COVID-19

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HIGHLIGHTS
Collaborative research led by PAHO in eight Latin American countries and recently published in the Lancet Regional Health – Americas shows that one in three pregnant women with COVID-19 who should have had access to an intensive care unit for critical care during the first two years of the pandemic failed to receive this care. The study was carried out by PAHO’s Latin American Center for Perinatology, Women’s Health and Reproductive Health (CLAP), and is the largest to date worldwide. It is based on 447 cases from Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Ecuador, Peru, and Paraguay. The study found that 35% of the pregnant women who died from COVID-19-related causes were not admitted to intensive care. The average maternal age was 31, and about half of those who died were obese. In most cases, death occurred during the postpartum period – six weeks after childbirth – with an average of seven days between childbirth and death. Preterm delivery was the most frequent perinatal complication (76.9%), and 59.9% of the children were born with low weight. The authors emphasize the importance of prioritizing pregnant women for COVID-19 vaccines, as they are high risk. “Although recent data suggests a decline in maternal deaths from COVID-19 in the region, women are still dying from it, and vaccination is the main tool to reduce severe complications and deaths from this disease,” said Bremen de Mucio, PAHO Regional Maternal Health Advisor and one of the lead authors of the study. The research highlights “the importance of joining efforts to increase the early detection of severe COVID-19 in pregnant women in the region, and to provide evidence-based advice for public policies to protect them,” CLAP Director Suzanne Serruya said.
Reported number of cumulative COVID-19 cases in the Region of the Americas and corresponding incidence rate (per 100,000 population) by country/territory as of 14 May 2022.
PAHO/WHO Response (through 20 May 2022)

On 17 January 2020, the Pan American Sanitary Bureau activated an organization-wide Incident Management Support Team (IMST) to provide its countries and territories with technical cooperation to address and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These efforts align with the ten pillars of the 2021 WHO Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19 as well as with the strategic objectives and core components of WHO Strategic Preparedness, Readiness and Response Plan to End the Global COVID-19 Emergency in 2022, PAHO’s Response Strategy and Donor Appeal, and PAHO Resolution CD58.R9, approved by its Member States. PAHO has been developing, publishing, and disseminating evidence-based technical documents to help guide countries’ strategies and policies to manage this pandemic.

Regional

PAHO continued to collaborate with its partners within the Region and across the globe to deliver technical cooperation, evidence-based guidance and recommendations, and to advocate for the Americas on the global stage. PAHO’s regional IMST also provided support and strategic guidance to country-level IMSTs as they coordinated and monitored their national response activities.

PAHO continued to review new and emerging information to build the evidence base to combat the virus. The public has access to PAHO’s COVID-19 Technical Database for technical guidelines, scientific publications, and ongoing research protocols from the Region. This is the result of partnerships with WHO, Cochrane, McMaster University, Epistemonikos, and others.
Dr. Etienne delivered one press briefing during this reporting period. On 18 May 2022, the PAHO Director warned that COVID-19 infections and deaths have been rising steadily across the Region for the past four weeks. Compared to the previous week, the Americas reported a 27.2% increase in cases while admissions to intensive care units rose in 13 countries and territories. Dr. Etienne remarked that it is time to take stock of these numbers and act. The Director remarked that following a period of lower transmission, many countries abandoned preventive measures such as the use of masks and social distancing requirements. She also remarked that too many people remain unprotected by vaccines, with vulnerable populations still at risk. “The rise in cases should serve as a wake-up call,” she said. She also acknowledged that important lessons were learned over the past two years and new capacity was built to respond to the pandemic. The Director highlighted that enhanced testing and surveillance infrastructure, and hospital capacity must be maintained. Dr. Etienne added that primary care services must also be strengthened for timely diagnosis, treatment, and management of COVID-19 infections and to address other health needs. Finally, the PAHO director emphasized the importance of vaccinating the population now, and taking advantage of investments made to effectively respond to potential new surges. “The better prepared our health systems are, the less lives we lose, and the stronger and more resilient our societies become,” she concluded.

