CHILD & CAREGIVER MENTAL HEALTH:

Using Data to Make Progress
Child and caregiver mental health has long been neglected. While evidence shows the importance of investing in child and caregiver mental health, policies and practice are lagging behind and available data to guide decision making remains scarce. Launched in September 2021, Countdown Global Mental Health 2030 has been developed to close the data gap, combining data from multiple sources, and capturing a broad range of indicators that shape the mental health of children and caregivers. In future years, Countdown Global Mental Health 2030 will go further to cover all population groups.

This policy brief developed by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and United for Global Mental Health uses the framework of Countdown 2030 - social determinants, factors affecting mental health service demand and need, and factors affecting the strength of mental health systems - to explore child and caregiver mental health. This policy brief also uses the data already gathered by Countdown 2030 to illustrate examples of data that needs to be collected and policy actions that need to be taken, and aligning with the theme of World Mental Health Day 2021 highlights the inequality in those factors affecting child and caregiver mental health across the world.

Achieving significant improvement in the data collection on indicators that address mental health among young children requires collaboration between numerous actors in the field, such as governments and international organisations. Collecting comparable data necessitates widespread support for worldwide collaboration and data collection to encourage alignment of national datasets and surveys.
The Countdown 2030 is a global indicator set and database that provides data from a total of 238 countries and territories worldwide on 53 indicators to monitor mental health in the general population with a focus on children and caregivers (for more information see Annex 1). Using the Countdown 2030 data dashboard, it can be seen that much more needs to be done to improve the mental health of children and caregivers. It is the first step towards the broader perspective of social and economic determinants.

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The Countdown 2030 data dashboard can be accessed here.

The following sections draw on the data collected under Countdown 2030.

**Determinants of mental health**

Child and adolescent mental health is strongly connected to their environment, and thus the determinants of mental health are multifaceted. Factors such as the level of burden of a mental health disorder, financial accessibility to mental health care, and the social and economic status of the family all play a role. For example, education and the socioeconomic status of a child's family may affect their development and mental health outcomes. Other factors include environmental conditions such as cultural factors, education and the socioeconomic status of a child's family, as well as the level of violence within the family and the community.

Violent behaviour towards children can have significant detrimental impacts on their mental health, with anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts all linked to violence, as is permanent impairment of brain development due to toxic stress.

Poverty and related problems such as low parental education, housing conditions, poor nutrition and lack of stimulating materials such as toys and books, have long-term negative impacts on the psychosocial development of children. Worldwide, the number of children living in poverty varies widely. Available data show that in countries like China, South Africa and Brazil nearly 30% of children between ages 0 and 17 are currently living in poverty. At the other extreme, in Finland a relatively low proportion of children are living in low-income families, with an overall 3.6% of their young people living in poverty.

Air pollution has been shown to negatively impact mental health, particularly for children. Even very low levels of lead concentration in blood may be associated with decreased cognitive development and academic performance. Some of the highest stressors on the mental health of children are found in Cuba and Turkmenistan, with 36% and 37% respectively of children experiencing violent discipline). Lowest use of violent discipline rates of violence are reported in Ghana, Egypt and the Central African Republic (resp 93.6%, 93% and 92% of children experiencing violent discipline). Violence towards children can have significant detrimental impacts on their mental health, with anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts all linked to violence, as is permanent impairment of brain development due to toxic stress. Among 86 countries with available data, all report instances of violent discipline, although the levels of violent discipline vary greatly across the world. Lowest use of violent discipline is found in Cuba and Turkmenistan, with 36% and 37% respectively. This data provides useful information about potential risk and preventive factors for the developing child and their future mental health.

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**Factors shaping the demand and need for mental health care**

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life of their children, caregivers also have an important role in monitoring mental health of their children, identifying early signs of mental ill health, and helping children access mental health services when needed. Hence, information on caregiver attitudes is crucial and should be taken into account when examining mental health outcomes for children. Data reveal that attitudes in the general population vary greatly between countries, with people in Sweden and the UK most likely to think that mental ill health is like any other illness (74 and 76% respectively) and people from Brazil and Japan least likely to (44 and 41% respectively)\(^{13}\).

