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**Polio** will not be **stamped out** in **Pakistan** unless the national programme reaches out to parents from high-risk groups, such as low-income

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# ashtun communities

who suffer the greatest burden of this disease, according to a study published this month in the Bulletin of the World Health Organization

The study surveyed 1017 parents of children aged under five years in Karachi between September and October last year. It found that 41% (412) of them said they had never heard of polio and that 11.4% (116) said they refused to let their children be vaccinated.

Pakistan is one of only three endemic countries that have never stopped polio transmission. Eradicating polio – completely removing the disease worldwide – hinges on making progress in a few parts of these countries, of which the mega-city of Karachi, in Pakistan, is one.

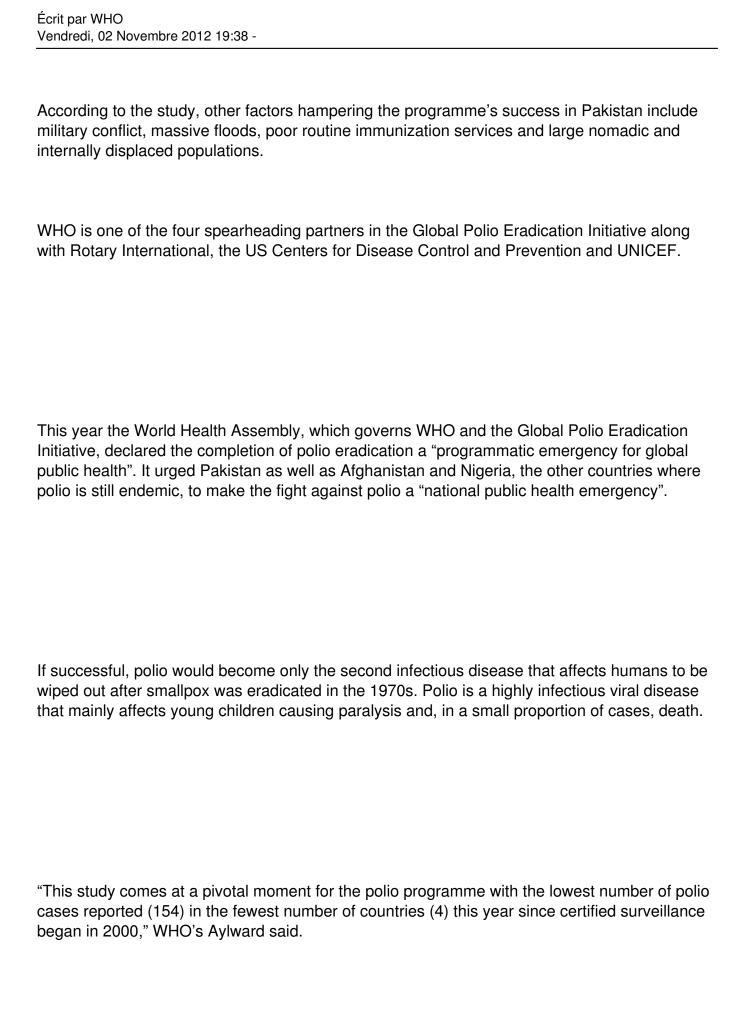
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"Parents who refused vaccination were from low socio-economic Pashtun families and cited lack of permission from family elders as the main reason," said lead author Dr Anita Zaidi, a professor in the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health at the Aga Khan University in Pakistan. "Or they were from high-income families of all ethnic backgrounds and believed that the vaccine was harmful or unnecessary."

The study provides new evidence suggesting that polio can be stamped out more quickly if national programmes reach out to high-risk groups and engage with them. In Pakistan, the Pashtun community represents only 15% of the population, but more than three-quarters of confirmed polio cases have occurred in this community this year.

"Once the national programme knows which communities vaccination services are not reaching and why, the Government of Pakistan supported by its partners can design strategies that are culturally appropriate to reach out to these populations and gain their confidence," said Dr Bruce Aylward, Assistant-Director General for Polio, Emergencies and Country Collaboration at the World Health Organization (WHO). "And this is something that the government 'has started doing in earnest this year".

This year, the government started to recruit more Pashtun vaccinators and social mobilizers – activists from the community who work within it – in collaboration with WHO and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Other recent efforts to engage this community include new strategies to reach Pashtun travellers as they move in and out of Karachi and a nation-wide media campaign that includes messages in the Pashto language.



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- Distractions en route to universal coverage
- A global research and development agreement
- Health systems research strategy unveiled
- Efforts to revise guidance on pandemic influenza preparedness
- Arsenic exposure in Bangladesh revisited
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