

Jamaica

Update on the context and situation of children

Despite its status as an upper-middle-income country, Jamaica continues to experience major economic, social and national security challenges, pressures on its natural environment and the increasing impacts of climate change, which also affect child survival and development.

As the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, Jamaica has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the region with just below one-fourth of the population being vaccinated. However, this has not deterred the resumption of economic activity and the reopening of schools.

Recent data show continued reduction in national poverty levels, moving from 12.6% (2018) to 11% (2019). Children and youth consistently remain the most vulnerable of the population groups, with children 0–8 years (13.9%) and adolescents (13.9%) displaying the highest levels of poverty – more than two percentage points above the national figure. Unemployment rates declined to 7.1% in 2021, which is the lowest on record. Again, youth experience inequities in this area with an unemployment rate of more than twice the national (18.9%), with female unemployment rates (9.0%) being consistently higher than male rates (5.4%).

Violence continues to be the most pressing priority in the country. The extremely high levels of homicide are caused by a mix of factors at the individual, family, community and societal levels. Young men are overwhelmingly affected by homicide when high levels of lethal violence are fueled by gangs, organized crime and violence in communities. Crime locations are predictable and violent crimes are concentrated in known disadvantaged urban and suburban areas, known as crime ‘hotspot’ communities. Escalation in homicides and gang activity in 2022 resulted in the Government utilizing states of emergency and designating hotspots as zones of special operations (ZOSOs). Whereas these efforts appear to curb violent incidents, there are concerns about human rights violations within these contexts. Despite those efforts, the homicide rate increased to 53 per 100,000 (2021) from 48 per 100,000 (2020). There was also an increase in the number of women and children murdered by 15% and 29.6% respectively. Some 450 children were victims of reported category 1[1] crimes in 2021.

Girls are more likely to experience sexual violence – 21% of adolescent girls aged 15–19 years report having experienced sexual violence – while boys are more likely to experience physical abuse or be involved in crime. Children in conflict with the law experience strong exclusion and stigmatization, which presents considerable challenges for them to reintegrate in society. In 2021, 1,104 children in contact or conflict with the law appeared before the courts; 54% of them were boys. These figures represent not only a declining trend from 2019 (2,485) but also a reduction in the proportion of boys (64%). Further investigation will be required to ascertain the factors contributing to this decline. Some 381 children benefited from the National Child Diversion System in 2021. Just over 19,000 cases of abuse were reported to the National Children’s Registry, with one in four reports being a case of neglect.

Although Jamaicans on average complete 11.7 years of schooling, with fairly high attendance rates, those years are equivalent to only 7.2 years of learning when benchmarked against top-performing systems. This reveals a notable learning gap of 4.5 years, felt largely by poorer quintiles. This inequity extends through all educational levels. Stark differences remain in performance between rich and poor, urban and rural, male and female and children with and without disabilities.

The Jamaican education system faced unprecedented challenges with the full resumption of face-to-face classes in March 2022. It is estimated that the loss in class hours amounted to 1.3 billion over 19

months of physical school closures. A recent study on the impact of COVID-19 identified the following challenges for the education and child protection sectors resulting from the pandemic:

- 1.Immeasurable learning loss
- 2.Loss of earnings by households over the long term
- 3.Deepening of the digital divide with resultant social inequalities
- 4.Socialization deficit for children and youth
- 5.Sport and physical exercise stalled with implications for health status including mental health and obesity
- 6.Loss of protection from home and community-based violence
- 7.Increased food insecurity
- 8.Overstressed education system and educators

More than 120,000 school-aged children were completely detached from their schools during that time. Through the Yard to Yard Find the Child initiative the Ministry of Education sought to address the re-engagement gap, where students did not return to physical school. In June 2022, this number was estimated to still be at 27,000.

