

Opinion **Disease prevention**

Anti-vaxxers distract from a more serious threat

Many parents aren't afraid of social media trolls but simply can't access or afford vaccines

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We must not let the vocal few who perpetuate misinformation distract us from addressing the main reasons why children are not vaccinated © Reuters

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus 2 HOURS AGO

If everything you knew about vaccines came from social media, you could be forgiven for thinking global immunisation rates are collapsing under a torrent of misinformation from [anti-vaccine activists](#) sowing seeds of doubt in the minds of parents.

Certainly, there are communities where falsehoods are overtaking evidence, leading to lower vaccination rates and [localised outbreaks](#). Such falsehoods have spread in European countries, the US, Canada and others, but also in less-developed nations including Pakistan and the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#), jeopardising the fight against polio and [Ebola](#).

Myths and misinformation about vaccines are a serious threat that the World Health Organization is committed to countering. But that's only part of the challenge. The global vaccine crisis is not that rates are falling everywhere, it's that they have stubbornly stalled.

New [data published on Monday](#) by the WHO and Unicef show that global vaccination rates have flatlined at around 86 per cent for the past decade. That's both good and bad news. On the upside, it confirms that despite the worst efforts of scaremongering sceptics, vaccination rates are holding

firm globally. As a result, polio has been cut from more than 350,000 cases in 1988 to just 33 cases in 2018, and measles deaths have fallen from around 550,000 in the year 2000 to 110,000 in 2017.

But it's worrying, too, because to prevent repeated outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases, such as measles, we need to achieve rates of around 95 per cent in every country and community.

The persistent coverage gap is a chink in the armour of the world's defences that helps to explain why we have seen new outbreaks of measles and other diseases. The global average also masks a wide discrepancy between countries and regions, from 25 per cent in Equatorial Guinea to 96 per cent in Norway.

As a result, close to 20m children worldwide — more than one in 10 — are not getting the vaccines they need. For the most part, that's not because their parents are being spooked by social media trolls. It's because they simply can't access vaccines. Some cannot afford to take time off work to go to a health clinic during opening hours; they may not have the money to pay for vaccines; there may be problems with the supply of vaccines; or clinics may be difficult to get to on public transport.

Even in the richest countries, children who miss out on vaccines come mostly from poor or disadvantaged families in rural, migrant or indigenous communities. For many children, conflict, unstable governments, poverty and weak health systems undermine their chances. It's unfair and immoral that while some have access to vaccines and preach against them, millions more would love access but don't have it.

We must counter myths and misinformation but we must do it with humility, not humiliation. Demonising or patronising parents for not vaccinating their children doesn't help. Vaccine hesitancy, and the separate phenomenon of [anti-vaxxers](#), are both real threats and contribute to creating pockets of unvaccinated children, vulnerable to outbreaks of potentially life-threatening disease. There is an urgent need to provide parents with accurate information.

But we must not let the vocal few who perpetuate misinformation distract us from addressing the main reasons why children are not vaccinated. That's why WHO's top priority is to support countries to achieve universal health coverage, so that everyone has access to essential health services.

How do we do that? We need sustained political commitment to build strong health systems, and bold advocacy from communities to support immunisation as a human right and a public good. Vaccinations are one of the most powerful innovations in the history of health. We must not take this scientific miracle for granted.

The writer is the director-general of the World Health Organization

