

Building Resilient Health Systems in Latin America and the Caribbean

Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic



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Executive Summary



Photo credit: World Bank / Dominic Chavez (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

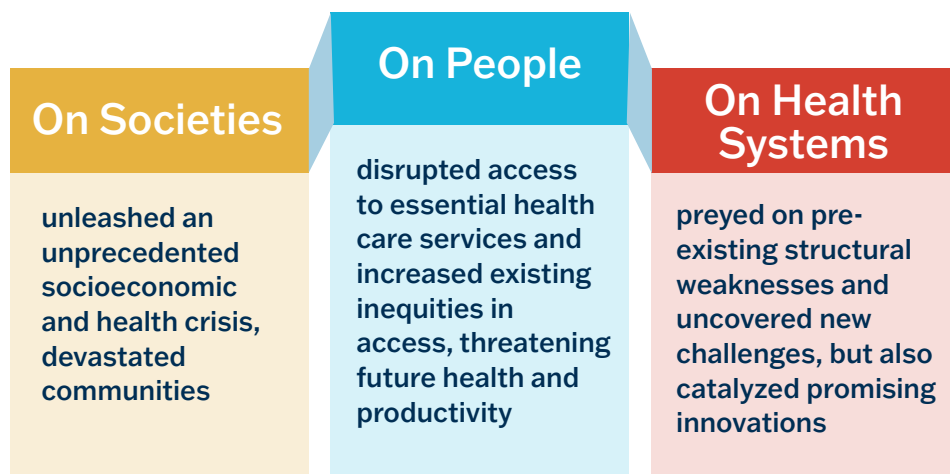
More than two years into the pandemic, the evidence is clear: COVID-19 has unleashed an unprecedented socioeconomic and health crisis, and devastated communities across Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Fundamental changes must be initiated to strengthen health systems to regain lost ground and avoid similar losses in the future.

A better recovery is imperative, but it will be challenging and will require innovation to better prepare for future crises, implementing effective universal health coverage and improving human capital outcomes.

This report summarizes key findings about the pandemic's impacts on health across the region. Drawing from a range of sources including World-Bank conducted research and phone surveys as well as research by partner organizations, governments, and academic experts, the first three chapters investigate three areas of impact: impacts on societies, impacts on people, and impacts on health systems. It then builds on those insights in a final chapter that maps out a five-pillar action plan and smart investments for decision-makers to consider in charting a way forward to build resiliency in health systems and improve health outcomes for all.

With an eye to usability for busy policy makers and practitioners, each chapter begins with a one-page graphics-based overview that summarizes key findings and action points—providing users with a visually rich snapshot to guide both consideration of the details presented in this report and also subsequent discussions to determine best courses of action for a given country. The balance of this executive summary section brings together much of the content of those one-pagers, looking first at the impacts of the pandemic and then turning to the way forward for health systems to enhance recovery and resilience.

Summary of Impacts



On Societies

Underinvestment in **public health** before the pandemic left systems in LAC severely **underprepared** and oriented towards curative care.


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13% of world's cases While home to only 8.5 percent of the world's population, the region accounted for 13 percent of all cases (July 2022).
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Highest **excess mortality** in Peru, Mexico, Ecuador, and Bolivia, with a steepening curve in Bolivia.
- 


Adaptations to meet high COVID-19 demands have caused **setbacks in health outcomes**.

Lack of preparedness prompted a government response to COVID-19 that **worsened economic performance** in LAC.

 LAC GDP contraction in 2020 hit 7 percent—the largest in the last 100 years and the worst worldwide.

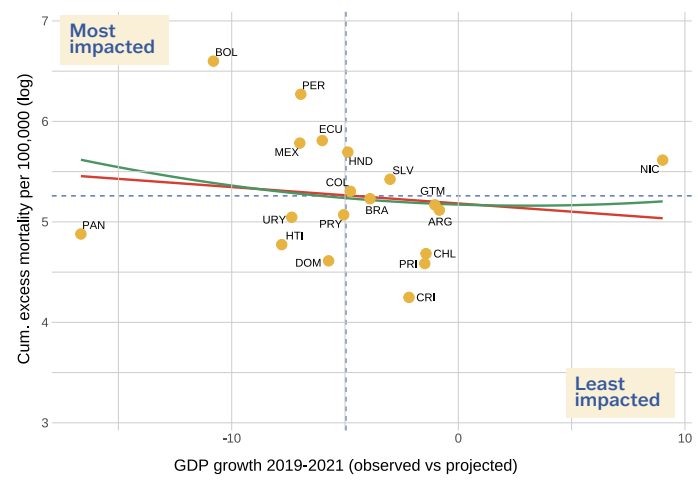
 By mid-2020, Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico registered 20 percent drops in employment; by 2021, almost 20 million people had left the labor force.