Adolescents' and young people's access to mental health services is an outstanding challenge. This was further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the attempted suicides reported to public hospitals were among those aged 10 to 19 (38%), and 73% of these were female. Jamaica falls short of international standards with respect to its capacity to deliver mental health services to its population. Nationally, the ratio of psychiatrists to patients is 1:1,582 and the ratio of community mental health officers/nurses to patients is 1:306, compared with international standards of 1:150 and 1:50 respectively. Adolescents are often unable to access counselling support and community-based mental health services, largely due to the limited capacity within the public health sector.

In 2022, the Government successfully presented its second Voluntary National Review on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Evidence generation and technical inputs from UNICEF were an integral part of the process. UNICEF also strengthened youth participation in facilitating increased youth consultation and financing the youth delegate to the United Nations High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development. Jamaica is only able to report on 40% of the 37 child-focused SDG indicators. The availability of these SDG indicators is on track to be addressed by the implementation of the 2022 Jamaica Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS). It is anticipated that the data will be disseminated in the first half of 2023.

[1] Category 1 crimes are major crimes and include murder, shooting, rape, aggravated assault, robbery, break-ins and larceny.

Major contributions and drivers of results

The new country programme 2022–2026 was approved in February 2022. It has the vision to transform the lives of Jamaican children focusing on five areas:

- 1)Child protection**
- 2)Education**
- 3)Survive and thrive**
- 4)Social policy**
- 5)Climate action and resilience.**

Child protection

Interventions under the child protection programme contributed to SDG Target 16.2: “End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence and torture against children.”

The strategic approach to child protection in the new programme cycle is centred on strengthening the national child protection system and promoting positive social and gender norms and behaviours. In 2022, UNICEF supported a range of strategies at the national and community levels to address violence against children across the socioecological framework.

Strengthening implementation of laws and policies: UNICEF continued to assist the Government in the implementation of the National Plan of Action for an Integrated Response to Children and Violence (NPACV). UNICEF supported the organization of a National Policy Dialogue on Violence Against Children, which led to a formal statement of commitment from the Government to accelerate efforts to end violence against children, including fast-tracking the legislative process to prohibit corporal punishment in all settings. The impact of this National Policy Dialogue was reinforced by the official visit to Jamaica of the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, Dr. Najat Maalla M’Jid. In coordination with the Resident Coordinator Office, UNICEF led the preparations for this visit, which provided an excellent opportunity for broad engagement with key stakeholders on the priority issue of the elimination of violence against children in the country.

UNICEF continued to advocate for cost-effective family-based alternatives to institutional care. In partnership with the Child Protection and Family Services Agency (CPFSA), UNICEF is supporting the development of a detailed costed plan of action for deinstitutionalization and raising children in families. UNICEF also provided technical assistance for the development of a national framework and standard operating procedures (SOPs) on the use of positive, non-violent behaviour management techniques for children in detention and supported the development and implementation of a training course for 15 Master Trainers to increase the knowledge and skills of staff working in juvenile correctional facilities on the use of the SOPs.

Generating and using evidence: The UNICEF-supported evaluation of the national child protection system provided critical insights into and recommendations for the types of interventions and investments that should be prioritized to strengthen the key components of the child protection system in Jamaica. UNICEF will collaborate with the Government to ensure the implementation of the key findings of this evaluation in combination with the findings of two other major research initiatives supported by UNICEF in 2002 – Social Service Workforce Mapping and the Kids Online research.

Promoting positive social norm change: As the United Nations agency lead of the prevention pillar of the Spotlight initiative supported by the European Union (EU), which focuses on changing social norms and harmful practices that perpetuate family and gender-based violence (GBV), UNICEF supported a blend of social and behaviour change (SBC) approaches to help raise public understanding, build consensus and generate positive social and gender norm changes for violence prevention. It is estimated that 322,741 persons were reached by UNICEF-supported SBC initiatives aimed at challenging the social acceptance of violence against children and GBV.

