

Missing the Mark?

A Six-Month Progress Report of the
Biden-Harris Administration's Focus on Children



Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Background | 6 |
| Purpose and Key Findings..... | 9 |
| Approach | 10 |
| Substantive Mentions of Children and Youth | 10 |
| Methodology: Coding and Disaggregating Mentions | 11 |
| Data | 12 |
| Press Releases & Statements..... | 17 |
| Executive Orders | 17 |
| Speeches..... | 19 |
| Twitter Analysis | 20 |
| Data Limitations..... | 22 |
| Recommendations | 22 |
| Recommendation One: Leadership..... | 22 |
| Recommendation Two: Funding | 24 |
| Recommendation Three: Enhanced Coordination | 24 |
| Recommendation Four: Meaningful Child and Youth Engagement | 25 |
| Conclusion | 26 |
| Annex | 26 |
| Data Collection Methods | 26 |

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ChildFund is a child-focused international development organization that works in 24 countries, including the United States, to connect children with the people, resources and institutions they need to grow up healthy, educated, skilled and safe, wherever they are. Delivered through more than 250 local implementing partner organizations, ChildFund's programs address the underlying conditions that prevent any child or youth from achieving their full potential and place a special emphasis on child protection throughout their approach.

Executive Summary

The United States is one of the world's largest donors of foreign aid. Funding from U.S. foreign assistance has contributed to positive development outcomes globally, including for infants, children, adolescents, and young adults. Since 2000 alone, U.S. foreign assistance has contributed to cutting maternal, infant and child mortality rates in half, reducing the number of children engaged in child labor by one-third, and enabled 2.4 million babies to be born HIV-free due to support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Labor (DoL), and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).¹ There are numerous policies, strategies, and initiatives promulgated by the U.S. government to address sector-specific or age-specific issues facing young people. This report details efforts conducted by the Biden-Harris administration to respond to children and youth through foreign policy and foreign assistance from January 20, 2021 through July 20, 2021, in an effort to quantify the efforts undertaken and the stated priorities of President Biden, Vice President Harris, and the White House. This has been done in an effort to better understand priority issues and to identify where specific gaps may lie, if any.

Introduction

The Biden-Harris administration took office during a global pandemic that followed years of fraught civil discourse and protests on key issues including immigration, climate change, women's rights, police brutality, the War on Terror, and economic growth. The tumult due to the change of U.S. leadership and the impacts of the pandemic were felt globally. To say the least, the first six months of the new administration were unprecedented and challenging.

Even under the best circumstances, and given the rapid pandemic response by the administration, it is unfair to expect any administration to accomplish everything they have planned for in just six months. Whether measuring against the administration's own stated goals and objectives or those that civil society has created for them, six months is simply not enough time for bold action by the federal government. Much of this early time is used by the executive branch to nominate, confirm, and appoint key leaders across various agencies. Hiring and vetting the right people is critical to implementing the vision of an administration. The pandemic made this work more complex as the response to the virus was paramount to the success of any initiative. Normal ways of working were necessarily challenged and changed.

Recognizing these constraints, this report was borne out of a call from civil society experts and coalitions of international organizations who work with and for children and youth. ChildFund, and our partners in this work, felt it was imperative to measure what has been done in these early days to support and discuss the unique issues for world's children and youth. We are using the data collected herein to make informed recommendations for what more needs to be done moving forward to support the world's young people.

Unfortunately, one of the worst parts of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the unrelenting onslaught of bad news for children and youth around the world. Even previously strong policies, structures and institutions have shown that they are not immune to the impacts of such an enormous global health crisis. Disruptions in social and physical mobility, access to education and other critical services and even economic opportunities have impacted children and youth perhaps the most negatively. Children and youth worldwide are facing increased violence, food insecurity, learning loss, and sexual abuse and exploitation. The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities they face and reversed decades of progress. The latest updated figures suggest that **a minimum of five million children have experienced the death of a mother, father, or other caregiver since the start of the pandemic.**ⁱⁱ Millions more children will be orphaned before the pandemic is over.ⁱⁱⁱ The impacts of such an enormous loss to the critical support systems children need most will surely be felt for decades to come.