The pandemic triggered a **profound shock to the education sector** which is critical to both quality of life and national long-term economic productivity and development.

 Students risk losing an amount equal to 14 percent of today's global GDP due to school closures.

 Unprecedented negative impacts on children's safety, health, and well-being (feeding programs, mental health, violence).

COVID-19 Excess Mortality Rate per 100,000 (2020–2021) and GDP Growth 2019–2021 (observed vs. projected)



Sources: COVID-19 Excess Mortality Collaborators 2022; IMF 2019; IMF 2022.
 Note: GDP = gross domestic product.

On People

Declines in people accessing health services (evidence from phone surveys in 14 LAC countries)



The main reason people did not seek care was **healthcare system supply constraints** such as the lack of staff, appointments or supplies, and facility closures.

Inequities exacerbated and financial protection in health worsened (evidence from Peru)



At the end of 2021, healthcare use was 14 percent below pre-pandemic levels for the richest quintile and 32 percent lower for the poorest quintile.

Service disruptions across the life course with longer-term health effects for children and youth, adults, and older people.

Children



Decreases in vaccine coverage, childhood nutrition programs, and primary care services

Adults



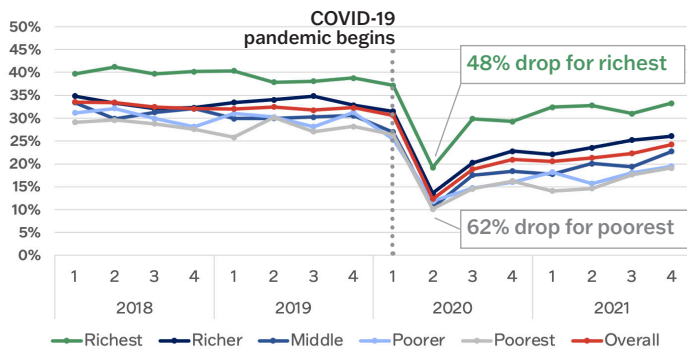
Decreases in key services and care (e.g., diabetes and cardiovascular diseases)

Older People



Decreases in key services and care (e.g., cancer screening)

Formal Healthcare Use Among Population with Illness Symptoms in the Past Month



Source: Perú Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática n.d.b.

On Health Systems

Negative impacts: already known structural weaknesses exacerbated by the pandemic.



System fragmentation



Financial constraints



Limitations in human resources and infrastructure



Shortcomings in governance and trust

Negative impacts: newly exposed weaknesses, including significant service delivery disruptions.



Countries with the greater pre-existing shortfalls in health system management had greater difficulties in coping with COVID-19.



Delayed care and lack of control in treatment adherence and filling prescriptions were the most frequent consequences.

Beneficial innovations: notable effective, innovative measures that mitigated constraints and merit consideration to improve health system resilience and efficiency going forward.



Substantial expansions of telemedicine and telehealth services

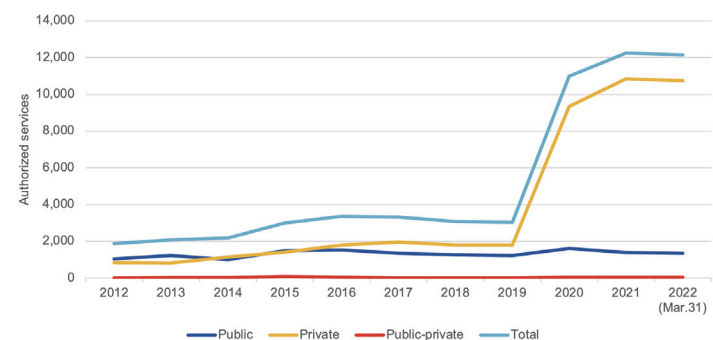


Use of data in decision-making



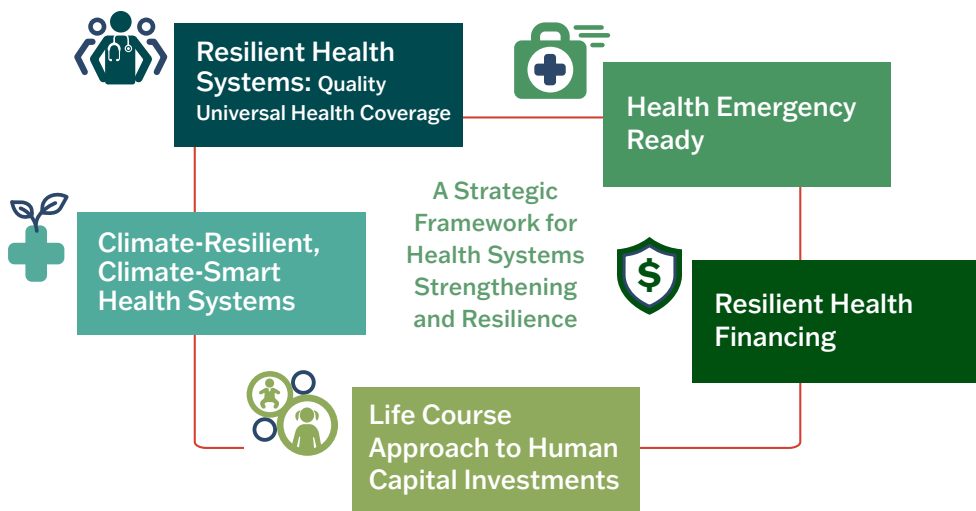
Integrated use of public and private facilities