Regional
As the communication needs of the Region evolve, PAHO continues to disseminate key messages across multiple platforms and respond to numerous media inquiries. Communications support is provided to country offices on a variety of issues, particularly regarding COVID-19 vaccines and COVAX. Infographics cover a range of issues related to COVID-19, from steps on how to prevent infection to tips on staying healthy and protecting one’s mental health during the pandemic.
Country

In Mexico, on 11 May 2022, PAHO participated in an International Nurses Day event in Mexico City. The Government of Mexico City launched a documentary produced in collaboration with PAHO about the COVID-19 vaccination campaign in the city. The film showcases the challenges faced by Mexico’s capital city during the pandemic, the solidarity and responsibility of its population, and the essential role played by health professionals in the response to COVID-19, including in the vaccination campaign. The video is available on the PAHO TV YouTube channel.

In the Bahamas, PAHO is collaborating with the Ministry of Health and Wellness (MoHW) and the Office of the Prime Minister on the implementation of a communication strategy to increase COVID-19 vaccine and booster dose uptake. As part of this strategy, on 17 May 2022, PAHO launched a campaign titled “The Chronicles of Keisha and COVID-19”, using material adapted from Public Service Announcements (PSAs) that were used in Trinidad and Tobago. The Junkanoo Corporation New Providence (JCNP) adapted the PSAs into four animations that are being aired on six popular radio stations in the Bahamas. The video versions are being disseminated on PAHO Caribbean social media channels and on the major television stations of the country. Preparations are underway to launch the same campaign via Twitter and Google Ads.

Regional

PAHO developed a Geo-Hub for the Region, which includes a series of dashboards and epidemiological data that are updated daily. The dashboard has four subregional and 56 country/territory/area geo-hubs for the Americas. In addition, PAHO’s interactive dashboard provides information for the public on cumulative cases, deaths, cumulative incidence rate, new cases and deaths, as well as several other epidemiological indicators reported by countries and territories.

PAHO also publishes weekly reports detailing trends in influenza and other respiratory viruses, as well as SARS-CoV-2 surveillance indicators. PAHO continues to analyze trends in the Region, particularly through the collection of COVID-19 nominal data.

Seroprevalence studies have provided the Region with invaluable data on how the virus has spread since the onset of the pandemic. PAHO maintains a dashboard that shows seroprevalence studies in Latin America and the Caribbean, including information on the study design, sampling method, sample sizes, and other factors.
PAHO’s Contact Tracing Knowledge Hub publishes multidisciplinary information on contact tracing for a variety of audiences, including policymakers, responders, researchers, educators, affected communities, and the public. Go.Data is one of the tools available through this platform. It is used to support case investigation and management, display transmission chains, and facilitate contact tracing. In collaboration with GOARN, to date, PAHO/WHO has trained more than 35 countries and territories in the Go.Data app.

Country
In Brazil, from 9 to 12 May 2022, a PAHO team was deployed to the state of Santa Catarina to deliver a situation analysis training. The training aimed to support local health surveillance teams in the analysis of health data and preparation of epidemiological bulletins for COVID-19 and other infectious diseases. Additionally, from 16 to 18 May 2022, PAHO participated in meetings with the Influenza Working Group of the Ministry of Health and national experts to discuss the follow-up of COVID-19, influenza, and other respiratory infections surveillance. There is a need to reorganize surveillance activities as the Ministry of Health declared the end of the Public Health Emergency of National Concern for COVID-19 in April 2022. Thirty representatives from state surveillance teams and from the Central Public Health Laboratories (Lacen) from the five regions of the country also participated in the meeting.

Regional
It is important that risk mitigation measures are always in place, including advice for travelers, particularly regarding self-monitoring of signs and symptoms; surveillance and case management at the point of entry and across borders; capacities and procedures for international contact tracing; and environmental controls and public health and social measures at points of entry and onboard conveyances.

PAHO will continue to support countries to ensure that these capacities are in place. PAHO will also support countries’ efforts to define a risk-based policy while resuming international traffic in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, considering the provisions of the International Health Regulations (IHR), available scientific evidence, and the most cost-effective use of available resources.
Regional
Since the beginning of PAHO’s response to the date of this report, the Organization has provided primers, probes and/or PCR kits for over 21.97 million reactions/tests and 21.46 million rapid antigen tests. To date, PAHO has provided over 706,700 swabs and 384 sampling kits, among other critical materials.

Global genomic surveillance efforts have been essential to identifying and detecting SARS-CoV-2 variants. Since the initial identification of SARS-CoV-2, until 20 May 2022, 3,992,864 complete genomic sequences from across the Region were shared globally through publicly accessible databases.