Supporting parents and caregivers: Since its launch in June, ParentText Jamaica has been gaining steady momentum among parents seeking new and effective ways to tackle parenting challenges, with more than 1,200 signing up to receive parenting information via their cell phones. ParentText Jamaica is led by UNICEF in collaboration with the Oxford University Parenting for Lifelong Health programme and in partnership with the National Parenting Support Commission. In addition, about 150 adolescent mothers benefited from the Empowered Futures Parenting programme for adolescent parents scaled up by the Women’s Centre of Jamaica Foundation (WCJF), with the support of UNICEF and the University of the West Indies. Approximately 1,100 parents benefited from gender-responsive parenting interventions in crime hotspot communities under the Spotlight initiative.

Education

All UNICEF-supported interventions in education were aligned with SDG 4 and Goal 1 of the Vision 2030 national development plan for Jamaica, which aims for world-class education and training. Strategic interventions in 2022 spanned sectors from early childhood through primary and secondary, with an added focus on out-of-school youth and transition to work, a new area of intervention for the country programme.

The long-term school closure from March 2020 has proven to be very harmful. More than 120,000 school-aged children were completely detached from their schools during that time, although hybrid and staggered attendance was eventually facilitated. UNICEF advocacy efforts in partnership with the Private Sector Organization of Jamaica (PSOJ) facilitated the return to face-to-face school on 7 March 2022 for all Jamaican children without any vaccination conditionality. UNICEF continued to support the Ministry of Education and Youth (MOEY) in its learning recovery efforts through system strengthening, teacher training, inclusive and technological content development and the prioritization of student-centred approaches to the teaching of core subjects, including remedial content to respond to the effects of COVID-19 and build resilience in the sector.

Recovery efforts were guided by the voices of students and teachers through several participatory processes led by UNICEF. As part of preparations for high-level participation in the global Transforming Education Summit in September 2022, UNICEF, UNESCO and the Resident Coordinator Office conducted an integrated process that included 900 teachers from early childhood, primary and secondary schools as well as schools for children with disabilities in urban and rural areas.

At the policy level, UNICEF continued to support the education transformation agenda led by the prime minister of Jamaica through participation in the Education Transformation and Oversight Committee (ETOC). To guide this transformation process, the committee relied heavily on the findings and recommendations from the UNICEF-supported public expenditure review conducted in partnership with the World Bank that was presented in early 2022.

Successes in this sector also include support for the data-collection component of the June 2022 administration of the Jamaica School Readiness Assessment (JSRA). This assessment, the first since 2019, was administered by the Early Childhood Commission (ECC) to all 4-year-olds. UNICEF provided kits of manipulatives to conduct the secondary assessments where recommended. With respect to teacher capacity building, foundational literacy and numeracy for young children was a key component of the roll-out of the evidence-based, locally developed Irie Classroom Toolbox (ICT), which was completed by 840 teachers. This represents staff members from more than 30% of the institutions island wide.

At the primary level, key achievements include content curation for the Learning Passport platform targeting catch-up learning in grades 1–3 and the launch of the first two accessible digital reading books, which will be added to its offerings in early 2023. The Learning Passport is a mobile tech platform enabling high-quality, flexible learning, developed by UNICEF in partnership with Microsoft and available online and offline. Important recovery and resilience work to support school-based mental health continues through course development in socioemotional learning with the Jamaica Teaching Council (JTC).

Out-of-school youth have also emerged as a critical area of focus for the education sector. Promising work is under way to roll out an inclusive, chat-based, gamified digital platform to provide access to experiential learning for adolescents using Fundoo. A strategic public partnership with the PSOJ was initiated to work through its Social Transformation and Renewal project, popularly known as Project STAR, promoting the transfer of soft skills and participation and engagement of adolescents and youngsters in volatile communities.

Survive and thrive

UNICEF-supported interventions related to health aligned with SDG 3 (ensure health and well-being for all), SDG 2 (zero hunger) and the Vision 2030 national development outcome 1: a healthy and stable population.

UNICEF has proven itself a valuable partner of the Ministry of Health and Wellness (MOHW) throughout the pandemic and has been recognized by the ministry for its contribution to prevention and mitigation efforts. This support continued in 2022 as Jamaica worked to recover from the shocks of COVID-19 to build a more resilient health system.