SNAPSHOT: State of the World's Children

~42% of the world is **under the age of 25**.^{iv}

356 million children **lived in extreme poverty** before COVID-19. This has **only worsened**.^v

85% of the world's children live in places most **vulnerable to climate change's** worst impacts.^{vi}

6,000 children under 5 **could die a day** directly due to COVID-19 — **more than 4 per minute**.^{vii}

1.5 million children have already **lost a primary caregiver** to COVID-19. In South Africa, that's **one in every 200 children**. In Peru, it's **one in every 100**.^{viii}

10 million additional **child marriages** may occur due to COVID-19's threats to decades of progress to end the practice.^{ix}

9.3 million additional children will experience **wasting because of malnutrition** by 2022 due to the pandemic.^x

\$29.7 billion will be lost in future productivity due to **increased stunting and child mortality** due to COVID-19's secondary impacts.^{xi}

Those already most vulnerable—such as children and youth living amid or recovering from conflict, who are refugees or displaced within their home countries, or who are experiencing natural disasters—are the most at risk of losing critical health, education and protection services.^{xii} Around 85% of the world's children live in developing countries that will face the most serious impacts of climate change,^{xiii} and they will bear the brunt of an estimated 80% of climate change-related illnesses and injuries.^{xiv} Now more than ever, children need to be at the forefront of U.S. government actions and discussions.

This last July marked six months since the Biden-Harris administration took office. Even before the inauguration, foreign policy experts had urged members of the new administration's transition team to prioritize children and youth in their foreign policy and programmatic work.

At the same time, children's rights- and youth-focused civil society organizations have been collaborating to articulate what a whole-of-government framework for children and youth globally might look like. This proposal will detail the ways in which foreign policy and foreign assistance should be delivered to center children's and youth's rights, needs, and voices in diplomacy, development, humanitarian aid, educational exchange programs, and all other elements of U.S. foreign policy. This framework was developed due to the great need for coordination, collaboration, and clarity on the joint efforts to address the issues impacting children and youth globally. As the

InterAction Children and Youth Working Group noted in their transition memo for the Biden-Harris administration^{xv}:

“The range of sectoral issues and societal barriers impacting children and youth are all interrelated and cannot be addressed separately. Since children and youth do not lead their lives in sectoral silos, U.S. government programs, policies, and funding must be integrated, cross-sectoral, and support children and youth throughout all life stages. Children and youth must be empowered as agents of their own development and imbued with the knowledge and skills to create more inclusive societies.”

Currently, funding, policy, and programming that affect children and youth globally are fragmented and are typically only able to address a fraction of children’s lives in the form of single-issue areas such as education, nutrition, health, or livelihoods. Often, U.S. foreign assistance focuses on specific sectors or on very narrow age ranges rather than life stages. Unfortunately, this means that artificial parameters are placed upon real people whose lives are complex, and critical supports and inputs are missed. This leaves young people with gaps in the kinds of support they need to thrive and succeed throughout their lives.

Gaps between life stages and that do not focus on the multifaceted lives of children and youth can also make U.S. investments less effective. Overcoming these disparities and obstacles in foreign assistance and implementing more holistic policies, programming, and rhetoric will take bold and decisive action. It will also require intentional inter-agency coordination with strong leadership, including from the president and vice president.

*Please note that the methodology utilized for this report is included in the annex on data collection methods. Please also refer to the data limitations section for further context. These sections can be found on pages 20 and 25.

Background

The first six months in any new administration are necessarily focused on hiring key staff and starting new initiatives. This is perhaps even more true for an administration grappling with a pandemic and all of the secondary impacts related to that pandemic. Even under more normal circumstances, six months is simply not enough time to enact changes in policy at the federal level on almost any issue. That said, several important policy moments occurred early in the administration. In the first 100 days alone, President Biden issued 42 executive orders and 106 executive actions. He signed more executive orders on his first day in office than his three immediate predecessors combined.^{xvi} In total, in his first six months, the president signed 52 executive orders. Despite the record number of executive orders and executive

actions, only one of these mentioned children or youth within the context of foreign policy. This particular **executive order, establishing the White House Gender Policy Council**, was both domestic and foreign in nature, and focused more heavily on domestic policy priorities as they pertained to gender. As such, it was categorized as a domestic mention for the purposes of this progress report, but it is important to note the importance of this as a policy priority and a White House council, particularly given the unique and intersectional vulnerabilities facing girls, young women, and gender minorities as a result of both their gender and age.