Telemedicine Services Authorized in Colombia 2012–2022



Source: Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social, Registro Especial de Prestadores de Servicios de Salud (March 31, 2022).

Five Key Investments



Resilient Health Systems: Quality Universal Health Coverage

IMPROVE effective access to health care especially for the most vulnerable and deliver quality universal health coverage based in high-performing primary health care and resilient health systems

- Invest in the frontline
- Invest in better prevention and health promotion
- Empower health workers to deliver quality care
- Leverage data and digital ecosystems for quality UHC

Investments and Policy Considerations

- Implement high-performing, people-centered primary health care (PHC) for all
- Reform service delivery to ensure quality of care
- Invest in a fit-for-purpose workforce for the health sector
- Expand digital transformation and create a digital ecosystem to improve access to and quality of services
- Engage the private sector with appropriate regulations to bridge gaps in service delivery and foster innovation

Health Emergency Ready



INVEST in better public health emergency prevention, preparedness, and response, and ensure effective collaboration in face of public health threats

- Invest in smart surveillance systems and coordination networks
- Build a multisectoral prevention and response system
- Invest in surge capacities including public health professionals
- Leverage PHC for better surveillance and response

Investments and Policy Considerations

- Invest in affordable surveillance systems for timely warning and response
- Scale up key multisectoral interventions
- Strengthen infection prevention and control in all healthcare settings to mitigate the disproportionate burden of epidemic-prone and hospital-acquired diseases
- Develop infrastructure and technical capabilities for development, manufacturing, and better procurement of drugs and vaccines
- Leverage PHC capacities for better pandemic preparedness and response
- Strengthen governance and international coordination for action in emergency situations



Resilient Health Financing

IMPLEMENT health financing reforms driving better population health and financial protection, reducing waste and inefficiencies, and ensuring the financial sustainability of health systems

- Adequate financing for health sector resiliency including
- Boost investments in Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response and break the cycle of panic and neglect contingency financing
- Boost health taxes
- Smart financing for efficiency and better population health

Investments and Policy Considerations

- Improve domestic resource mobilization through smarter taxation to boost government revenue
- Increase fiscal space for health and enhance pooling of health funds to reduce health system fragmentation
- Expand financial protection while achieving efficiencies and reduce waste
- Implement strategic purchasing mechanisms to incentivize the provision of high-value service ecosystems to improve access to and quality of services
- Establish emergency funds that can be quickly accessed during emergencies to accommodate fast-changing needs

Investments and Policy Considerations

- Implement effective interventions targeting the first 1,000 days of life to strengthen early childhood development
- Enact vaccination strategies tailored at national and subnational levels including for adults
- Strengthen multi-pronged strategies to reduce teenage pregnancy
- Leverage multi/inter-sectoral strategies to reduce behavioral risks
- Extend proactive community-based education and health promotion
- Establish and expand healthy longevity strategies

Climate-Resilient, Climate-Smart Health Systems



STRENGTHEN adaptation of health systems to climate change to protect health and well-being in the medium and long term

- Integrate public health, population health, and climate change surveillance systems
- Invest in adaptation efforts to provide essential services
- Invest in efforts to reduce the health sector's carbon footprint

Investments and Policy Considerations

- Integrate public health, population health, and climate change surveillance systems
- Invest in adaptation efforts to provide essential services despite climate-related hazards and risks
- Invest in efforts to reduce the carbon footprint of the health sector over the mid- to long-term



Life Course Approach to Human Capital Investments

IMPLEMENT highly effective human development interventions over the life course, especially in early childhood

- Commit to health and nutrition in the first 1,000 days of life
- Re-commit to vaccination for all, including adults
- Invest to reduce teen pregnancy and tackle risky behaviors
- Invest in key multisectoral interventions promoting healthy longevity

This report is part of series of knowledge products developed by the World Bank Group in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America and the Caribbean. Other knowledge products are available at: www.worldbank.org/en/region/lac/brief/knowledge-covid-19-response