A key highlight for 2022 was UNICEF-supported advancements in health system strengthening with the modernization of the cold chain vaccine storage capacity and information management system.

Building on the successful implementation in 2021 of the state-of-the-art digital COVID vaccine information management platform and vaccine certificate, UNICEF is working with MOHW on the expansion of a digital solution to ensure a modern and efficient immunization management system. An assessment of the vaccine management landscape in Jamaica was initiated in 2022 and the results and recommendations will inform the development of an electronic immunization registry for routine immunization to be rolled out in 2023.

The modernization of the vaccination system was also advanced through UNICEF procurement and distribution of state-of-the-art cold chain equipment valued at US\$800,000 to 140 public health centres across Jamaica. The equipment includes two refrigerated vehicles, 120 vaccine refrigerators, cold boxes and other items that will ensure better storage of vaccines and less waste.

In 2022, UNICEF led implementation of a comprehensive cold chain inventory assessment in 144 sites within the public health system to establish a baseline ahead of distribution of newly imported cold chain equipment. This assessment was also used by the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) in distribution.

The shortage of medical oxygen experienced during the third spike of COVID-19 cases in 2021 is being addressed in collaboration with the UNICEF Supply Division with the impending establishment of the first Oxygen Plant-in-a-Box for Jamaica. This new oxygen plant, which is to be installed at the St Ann's Bay Hospital, will ensure easy access to this essential resource by the hospital and facilities in close proximity. UNICEF procured and shipped the unit to Jamaica and is working with the MOHW to install and make the plant operational. A second oxygen plant will be installed at the May Pen Hospital in 2023.

With respect to nutrition policy advocacy, UNICEF has made significant strides in partnership with the Heart Foundation of Jamaica to call for Government action on front-of-package labelling. UNICEF also supported MOEY in the finalization of the National School Nutrition Policy through stakeholder consultations engaging 600 principals and concessionaires, 502 parents, 355 vendors and 638 students and youth advocates. UNICEF supported the Jamaica Moves in Schools programme that reached 9,400 students. Some 1,237 healthcare workers were trained to facilitate nutrition counselling and breastfeeding support benefiting 7,600 caregivers.

Adolescent health service delivery received a boost with the launch of the U-Matter mental health support chatline. This service, which is the product of a tripartite collaboration involving UNICEF, MOHW and University of the West Indies, has created island-wide access to first-line mental health support for adolescents and youth. Between its launch in March and the end of the year, 1,700 contact sessions with users were facilitated. UNICEF has also embarked on an advocacy plan that aims to underscore the need for more investment and improved mechanisms for cross-sectoral coordination for adolescent and child mental health.

More than 100 adolescents and youth were engaged in consultations for the review and revision of the National Strategic Plan on Adolescent Health and the National Adolescent HIV Prevention Action Plan. Additionally, a new adolescent-friendly facility, Teen-Hub, has been built to serve the needs of vulnerable adolescents in St Thomas, one of the poorest parishes in Jamaica, which reports high rates of teen pregnancies and sexual abuse. The facility, which will be operated by the health ministry, will offer sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services including pregnancy prevention counselling, HIV/STI testing and counselling, life skills education and mental health counselling.

UNICEF supported the National Family Planning Board's HIV Prevention Action Plan for Young People with inputs from 70 youth including from key and vulnerable groups. UNICEF is also supporting the development of a chatbot dedicated to improving HIV knowledge among young people.

Social policy

UNICEF continued its efforts to propose decisive responses to socioeconomic needs, within the context of diminishing fiscal space, to address some of the historical and emerging needs and against the backdrop of a global pandemic that threatened to erode domestic gains made during the previous years.

UNICEF is leading a new SDG Fund joint programme alongside the World Food Programme (WFP) and UN Women to support the expansion of the social protection system to cater to the needs of the most vulnerable. In 2022 the joint programme worked with the Ministry of Labor and Social Security (MLSS) to strengthen its public assistance programme to pilot a digital payment platform, as well as to conduct research to examine electronic delivery mechanisms for the provision of social assistance benefits. UNICEF also commenced a review of current payment modalities used for persons with disabilities towards enhancing the overall management and disbursement of cash-based transfers.