Another key moment was found in **the president's budget request**, released in April 2021 with proposed budget priorities for the 2022 fiscal year. Funding is critical to accomplish and accompany any policy priority. To that end, domestic priorities for children and youth were articulated in the form of requested increases for: high-poverty schools, early childcare and learning, support for children with disabilities, physical and mental well-being of students, and increases of Pell grants specifically for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients.

Historically, investments for children and youth have fallen short of their needs. In fiscal year 2020, just 0.11% of total federal spending specifically benefitted children and youth globally.

Investments in children and youth have long been notoriously difficult to track and fail to adequately meet the needs of children and youth in the U.S. or in lower- and middle-income countries. The most recent First Focus Budget Book shows that children make up approximately 25% of the U.S. population, yet just 7.48% of all federal spending went toward their well-being in fiscal year 2020. Globally, recent demographic data that shows approximately 42% of the world is under the age of 25,^{xvii} yet only \$9.54 of every \$100 spent on foreign aid specifically benefits children and youth. This amounts to only 0.11% of total federal spending.^{xviii}

Every year, the president's budget request starts the next fiscal year's budget process. The request and supporting documents are proposals for how the administration would like for the federal budget to be allocated and spent. While Congress must ultimately appropriate all funding, the president's budget request is a strong statement on the administration's priorities. It is important to note that this was the first budget request by the president in the new administration and that, unlike future years, the administration had less time and fewer key staff appointed to compile this document. While this request should be viewed as a blueprint for the president's vision for the next four years, ultimately it is Congress who controls funding through the appropriations process and will enact the funding levels in key accounts and on key issues as they see fit, not as the White House does. Still, it is important to view this budget request as the first time the new administration has unveiled not only their priorities but at what levels they would like to see those priorities funded.

For the purposes of this report, the fiscal year 2022 budget request was reviewed, but the supplementary materials from other agencies were not. This was done in an effort to review the stated priorities of the administration across all issues and the degree to which children and youth were part of those top priorities. Given that funding benefiting children and youth represents between 26 and 30 federal offices depending on the year, and despite the demonstrable and disproportionate need for investments in children and youth globally, we hypothesized that children or youth would be represented and mentioned in the president's budget request. However, the Biden-Harris administration did not augment previously enacted budget levels for children and youth in their budget request for the 2022 fiscal year.^{xix}

In fact, the president's requests for child-focused accounts decreased from previously enacted levels in key child- and youth-focused accounts. At a time of unprecedented learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the requested funding level of \$682 million for Basic Education was cut by 28%, or \$268 million, from the previously enacted level of \$950 million for fiscal year 2021. The president's budget request included an overall proposed 11% increase to the foreign assistance budget,^{xx} including key priorities such as climate change, democracy, and irregular migration. However, the request did not articulate or prioritize specific investments in children and youth in key accounts such as Maternal and Child Health or Vulnerable Children. Nor did the budget request make recommendations for specific investments in children and youth in areas such as youth peace and security or in ending child marriage, child labor, or child trafficking.

Moreover, the word "youth" itself only appeared four times in the budget request, and each time referred to a category of vulnerability, such as "homeless youth," "at-risk youth," or "disadvantaged youth." Each of these mentions was in a domestic context. The vast majority of mentions of children in the budget request were similarly domestic, and all mentions focused on vulnerabilities rather than assets. Not only does this framing of children and youth go against established U.S. government policies related to positive youth development principles, but this language also omits critical contributions by young people themselves toward positive change at home and abroad.

Of particular note is the increased focus on the issue of climate change in the budget request. Despite the valuable role that youth activists have played in increasing attention and action toward addressing and combatting a changing climate, support for youth-led organizations and youth-supporting organizations is not mentioned in the context of climate or foreign affairs. **In fact, the important role that youth play as members of society, including as peacemakers, caregivers, activists, and advocates, is not discussed in any context.**

Purpose and Key Findings

The aim of this report is to develop and present a snapshot of the prioritization of children and youth in the White House's foreign policy. Although policy making can occur at many levels in an administration, this analysis captures most public facing statements and documents promulgated by the president, vice president, and White House. Future reports may go beyond this high-level leadership, but given that much of the work done early in an administration is at the direction of the president and vice president, this report is focused on their words and policy actions in order to capture their stated priorities.