Parental stress and depression, such as postpartum depression, has been shown to impact maternal-infant bonding and is associated with increased risks of psychological disorders and suicide, or DALYs due to mental health and neurological conditions as proportion of all DALYs in young children are informative, they do not paint the complete picture of mental health burden of disease and much more can be done to understand the need for mental health services in children and caregivers.

Factors shaping the strength of the mental health system

Providing effective mental health services such as pre and postnatal mental health support is crucial to ensure the wellbeing of both children and caregivers. However, most countries only 46 countries report implementing such initiatives. This is also the case with plans or national policy/plan adopted by the government.

Defining the burden of mental health disorders through the measurement of mental health outcomes is necessary to determine the overall demand of mental health services and to optimise mental health services and policies. For instance, every year, over 30 people per 100,000 die by suicide in Guyana and Kiribati, whereas the Bahamas reports lower than 2 people per 100,000 die by suicide annually\(^{14}\). While indicators such as prevalence of mental disorders and suicide, or DALYs due to mental health and neurological conditions vary greatly between countries, with data revealing a high variance of services, processes and outcomes on mental health between countries.

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Improving child and caregiver mental health across the world

The Countdown 2030 on Child and Caregiver Mental Health database provides insight into the current state of mental health services, processes and outcomes in countries, while taking a broad and integrated perspective on mental health for children and caregivers. The amount of information available varies greatly between countries, with data revealing a high variance of services, processes and outcomes on mental health between countries. This is especially the case for data pertaining to child and caregiver mental health where key indicators such as the levels of mental health education that parents receive as part of prenatal care there is no comparative data available, or where there is little data such as the levels of positive and stimulating home learning environments children experience. There is a need to keep advancing mental health policies and data availability, WREHWWUXQHUVWDQDGQGHVVLJQHBFWLYHFKLOGZHOODEHLQJSROLFLHV
Based on the information provided and the broader desire to advance progress on child and caregiver mental health, we recommend that:

1. **Mental health of children and caregivers is seen within the broader perspective of social and economic determinants.**

   The social determinants of mental disorders are the social and economic factors that have a direct influence on the prevalence and severity of mental ill health in children and caregivers. Taking a social determinants approach to child and caregiver mental health facilitates actions to promote mental health of children and caregivers and also in adapting mental health services to specific population groups and individuals. By examining the relevant data, countries can identify those determinants (e.g., extreme poverty, violence or environmental factors) that require urgent attention by developing or more effectively implementing policies and programs.

2. **Urgently needed global and national investments are made to promote and protect the mental health of children and caregivers and to provide care guided by accurate and timely data and evidence.**

   Substantial investments are needed globally and nationally in mental health of children and caregivers; these should be guided by the available data to ensure that investments are effective and efficient. Without comprehensive, independent data which can capture the full range of issues that impact and are impacted by mental health, it is far harder to identify gaps in mental health systems, and to develop an accurate and timely picture of children and caregivers.

3. **Increased and improved monitoring of child and caregiver mental health globally and nationally is routinely done, facilitated by the Countdown 2030 set of indicators.**

   Many global and national commitments have been made on mental health of children and caregivers; these have been facilitated by the available data to ensure that monitoring is accurate, timely and comparable. Data collection is critical to measuring successes and failures, and is critical to making progress. These are essential steps for action to achieve the highest attainable level of mental health for children and caregivers.

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**Annex 1 - Developing Countdown for Child and Caregiver Mental Health**

The indicators selected for Countdown Global Mental Health 2030 recognize mental health as an integral component of the broader SDGs. As such, Countdown indicators consist of mental health as well as health system and services indicators, and also non-health sector social and economic risk factors, determinants, and outcomes relevant for mental health and also aligned with SDGs.

Data for the Countdown has been collected from reliable and credible sources (at the governmental level in both health and non-health sectors, as relevant), as well as from relevant other databases and academic literature. Data from the health sector at the global, national, and subnational levels are routinely collected for the WHO Mental Health Atlas project, and this data has been made available for the Countdown. Where resources permit, grounded data in select countries focusing on human rights, quality of care, and satisfaction with care will also be collected in future years.

**In the future, in addition to the global indicator set, national indicator sets will be developed to provide additional information that cannot be captured by quantitative indicators.**

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