

Iraq: Children's health, education have greatly deteriorated

Children, the most vulnerable members of society, require the most protection – especially in time of war. Yet, humanitarian agencies such as [UNICEF](#) report the health and education of Iraqi children have greatly deteriorated due to sanctions after the 1990 Gulf War and new violence since the U.S. invasion in 2003. The following report was prepared by Noriko Kosaka, an intern with the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

Iraq has been a republic since the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958. Since Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979, Iraq has suffered three wars: the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Gulf War (1990) and the U.S. invasion (2003). The Gulf War resulted in UN-imposed international sanctions, which continued until the U.S. invasion.

Children are most vulnerable in such deadly situations. Because of the recent wars and sanctions, the children of Iraq have increasingly found safe water and basic health care inaccessible. The sanctions have also contributed to early childhood deaths. Children have been deprived of educational opportunities, and even very young children have been forced to work to help support their families.

To improve the situation of Iraq under sanctions, the UN established the [Oil for Food Program](#) in 1995. This program was intended to allow Iraq to sell oil on the world market in exchange for food, medicine, and other humanitarian needs of ordinary Iraqi citizens without allowing Iraq to build up its military. However, the program did not improve the nutritional status of children. A nutrition survey by UNICEF in May 2000 found that one in five children was malnourished, and the child sickness rate was extremely high.

Since the U.S. invasion of 2003, other nations and nonprofit agencies have provided Iraq with basic necessities such as food and health care. However, the mortality rate among young children remains high. UNICEF said in 2004 that 125 in 1,000 children died before reaching five years of age.

Household and family

Since the Gulf War, food security for most Iraqi households has been dependent on government rations. The rations system remained in place during a dozen years of international sanctions. However, the monthly food rations did not make up for low personal incomes. According to a [UN Food and Agriculture Organization](#) mission in April 2000, salaries averaged only \$3 to \$6 a month. This low household income contributed to child labor, low school enrollment and many health crises.

The [UN World Food Program \(WFP\)](#) estimated in 2004 that approximately 96 percent of Iraqis (about 28 million) received food rations, and that one-quarter of the population was highly dependent on them. Over WFP objections, however, the Iraqi government cut the food ration budget in 2006 from \$4 billion to \$3 billion, saying the country was shifting from a socialist economy toward a free market economy. The Trade Ministry said many items that were scarce under sanctions had become widely available on the open market.

The World Food Program warned that many low-income households, and particularly women and children, would not be able to meet their food requirements with the reduced rations. Nevertheless,

while the government continued to supply free rice, sugar, flour and cooking oil, the rations of staples such as salt, soap and beans were cut.

Health

In the 1980s Iraq had one of the best health care systems in the Middle East. However, years of war and sanctions completely changed that status. Strict international sanctions isolated the country and limited its access to drug supplies, modern medical instruments and opportunities for continuing medical education.

Examples of the damaging impact on Iraq's health care system are many, e.g.:

- Maternal mortality increased six-fold between 1990 and 1999
- Mortality under age five increased more than four times, from 30.2 per thousand live births in 1989 to 130.6 per thousand in 1999
- Reported cases of mortality under five from diarrhea leaped from 1.6 per thousand in 1990 to 19.3 in 1998
- Acute malnutrition among children under five nearly doubled from four percent in 2002 to 7.7 percent in 2004

Before 1990, the Iraqi Ministry of Health had an annual budget of \$450 million for a population of fewer than 20 million. However, the budget shrunk to some \$22 million in 2000 even though the population had increased 10 to 15 percent. Many Iraqis could no longer afford basic health care, which badly affected their children's health. By 2004 the Health Ministry was budgeting only \$38 per capita, compared with \$80 before 1990.

Iraq's health care system has been underwritten by other governments and non-governmental organizations since the U.S. invasion of 2003. In that year Congress appropriated \$2.5 billion for the Iraq Relief Reconstruction Fund to help meet immediate needs for water, food and medicine. The State Department said nearly all of the appropriation was disbursed by the end of the 2006 fiscal year, but the U.S. has come under criticism for reportedly spending much of its reconstruction monies on security measures instead.

According to a Health Ministry report, Iraq's network of health centers was worse off in October 2004 than before the U.S. invasion of March 2003 due to increased violence, insecurity and a chronic lack of medicine. Damage to water supplies and lack of sanitation were also cited as serious problems. The ministry said it was focusing on building up primary health care clinics.

UNICEF says infant mortality increased in recent decades. From 1985 to 1989 there were 47 infant deaths per 1,000 in south central Iraq. This figure increased to 79 from 1990-1994, and to 107 from 1995-1999.

Figures for child malnutrition are also high. In 1996 more than 23 percent of Iraqi children under five years of age were reportedly underweight. Four years later the figure was still nearly 20 percent. UNICEF says the mothers of many underweight children were themselves malnourished. It found that more than half of the expectant mothers were anemic due to inadequate food intake. Babies born from these mothers often had low birth weights.

A U.S. government report in 2006 said one in four Iraqi children suffered from chronic malnutrition. It also said one in three children in remote or rural areas had health problems associated with poor diet, such as being underweight or suffering from stunted growth. The report was based on a survey of more than 22,000 households in 98 districts.

Education

Primary education has been compulsory in Iraq since 1976. Iraqis were one of the most educated populations in the Middle East in the 1970s. However, enrollment began to drop during the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s, and it continued to decrease under sanctions during the 1990s. The UN Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq reported that the number of primary school buildings decreased from 9,092 in the 1989-1990 school year to 7,572 in 1997-1998.

UNICEF said 23.7 percent of primary school-aged children in Iraq did not attend school in 2000, including nearly twice as many girls as boys. The deteriorating situation is more serious in rural areas, with 39 percent of primary school-aged children out of school, than in urban areas, with 16.2 percent.

UNICEF said Iraq's education sector was in crisis by the mid 1990s, when funds and supplies for teachers and buildings were already short. Teachers' salaries were at the poverty level, and there were severe shortages of textbooks, teaching aids, basic school supplies and classroom furniture.

Since the U.S. invasion, school enrollment has increased. Primary school enrollment went up 7.4 percent between 2000 and 2005, and middle schools and high schools saw a 27 percent rise, according to the Ministry of Education. In 2000 only one-third of high school-aged children were enrolled, but this increased to 75 percent by 2004.

In some areas, one or two concerns still leave parents hesitant to send their children to school: lack of security, and lack of water and poor sanitation.

School enrollment is relatively high in the south, which is largely peaceful. Enrollment is much lower in areas such as Baghdad and Divala, a province to the north where violence has been nearly as serious as in the capital. More and more parents arrange to have their children driven to school, or accompany the children themselves, where there is more violence.

Although enrollments have increased each year since the U.S. invasion, thousands of schools in Iraq lack basic necessities. As recently as October 2004, one-third of all primary schools lacked water supplies, and almost half were without any sanitation facilities.

In one positive development, the government decided in 2004 to allow private schools, which were banned during the Saddam Hussein era. Two years later, 224 private schools around Iraq had been licensed to open by the Ministry of Education.

Unfortunately, more than 700 primary schools have been damaged by bombing since March 2003 – one-third of them in Baghdad. It is estimated that the country needs approximately 5,000 new schools.