More specifically, this report captures the context in which children and youth were mentioned and discussed by the president and vice president and through White House official statements and policy documents, to produce an analysis of the current landscape of the administration's priorities. At the six-month mark, this progress report serves as a way to understand the foundational priorities as articulated by the administration itself.

Most of the **external communications**—speeches, executive orders, press releases, and social media—made by the president, vice president, and the White House in the first six months of the administration lacked a focus on children and youth. When and where children and youth were mentioned, it was rarely a stand-alone expression of their value, needs, or aspirations. Instead, they were often linked to other populations in sentences ending with, “including women and girls,” which did not include the specific vulnerabilities, needs or opportunities related to the specific populations of either adult women or the many and diverse needs across the life stages represented between birth and age 18.

In further analysis that sought to determine whether a mention of children and youth was substantive, the data yielded a startling result: **Of the 1,033 documents reviewed, a total of 289 made reference to children and/or youth.** Of these, roughly half met the criteria for substantive mentions and half did not (149 mentions and 140 mentions, respectively). References to children and youth that included youth participation occurred only twice over the first six-month period. This accounts for just 0.002% of total mentions. In an analysis of the president's, vice president's and White House's Twitter handles, 108 mentions of children and youth were deemed to be substantive.

KEY FINDINGS

1,033 speeches, EOs, statements, fact sheets & press releases reviewed from the first six months of the Biden-Harris administration.

149 substantive mentions of children and youth—or approximately 15% of all documents.

7 out of 52 executive orders signed by the president in his first six months, mention children or youth, and **only one of those included children and youth in foreign policy.**

2% of **President Biden's archived public speeches** mentioned children and/or youth in the context of foreign policy or foreign assistance.

3.8% of **all documents released by the White House** mentions of children and youth in the context of foreign policy or foreign assistance.

2 substantive mentions of children and youth by the president and vice president on the topic of **youth participation.**

3 substantive mentions by the president and vice president on the topic of **adolescent girls.**

108 substantive tweets of children and youth made by Biden, Harris and the White House.

Approach

Substantive Mentions of Children and Youth

To fully outline the scope of issues, specifically mentions of children and youth, ChildFund analyzed four key areas that the Biden-Harris administration uses to push out messaging, calls to action, and priorities. These four areas are **speeches, press releases and statements, executive orders, and social media via Twitter.** ChildFund conducted a qualitative data analysis of the speeches, press releases, and statements to determine the frequency with which children, youth and/or key issues for children and youth were raised. As a part of this analysis, ChildFund disaggregated this data into topic areas covering domestic and foreign policy and a number of sector-specific issue areas within those policy areas. Once disaggregated, each mention was reviewed to determine whether children or youth were the central topic being raised. In many instances, as we will discuss below, children or youth were used as grammatical proxies to discuss the future. In other instances, children were discussed as obstacles to their parents' ability to participate in the economy instead of people with their own needs and dreams. As such, each individual mention was further analyzed to determine whether children and/or youth were being discussed in substantial ways or not, following guidelines we will articulate below.

ChildFund is defining **substantive mentions as those related to a policy directive, funding, political will, or directly raising youth voices.** An example of a substantive mention is the following quote from a White House press statement released in February: “U.S. agencies’ partnerships will also serve people around the world. Whether it is promoting child and maternal health or defusing conflicts, these partnerships are vital for the success and effectiveness of the United States’ diplomatic, international development, and global humanitarian work”.^{xxi}

Non-substantive mentions, where children are discussed as ideas rather than people, included, “They’re all our children. And they are the kite strings that literally lift our national ambitions aloft,”^{xxii} or mentions that described children as barriers, such as, “...to help women workers, including through assistance for childcare...”^{xxiii} Non-substantive mentions did account for the vast majority of times that children or youth or issues relating to children and youth were raised. Across the 1,033 documents reviewed, 289 mention children and youth a domestic or foreign policy context, and just half of those mentions are substantive.

This report also includes an analysis of the president’s, vice president’s and White House’s Twitter handles. A capture and coding of tweets was analyzed by monitoring key words and hashtags that mention children and youth. For a complete list of terms, please see the annex. Analysis of these Twitter handles, and associated tweets identified 108 mentions of children and youth deemed to be substantive.