UNICEF collaborated with the Jamaica Council of Persons with Disabilities (JCPD) to generate critical evidence for improving the quality and functionality of and access to services for persons with disabilities. A review on the capacity of the existing information, communication and technology infrastructure and human capital was conducted with UNICEF support that provided critical recommendations to improve the system as the country initiates the implementation of the Disabilities Act that came into effect in February 2022.

UNICEF completed its collaboration with the World Bank with the dissemination of the public expenditure review (PER) on education. This document provided critical insights for improving budget policy reform efforts and supporting the achievement of the education sector goals. Through the SDG joint programme on SDG financing, UNICEF worked with MOEY and the finance ministry to address some of the key recommendations. UNICEF supported bolstering of the public finance management capacity of officers from across the ministry and conducted a series of deep dives into the budgets of three education programmes identified by the PER: school feeding programme, national textbook programme and tertiary education programme.

UNICEF supported the development of a financial simulation model for MOEY geared towards improving the formation of education policy objectives to support the country's education system resource requirements according to policy assumptions and targets.

Climate action and resilience

As part of the country programme 2022–2026, UNICEF Jamaica established a new outcome to address climate action and disaster risk reduction and preparations for emergencies. Interventions under this outcome will build on the recommendation of the research Climate Landscape Analysis and Children in Jamaica finalized in 2021 and consultations with several stakeholders. The planning for a junior and youth advocates programme was initiated in 2022. This activity, to be implemented in 2023, will

support the participation of children and adolescents in decision-making processes on climate issues.

UNICEF supported approximately 1,100 students through the Resilient Schools water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) project in partnership with Food For The Poor to provide access to handwashing facilities and water storage capacity in 15 rural schools. UNICEF strengthened stakeholder coordination in WASH through the establishment of the WASH Coordination Platform. Stakeholder capacity in emergency preparedness and response for the WASH sector was enhanced through two training sessions in Jamaica and the Bahamas.

UN Collaboration and Other Partnerships

Inter-agency collaboration and inter-country support in Jamaica is guided by the recently approved United Nations Multi-Country Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for the English and Dutch Speaking Caribbean (MSDCF) 2022–2026. UNICEF Jamaica played a key role in the development of the Caribbean framework and the Country Implementation Plan as well as the update of the Common Country Analysis for Jamaica. Since 2021, UNICEF Jamaica has been located at the UN common premises, which has helped to create synergies and efficiencies and more close collaboration with other UN agencies. In 2022, UNICEF supported the relocation of the WFP to the common premises, which is expected for 2023, and at the request of the Resident Coordinator is supporting the development of a youth engagement strategy for the whole UN system in Jamaica in collaboration with UNESCO.

As part of the UN reform, UNICEF Jamaica has made a deliberate effort to join forces and work together with the rest of the UN system to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the response to emergencies in Jamaica. UNICEF Jamaica works closely in partnership with peer agencies in the implementation of several joint programmes such as the Spotlight initiative, which is supporting efforts by the Government of Jamaica to reduce family violence, the Secretariat SDG Fund, with programmes on SDG financing and a second joint programme to promote shock-responsive social protection and the joint HIV programme. In partnership with UNESCO, UNICEF is leading a joint programme proposal to the Human Security Fund that will focus on crime prevention in Jamaica.

UNICEF efforts to respond to COVID 19 pandemic and strengthened the resilience of the health sector to external shocks was reinforced by the strong partnership forged with the Japanese and Canadian Governments. With support from Japan the health sector now has increased cold-chain capacity to ensure vaccine efficacy in transportation and storage. Significant investment from Canada in 2023 will build on these achievements for further health system strengthening.

In 2022, UNICEF continued to work closely with international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Development Bank (IDB). The finalization and dissemination of a very successful PER of the education sector has resulted in a close collaboration with the World Bank in the area of education with a special focus on advocacy for early education investment and the development of a digital education management information system. In 2022, IDB provided funds to partially support the implementation of the new MICS survey.

