

Pandemic linked to 14% increase in underweight children in India

February 5 2024, by Dan Verderosa



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Malnutrition of Indian children rose dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to new research from the Tata-Cornell Institute for Agriculture and Nutrition (TCI).

In [a study published Feb. 2](#) in *Economic and Political Weekly*, TCI

researchers analyzed pre- and post-pandemic [survey data](#) on children's health and nutrition. They found that the number of children deemed underweight increased by 14% as a result of disruptions caused by the pandemic, including supply chain disruptions, price inflation, loss of work and the interruption of government food safety net programs.

Previous TCI research on the impact of COVID-19 has found that supply chain disruptions caused [food prices](#) to increase and that women's dietary diversity worsened during the pandemic.

"Researchers long suspected that pandemic-related disruptions to India's food systems reduced access to healthy, nutritious diets, especially for marginalized populations dependent on [government programs](#)," said Prabhu Pingali, director of TCI and professor in the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, with an appointment in the Department of Global Development in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs).

"Our study confirms these suspicions," he said, "and shows the real damage done to children's nutrition and development."

TCI researcher Payal Seth and colleagues examined survey data collected from 511 [households](#) in the states of Bihar and Odisha in June 2017 and July 2021, about 18 months after the last pandemic-related lockdowns ended in India.

Researchers found that the percentage of underweight children increased from 31% in 2017 to 45% in 2021, with children under the age of 2 disproportionately impacted. Most of the shift occurred in children who already had a low weight for their age in 2017.

A number of factors were behind a child's weight-for-age worsening, including reduced access to food safety net programs like Integrated

Child Development Services (ICDS) and the Partnerships and Opportunities to Strengthen and Harmonize Actions for Nutrition (POSHAN) initiative or Mid-Day Meal Scheme.

Some of the children surveyed experienced an improvement in weight during the pandemic. Those children had higher access to ICDS and cultivated pulses (the edible seeds of plants in the legume family) and vegetables in 2021 than they did in 2017.

Researchers recommended that policymakers encourage the diversification of agriculture to ensure access to diverse, nutritious foods. Household production diversity—the number of crops a farming household grows—was a significant predictor of weight-for-age in the TCI study, as it improves resilience to market disruptions.

The researchers also recommended that policymakers work to minimize any potential disruptions to ICDS, POSHAN and other programs that ensure supplementary nutrition for vulnerable groups.

"To directly address the reduction of access to these programs during pandemics and other crises, states should explore switching to direct cash transfers when the physical delivery of services is difficult," Seth said.

The researchers recommended that the restoration of basic maternal and child-care services be prioritized in the future. Children younger than 2 were disproportionately impacted and researchers found that a mother's body mass index (BMI) was associated with improved child weight during the pandemic.

"By addressing the disruptions that most impacted children's nutrition and building household resilience through diversified farming," Seth said, "policymakers can minimize harm to [children's health](#) and

development during future adverse events."

More information: Did the COVID-19 Lockdown Reverse the Nutritional Gains in Children?, *Economic and Political Weekly* (2024). [www.epw.in/journal/2024/5/spec ... tritional-gains.html](http://www.epw.in/journal/2024/5/spec...ritional-gains.html)

Provided by Cornell University

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