To determine whether a tweet was substantive, ChildFund applied similar criteria to those applied to other official statements. However, given Twitter’s format and character limits, which do not allow for the same degree of context to be included as other formats, a more nuanced approach was employed when analyzing mentions of children and youth. Researchers reviewed whether the text contained references to specific policies, children’s or youth’s issues, or a call to action for children and youth, or whether direct quotes by children or youth were included. One example of a substantive tweet, from the president’s handle, stated: “Yesterday’s Federal court ruling is deeply disappointing. While the court’s order does not now affect current DACA recipients, this decision nonetheless relegates hundreds of thousands of young immigrants to an uncertain future. It is my fervent hope that Congress will act.”^{xxiv}

Methodology: Coding and Disaggregating Mentions

ChildFund reviewed all publicly available texts from the above outlined subject areas from January 20, 2021, through July 20, 2021. All data was captured and analyzed by the key words and phrases outlined in our annex below. Key words and phrases allowed for datasets to be further analyzed and were subsequently deemed substantive or non-substantive through the aforementioned criteria. This data was then coded by policy subject matter (e.g., education or climate change) and then further disaggregated between domestic and foreign policy. The most frequently

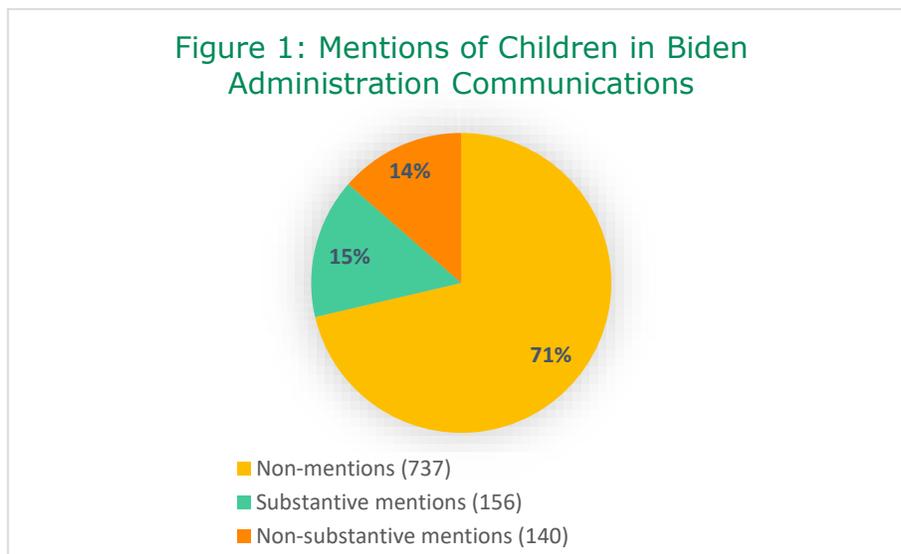
mentioned contexts were parental supports, education, health and nutrition, immigration, climate, child protection and gender.

By these guidelines, this report will contain qualitative data only.

Data

A total of 1,033 documents were reviewed in this analysis. These documents represent all publicly available executive orders, speeches, and statements by the president or vice president, and all press releases, fact sheets, statements, and other documents released by the White House. Out of all official documents included in this report 289—or roughly 29—mention children or youth. However, many of these mentions did not meet the criteria defined above to qualify as substantive. Children and youth are mentioned in seven of the 52 executive orders, only one has specific policy directives in foreign policy that pertain to children or youth.

Our analysis of these press releases, statements, and speeches highlighted the frequency with which children and youth were discussed in a substantive way. In fact, children and youth were mentioned by the Biden-Harris administration in a substantive way 149 times—or approximately 15%—during the first six months of office. Substantive mentions discussed issues or children in ways that included a policy directive, funding, political will, or represented or supported youth participation. The remaining 140 mentions did not meet the criteria listed above and were catalogued as non-substantive. This means that, **when President Biden or Vice President Harris verbally discussed children and youth or the White House released official statements and press releases, only half of all mentions were substantive.**