Engaging with the private sector to deliver results for children maintained the momentum gained in 2021. UNICEF continued its partnership with the PSOJ through its support of Project STAR. UNICEF will focus on the transfer of soft skills and the participation of adolescents and young people in volatile communities. UNICEF also renewed the partnership with telecommunication company Flow and has committed to join forces on advocacy for safe use of the Internet as well promoting participation and adolescent engagement through U-Report activities.

Lessons Learned and Innovations

1. UNICEF-supported child protection system evaluation highlighted the broad consensus among stakeholders that the system lacks integration and is under-resourced and that rural areas are particularly underserved. This reconfirmed the need for UNICEF Jamaica to continue to influence Government priority-setting processes and budget allocations for child protection. Moving forward, particular emphasis will therefore be placed on making the investment case for child protection by demonstrating both the cost of inaction as well as the strong returns on investing. Furthermore, evidence generation will focus on obtaining robust data to support policy and budget decisions for

child protection; this is to ensure that resources are better distributed to promote equitable spending with greater attention to disadvantaged groups and areas. Another important lesson learned from the system evaluation is that there is a need to address positive mental health and well-being as a holistic, life-course issue relevant to every sector of development. UNICEF will continue to address mental health as an office-wide, cross-cutting priority and advocate for greater Government investments for a well-planned, coordinated and multisectoral approach to expanding mental health and psychosocial support to children and their caregivers.

2. UNICEF continued to use and expand on innovative ways of delivering services to children and their parents through technology-based approaches. With UNICEF support, a telemental health service was established for children and adolescents in collaboration with MOEY and MOHW. UNICEF also supported the development of the ParentText messaging service, using UNICEF RapidPro technology that allows parents to receive tips and information through WhatsApp messages. The mental health U-Matter chatline launched in 2022 has already proven its utility as a sustainable support over text service for young people. The service will be handed over to MOHW for full operation at the end of 2023. Much is also expected of the implementation of the innovative Fundoo application that was initiated in 2022. It will facilitate access to relevant life skills content for adolescents and youth in several contexts. Fundoo is a chat-based learning platform delivered via WhatsApp using our U-Report social messaging service, with a curriculum based on the UNICEF 21st Century Skills framework.

3. The COVID-19 response provided a critical opportunity for UNICEF to contribute to the modernization and digitization of the Jamaican Government. In 2021, UNICEF supported the development and implementation of a state-of-the-art COVID 19 vaccine digital information management platform that was praised for its timeliness and quality. Building on this successful intervention, UNICEF is now supporting the digitization of the entire routine immunization registry, which will facilitate the monitoring of individual immunization schedules and the storage of individual immunization histories and, consequently, help enhance the performance of the Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) in terms of both coverage and efficiency. In addition, the expertise gained through this process has enabled UNICEF to partner with MOEY in the development of a long overdue digital education management information system for Jamaica in collaboration with the World Bank and IDB. UNICEF has also recently initiated a collaboration with the minister of justice to support the digitalization of the child diversion programme management information system.

4. The experience over the past year in implementation of gender-responsive programmes focused on adolescent sexual and reproductive health and prevention of family violence programming has generated some key lessons learned. The Teen Hub has shown that boys and girls are keen to access health services if they feel respected and safe. This model facility has consistently received high service uptake and between January and November 2022, the MOHW reports that it received 4,036 visits from girls and 3,705 visits from boys. The Women's Centre which serves teen mothers also highlights the need for more effective Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health among girls and a greater focus on issues around sexual consent for both girls and boys. Family violence remains a formidable threat to the development and wellbeing of adolescent girls and therefore must remain priority for the Jamaica country office. Male engagement has been a focus of the Spotlight Programme and has shown promising results with men engaging men as facilitators of community conversations on the issue. Meanwhile, the survivor-centred approach, has also been applied to engage women and girls who have been victims to access counselling and other health and justice related services.