 5.2 million children affected by global surges in COVID-associated orphanhood and caregiver death: new evidence for national responses. *Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* 2022, published online Feb 24

THE LANCET *Child & Adolescent Health*

The best science for better lives

At least 5.2 million children worldwide have lost a parent or caregiver due to COVID-19, with adolescents worst affected. This infographic illustrates updates to global estimates of COVID-19 related orphanhood. Credit: The Lancet

The number of children estimated to have experienced the death of a

parent or caregiver as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has surged to more than 5.2 million globally, according to a new modeling study published in *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* journal.

Estimates of the numbers of children affected by COVID-19-associated orphanhood and caregiver death nearly doubled in the six months from 1 May 2021 through 31 October 2021, compared with the amount after the first 14 months of the pandemic (March 1, 2020 through April 30, 2021).

Globally, the new study suggests that two out of three children orphaned from COVID-19 are adolescents aged 10 to 17 years. Additionally, in line with evidence that COVID-19 deaths disproportionally affect men, three out of four children worldwide who experienced the death of a parent during the pandemic lost their fathers.

Overall, children who experience the loss of a caregiver have an increased risk of poverty, exploitation and sexual violence or abuse, HIV infection, mental health challenges and severe distress, and in some contexts, increased vulnerability to gang involvement and violent extremism. The researchers call for evidence-based programs for children experiencing orphanhood to be urgently incorporated into pandemic response efforts, including programs that support economic strengthening, enhanced community and [family support](#), and programs that avoid placing children in institutional care. The findings can aid national responses tailored to age and circumstances of affected children.

"We estimate that for every person reported to have died as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, one child is left orphaned or loses a caregiver. That is the equivalent of one child every six seconds facing a heightened risk of lifelong adversity unless given appropriate support in time. Thus, support for orphaned children must be immediately integrated into every

national COVID-19 response plan. Such support should focus on three core components: preventing caregiver death through equitable COVID-19 vaccine coverage, containment, and treatment; preparing families that are safe and nurturing to support affected children (such as through kinship care, foster care, and adoption); and protecting children using evidence-based strategies to reduce risks of poverty, childhood adversity, and violence. These strategies will help save lives now and put the programmatic and financial infrastructure in place on a global scale to secure a better future for children and families around the world," says lead author Dr. Susan Hillis, who completed this work during her tenure at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Dr. Juliette Unwin, lead author from Imperial College London (UK), adds, "sadly, as high as our estimates of orphanhood and caregiver deaths are, they are likely to be underestimates, and we expect these numbers to grow as more global data on COVID-19 deaths becomes available. For example, WHO estimates accurate data for COVID-19 deaths in Africa are limited, and the real estimates are likely to be 10 times higher than what is currently being reported. Consequently, these under-reported deaths mean that COVID-19-related orphanhood and caregiver loss is also drastically underestimated. Real-time updated data suggests the true totals reached 6.7 million children as of January 2022. While our current study looked at estimates through October 2021, the pandemic is still raging worldwide, which means COVID-19 related orphanhood will also continue to surge."

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were an estimated 140 million orphaned children worldwide. COVID-19's impact on orphanhood was first revealed in a study published in July 2021, which estimated that 1.5 million children had experienced the death of a parent or caregiver between March 2020 and April 2021 as a result of COVID-19.

The new study increases this estimate to more than 2.7 million children

for the same time period, by re-calculating the figures from updated COVID-19 death figures along with excess mortality data to account for indirect deaths associated with the pandemic (July 2021 estimates: 1,562,000 children vs latest estimates: 2,737,300 children).

Using the same methodology, the researchers extended their analysis to 31 October 2021, analyzing mortality and fertility data from countries that accounted for the largest proportion of COVID-19 deaths and using mathematical modeling to extrapolate their findings for global estimates. This approach has previously shown a strong correlation between the ratio of orphanhood to deaths and total fertility rate.

As before, the team estimated the loss of caregiver grandparents using United Nations household composition data for the proportion of adults aged over 60 years co-residing with children under 18 years, with or without a parent. These proportions were multiplied by COVID-19 associated deaths in the relevant age group to estimate the number of children affected, conservatively estimating that one death resulted in only one child experiencing caregiver death.

For the entire 20-month period of the study, the team estimates a minimum of 3,367,000 children were orphaned worldwide, experiencing the loss of a parent. A further 1,833,300 children were affected by the death of a grandparent or older adult caregiver living in their own home. Overall, the number of children affected by the death of a caregiver due to COVID-19 exceeded the number of reported COVID-19 deaths (5.2 million children compared to 5 million COVID-19 deaths).