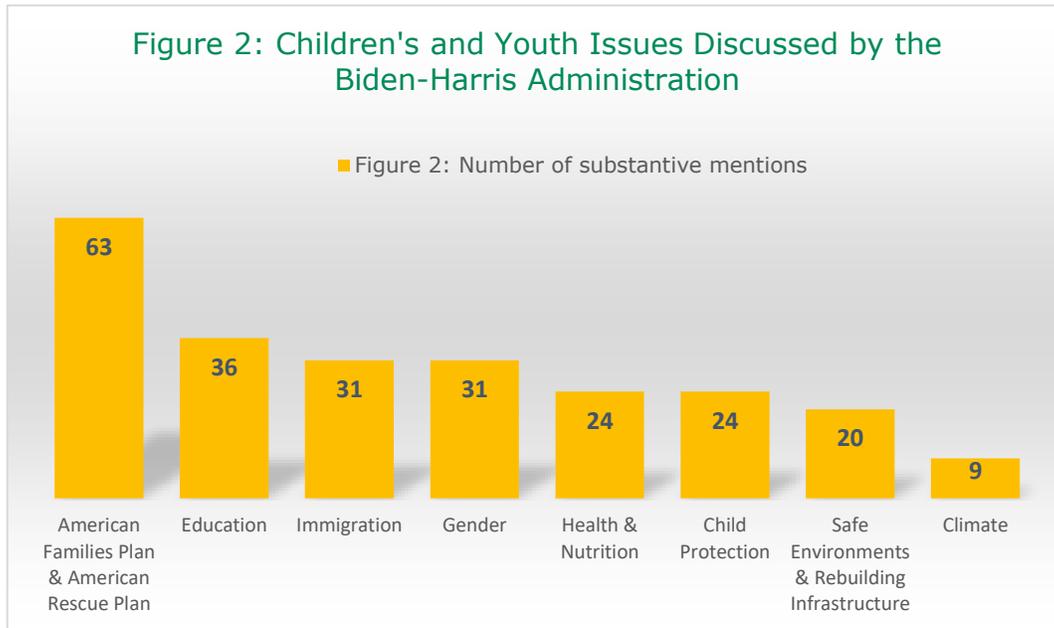
Of the 52 executive orders, seven mentioned children and youth and two of those seven referenced both domestic and foreign policy. However, while one executive order did discuss children and youth and both domestic and foreign policy, it did not discuss both foreign policy and children and youth at the same time. Executive Order 14008, “Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad,” calls for the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) to establish a new domestic policy office on climate change and a new interagency working group to decrease the risks of climate change for children, the elderly, those with disabilities, and other vulnerable persons.^{xxv} Given that the focus of HHS is primarily domestic and that the new policy office that would head the task force is focused on the American people, this executive order did not qualify under our analysis. In fact, the executive orders the president issued were neither exclusively focused on foreign policy nor were any focused exclusively on children and youth.

When children and youth were discussed by the Biden-Harris administration beyond executive orders, it was most often in the context of domestic issues. In fact, over 79% of the substantive mentions of children and youth in speeches, press releases and statements were on domestic issues. Stated another way, 21% of all other mentions on issues impacting children were focused on U.S. foreign policy and foreign assistance.

Across both domestic and international issues, all of the mentions within speeches, press releases, statements, and executive orders were coded under the contextual issue areas relating to children or youth being discussed. With several international crises impacting the world’s most vulnerable children and youth, one might expect to see issues like immigration, climate change, or COVID-19 response discussed most frequently. However, these initial topline issue areas were not reflected in the data captured. It is important to note that a single sentence could contain multiple coded mentions.

For example, if in a speech Vice President Harris discussed the importance of girls’ access to quality education and mentioned a specific policy to achieve that, that sentence in her speech would be coded as both education and gender but would not actually represent two distinct mentions. In order of frequency, the children and youth came up most often in the context of the American Families Plan and/or the American Rescue Plan, and least frequently in the context of climate change, youth participation, or adolescent girls. These last two were mentioned just two times each. Both of the policies mentioned most frequently are domestic policies related to COVID-19 responses, including those for families.

Figure 2: Children's and Youth Issues Discussed by the Biden-Harris Administration



Making up 40% of all mentions (63 total), the most frequently discussed child- or youth-focused issue for the Biden-Harris administration was the **American Families Plan and the American Rescue Plan**. Both pieces of legislature aimed to address the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and provide parents and families with support. During times of mass closures of businesses and schools, the bills included provisions for job development for parents, childcare and tax credits for families with children.

