

UNICEF report has grave implications for child health in developing countries

More than one billion children — or over half the youngsters growing up in developing countries — suffer from severe deprivation of basic human needs, and 674 million of them live in absolute poverty, according to a study sponsored by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Authors of the "Child Poverty in the Developing World" report note that the dismal living conditions have serious adverse consequences for the health, well-being and development of children.

"Many of the 10 to 11 million children who die each year, mainly in the developing world, die because of the living conditions recorded in this study," says Professor David Gordon, Director of the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research at the University of Bristol, who led the research. "In particular, poor sanitation, inadequate clean water and overcrowded dwellings contribute greatly to diarrhoeal and respiratory diseases — the major killers."

Commenting on the report, Dr Hans Troedsson, Director of Children and Adolescent Health and Development at the World Health Organization, called the figures it contains "shocking but not surprising." "It's confirming the fears we have of how bad the situation actually is," he added.

For the analysis, Gordon and colleagues at the Townsend Centre along with researchers at the London School of Economics and Political Science pored over details of the lives of nearly 1.2 million children. The information was collected, mainly during the late 1990s, from the Demographic and Health Surveys of 45 countries and, for China, the China Health and Nutrition Survey. Using the survey data, the researchers charted the availability of seven essentials: food, water, sanitation, health, shelter, education and access to information.

The 36-page report, which was released in October, paints a bleak picture. Those living in "severe deprivation"

included 91 million severely malnourished children younger than 5 years, nearly 376 million children who use unsafe water, more than 5 billion children who have no kind of toilet facility, and 265 million children who have never received *any* immunizations or have chronic diarrhoea. Furthermore, the 674 million children living in "absolute poverty" suffer from two or more severe deprivations of basic human needs.

The researchers themselves describe the findings as shocking, but they also point out that the figures may be minimum estimations since the report focuses on particularly severe living conditions. "We used far harsher definitions of deprivations, such as having no toilet facility whatsoever, than those used by most international organizations," Gordon says. "And we still came up with these enormous numbers of children. That's what is shocking."

The report concludes that helping the world's poorest children needs to include improving infrastructure. Otherwise, the lack of adequate housing, water treatment and sanitation facilities could undermine efforts aimed at health, nutrition and education. "Building schools without tackling the causes of what makes children sick," Gordon says, "won't necessarily improve the education of children living in these circumstances." ■

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