5.1 SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern

Given the significant resource requirements needed to sequence all samples in the Region to identify variants, PAHO continues to work closely with the laboratories of the countries of the Americas to help identify samples, which should be prioritized for genomic sequencing. To date, PAHO has distributed 63 unique primers to detect genetic variants using PCR.

To date, 31 laboratories from 28 countries are participating in the COVID-19 Genomic Surveillance Regional Network (COVIGEN). Reference sequencing laboratories in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Panama, the United States of America and Trinidad and Tobago are visible on this dashboard. This network will be critical to track the spread or appearance of new Variants of Concern (VOCs). During the reporting period, a total of 8,304 samples were shipped through COVIGEN’s regional sequencing reference laboratories for COVID-19 in support of countries using external sequencing capacity.

Regional
Implementation of national IPC plans are key to reducing COVID-19 transmission at both community and health facility levels. PAHO supports countries by supplying personal protective equipment (PPE) through donations which are procured through the Revolving Fund, and by training healthcare personnel.

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1 The number of COVIGEN laboratories was reduced by one as one of the laboratories from El Salvador is no longer considered part of the network. El Salvador continues to have one laboratory participating in the Genomic Surveillance Regional Network.
On May 18 and 19, PAHO held a regional webinar on PPE quality standards and correct use. The online event was directed at health professionals from countries and territories in the Americas, and 160 people participated in each day of the event.

Considering the breadth of knowledge and evidence related to COVID-19, PAHO maintains an interactive infographic to help external partners navigate PAHO and WHO’s technical material and compilations of evidence from the Americas and around the globe.

The Organization worked with countries in the Region to promote the WHO Global COVID-19 Clinical Data Platform for the clinical characterization and management of hospitalized patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19. This is part of a global strategy to gain a clearer understanding of the severity, clinical features, and prognostic factors of COVID-19. The Platform receives contributions from the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and the United States of America.

PAHO last updated evidence for the Ongoing Living Update of Potential COVID-19 Therapeutics: Summary of rapid systematic reviews on 4 May 2022. The study synthesizes evidence on 193 therapeutics from 615 randomized controlled trials and observational studies.

Emergency Medical Teams (EMTs) are invaluable when demands on a country’s health system exceed regular capacity. Updated information on deployed EMTs and alternative medical care sites (AMCS) throughout the Americas remained available at PAHO’s COVID-19 EMT Response information hub. As of 20 May 2022, there were at least 17 EMTs deployed throughout the Region, and 53 AMCs, such as military bases, sports stadiums, and fairgrounds managed by PAHO. These EMTs currently add 2,507 inpatient hospital beds and 381 critical care beds throughout the Region.

Country

In Brazil, from 16 to 20 May 2022, PAHO participated in the second edition of the Realistic Simulation of the National Network of Hospital Epidemiological Surveillance (Renaveh), held in Passo Fundo, state of Rio Grande do Sul. The event aimed to empower states that were not contemplated in the first edition, held in 2021. The simulation aimed to build capacity and expand the discussion regarding patient flow and care procedures with representations of real hospital scenarios. Four public health events (suspected cases of rubella, chickenpox, pertussis, and severe COVID-19) were simulated. There were five representatives from each of the participant states, who discussed the investigation, notification, and communication flows.
Regional

The regional team continued to collaborate with regional, national, and international partners (including other UN agencies) on all matters related to procurement, shipping, freight, logistics and technical specifications for PPE, oxygen concentrators, in vitro diagnostic products (IVDs), and other goods, supplies, and equipment critical to the COVID-19 response in the Americas.

Considering the multitude of suppliers and concerns about the quality of procured goods, PAHO has made quality assurance a critical component of its technical support in the procurement of goods, supplies and equipment for COVID-19 response. This involves reviewing technical specifications, ensuring correct shipping documentation for customs clearance, and supporting countries with quality assurance issues. WHO issued adapted interim guidance on the rational use of PPE for COVID-19 as well as considerations during severe shortages.