Many mentions were deemed to be non-substantive because they focused on children and youth as barriers to parents' productivity and economic success rather than as individuals in need of care, support, and economic stability. Such statements made by the president included, "Because here's the thing — think about it. Care — childcare, home care — keeps us working. It keeps working people working. Just ask any parent who has been home with their kids for the last year."^{xxvi}

As both the primary and secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are multi-faceted, mentions of children and youth within the context of COVID-19 were disaggregated across contextual issues. Depending on the issues raised by the Biden-Harris administration on the COVID-19 response, all mentions were categorized and coded across the following categories: 1) Health & Nutrition, 2) Education, and 3) the American Rescue Plan and American Families Plan.

Gender-focused issues were in large part mentioned by the vice president more than they were by the president. **Of Vice President Harris' speeches, 15% mentioned girls, or children and youth in the context of gender, while just over 3% of President Biden's speeches did the same.** It is important to note that Vice President Harris gave

28 speeches, while President Biden gave 204—a difference of 176 speeches. Given the limited number of data points in the first six months of speeches by the vice president, it is difficult to accurately state her priorities on any issue.

However, it is interesting to note that despite the small number of speeches given by the vice president, she still prioritized topics related to gender nearly the same number of times in her speeches as President Biden did. In fact, the president and vice president each gave just one single speech that focused on LGBTQIA+ youth. The president gave one speech that mentioned girls, and the vice president gave two. Although the vice president does not give as many public remarks as the president, she does appear to have a greater prioritization on girls when she does so. The frequency with which these issues are raised could reflect the administration's focus and prioritization on various populations, which is particularly critical given that these speeches are directed at the American public.

Gender-based violence (GBV) was a focus for then-Vice President Biden under the Obama administration and during his time as a Senator in Congress, where he sponsored the introduction and made a large push for the ratification of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA).^{xxvii} However, President Biden did not mention gender-based violence against children once within his first six months of office.

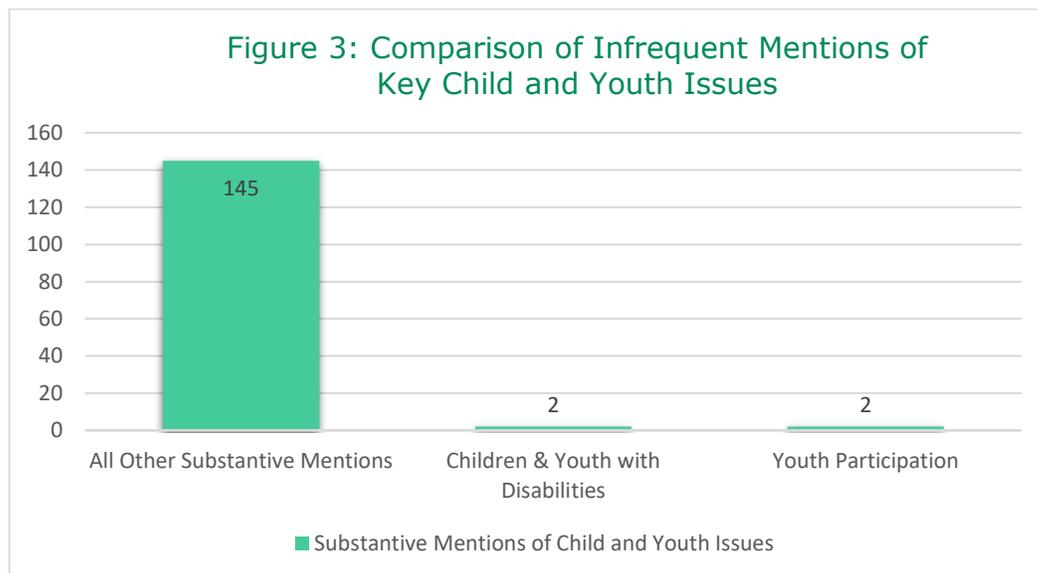
As mentioned above, many of the non-substantive mentions analyzed were not contextually focused on children and youth. The most prevalent example of this is the repeated use of the phrase, “including women and girls,” by the president and vice president. This phrase is often used at the end of a sentence without the acknowledgment of the impact or role women and girls play in the issues in which they were “included”. One illustrative instance occurred in a January press release on the vice president's call with the WHO, which stated: “Vice President Harris also stressed the Biden-Harris administration's strong support for efforts to strengthen the global COVID-19 response, mitigate its secondary impacts, including on women and girls, and advance global health security to prevent the next outbreak from becoming an epidemic or pandemic.”