"It took 10 years for 5 million children to be orphaned by HIV/AIDS, whereas the same number of children have been orphaned by COVID-19 in just two years. These figures do not account for the latest wave of the omicron COVID-19 variant, which may push the true toll even higher. We need to act swiftly to identify the children behind these numbers, so

they can be given the support they need to thrive," says senior author Prof Lorraine Sherr from University College London (UK).

The number of children affected in the 20 countries studied ranged from 2,400 in Germany to more than 1.9 million in India. Calculations of estimated orphanhood cases per capita showed the highest rates were in Peru and South Africa, with 8 and 7 out of every 1000 children affected, respectively.

In all countries, children were more likely to have lost a father than a mother, with more than three times as many children experiencing the death of a father than losing a mother (76.5% or 2,581,300/3,374,900 of children lost fathers as compared to 23.5% or 793,600/3,374,900 who lost mothers).

The researchers also calculated the ages of children who lost a parent in each of the countries studied, by estimating yearly fertility contributions separately to obtain the average number of children for every year of age between birth and 17 years. Mathematical modeling was again used to extrapolate these findings for all countries in the world that had reported COVID-19 deaths up to 31 October 2021. Adolescents accounted for a far greater proportion of those orphaned (Ages 10-17 years represented 63.6% or 2,146,700/3,374,900 of orphaned children) than younger children in all countries. (Ages 5-9 years: 21.8%, 736,800/3,374,900; ages 0-4 years: 14.6%, 491,300/3,374,900).

"The global health community must build upon the two decades experience supporting vulnerable children through the HIV/AIDS epidemic to offer that same support for children experiencing loss due to COVID-19. Losing a parent or grandparent is a distressing experience for any child, however, the specific needs and vulnerabilities of orphanhood vary dramatically with age and developmental stage. We know that different age groups benefit from tailored, evidence-based

support packages that include strengthening family-based and community support networks, and economic support while avoiding placing children in institutional care wherever possible. Our findings show the urgent need to invest in response plans focused on children at greatest risk and in the locations most affected. We have seen that timely, responsive, and supportive intervention transforms damage into lifelong dividends. Hesitation is a luxury we cannot afford," says study author Prof Chris Desmond of University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa).

The authors note some limitations. Most notably, their estimates are generated by mathematical modeling and cannot measure actual numbers of children affected by a parent or caregiver's death. They say future pandemic responses should include surveillance systems to monitor the numbers of children affected for every parental and caregiver death, in order to track needs for services and provide referral platforms that help point families towards appropriate support.

They also note that their analysis is based on the best available data, but many countries do not have robust reporting systems for deaths or fertility. However, by using a stable COVID-19 infection fatality ratio, they say it is unlikely this limitation substantially biased their results.

Writing in a linked Comment, lead author Dr. Michael Goodman of the University of Texas Medical Branch (U.S.), who was not involved in the study, says, "[The] modeling represents an ongoing attempt to hit a moving target—heart-wrenching and unavoidably incomplete. Beyond updating earlier estimates, the authors add value through describing orphanhood 'by time, person, and place'. In doing so, they draw attention to the importance of dynamic, multilevel systems in shaping the crisis. Orphanhood increases a range of economic, social, educational, and health risks. To best protect [children](#), we must consider the individual, family, community, national, and global factors that affect their

wellbeing, and how these can be integrated into an adaptive response... COVID-19 orphanhood confronts us at a time nearing resource exhaustion across multiple systems. The consequences of orphanhood linger throughout the course of a lifetime, affecting the futures of families, communities, and societies. We determine how long our communities will suffer the effects of COVID-19 by urgently determining the quality and force of our concern for orphaned young people."

As part of this work, the authors developed a real-time COVID-19 calculator, providing ongoing updated estimates of COVID-19-associated orphanhood and [death](#) of caregivers for every country in the world. The authors have also developed an updated evidence-based strategy for action as described in the paper, which can be found in a policy report authored by the Global Reference Group for Children Affected by COVID: "Joint Estimates and Action. Children: The hidden pandemic, February 2022—updated interim estimates."

More information: H Juliette T Unwin et al, Global, regional, and national minimum estimates of children affected by COVID-19-associated orphanhood and caregiver death, by age and family circumstance up to Oct 31, 2021: an updated modelling study, *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* (2022). DOI: 10.1016/S2352-4642(22)00005-0 , [www.thelancet.com/journals/lan ... \(22\)00005-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lan ... (22)00005-0/fulltext)

Provided by Lancet

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