8.1 PAHO Strategic Fund for Essential Medicines and Public Health Supplies

Established in 2000, the PAHO Strategic Fund (SF) supports Member States by ensuring the quality, safety, and efficacy of medicines and other health products; improving demand planning and capacity-strengthening for supply chain systems; sustainably reducing prices of critical medications and supplies through transparent international sourcing; and providing a line of credit option to facilitate Member State procurement.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the SF was rapidly mobilized to assess inventories across the Region and evaluate which medications had adequate safety stock and which needed to be prioritized, avoiding unnecessary expenses or late fees. The SF leveraged existing long-term agreements and relationships with suppliers to mitigate price inflation and coordinate time-efficient shipments/deliveries. The SF also coordinated alternative modes of transport (e.g., air freight versus ocean freight) to adapt to the most cost-effective and timely methods amidst continuously evolving COVID-19-related disruptions. This required direct negotiations with suppliers to absorb increases in freight costs for medicines. Finally, the SF worked with partners to support effective alternative treatment protocols to help adapt to limited supplies during COVID-19.

Since the start of the pandemic to 20 May 2022, the SF has procured more than $298 million worth of COVID-19 diagnostic tests (PCR and rapid tests), PPE and medicines for critical care, benefiting more than 39 million people throughout the Region of the Americas. The Fund continues to support the procurement of medicines and public health supplies for individuals affected by HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, diabetes, neglected tropical diseases, cardiovascular diseases, and hepatitis C. Learn more about the PAHO Strategic Fund’s essential work on the PAHO website.

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2 Sum of all Strategic Fund purchase orders placed to date. Occasionally, countries will withdraw or cancel orders, causing the figure to fluctuate from one report to the next.
Regional
PAHO provides continuous assistance to its Member States on regulatory preparedness to expedite processes for vaccine deployment. As part of the COVAX Facility’s allocation mechanism, support includes presenting information on technical documents required by Member States during bilateral and regional meetings.

Health technology assessments (HTAs) are invaluable guidance for health authorities in the use of technologies relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic. There are 433 COVID-19 related reports available in the Regional Database of HTA Reports of the Americas (BRISA).

The Organization collaborates with national regulatory authorities from across the Region to share recommendations, considerations, and evaluations on products used to support COVID-19 patients and prevent transmission during the pandemic. Additionally, PAHO maintains a repository of websites and relevant information, including regulatory response on COVID-19, at the Regional Platform on Access and Innovation for Health Technologies (PRAIS).

Regional
As of 20 May 2022, more than 1,849,426,821 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines had been administered in the Americas, with more than 700 million people having completed their full vaccination schedule. Fifty-one countries and territories in the Region have begun vaccination. Additionally, PAHO continued to provide strategic direction to countries in the Region that are pending arrival of vaccines. More details are available on PAHO’s COVID-19 Vaccination in the Americas database, which reports on doses administered by country.

Successfully deploying vaccines for COVID-19 requires that countries have detailed plans, which factor in considerations ranging from regulatory and logistical issues to staff needs to ensuring equitable distribution, while targeting those most at risk of infection (e.g., frontline health workers, older persons, and those with underlying conditions).

In addition to written guidance, PAHO also provides training webinars to its Member States. PAHO worked with Member States to develop workshops aimed at strengthening the Events Supposedly Attributable to...
Vaccination or Immunization (ESAVI) surveillance in the Region of the Americas. Access the full list of past and future training sessions for all member states on PAHO's website.

PAHO maintains a public dashboard that tracks the safety of various COVID-19 vaccines during and after clinical trials.

### 10.1 PAHO’s Revolving Fund for the Procurement of Vaccines

Through its Revolving Fund, PAHO has been helping countries prepare to meet COVAX requirements, including by updating market dynamics and financial projections to estimate investment in COVID-19 vaccines; supporting demand planning for routine immunization programs and for procurement of other supplies required for vaccination; participating in international bidding and joint tender with UNICEF; establishing long-term agreements with suppliers to issue price estimates, purchase orders, and requisitions; coordinating and monitoring international logistics; advocating for donations to the Region; and supporting coordination and country readiness.

33 countries have received vaccine doses through COVAX. Overall, as of 20 May 2022, PAHO’s Revolving Fund had distributed more than 141,926,350 million doses to the Americas through COVAX.

**Country**

In Suriname, PAHO supported the organization of a COVID-19 vaccination event on 15 May 2022, as a continuation of World Health Day celebrations. The event included a number of health promotion activities aimed at raising awareness about the importance of making healthy choices, including taking the COVID-19 vaccine. During this event, several persons received their first, second or booster COVID-19 vaccine.

Figure 3: People get vaccinated against COVID-19 during continuation of World Health Day celebrations in Suriname. Credit: PAHO.