The references to girls in these examples and other examples like them were recurring and were more frequent than mentions of children and climate, disabilities, and international educational programs. In fact, one of the smallest categories of mentions was that of children and youth in the context of **climate change**. As mentioned above, the climate crisis impacts children disproportionately. With the data supporting this impact, **children and climate-related policies or efforts were mentioned only 6% of the time.**

The Biden administration spoke to other issues impacting children and youth outside of the list above, such as **youth participation or children with disabilities**; however, these contexts were used infrequently, with only very few examples—sometimes

coming up a single time—and often without substantive context. Included in our definition of a substantive mention was supporting or raising active youth participation. References that included **youth participation** occurred only twice over the first six-month period. This accounts for just 0.01% of mentions. One example includes a mention by President Biden during an LGBTQ+ Pride Month event where youth were given a platform to speak on the issues impacting their lives. Following one youth speaker, the president said, “As I’ve said before, many times, transgender kids are some of the bravest people in the world. I mean it sincerely. You just saw it with Ashton, and you’ll see it with several other young people here.”⁹ This quote, on its own, might not appear to be substantive, but the context around it is. The fact that multiple LGBTQ youth spoke ahead of the president’s remarks and that the president referenced their remarks met our substantive criteria for youth engagement.

The substantive mentions of children and youth with disabilities also accounted for only 0.01% of all mentions, with only one document, The American Families Plan Advances Equity and Racial Justice Fact Sheet, that meaningfully outlines support for children and youth with disabilities.

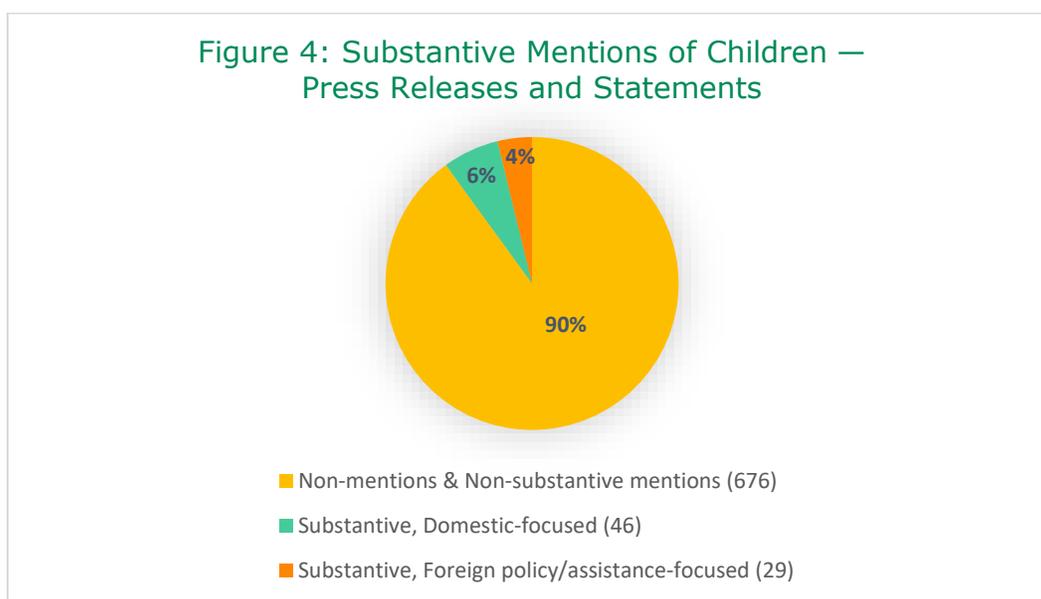


Across multiple issue areas, there were recurring themes in the language and reasoning used when discussing the root causes of the issues most impacting children and youth. One of the examples of this is the vice president’s claims that corruption is one of the root causes of the most prevalent negative issues impacting children and youth. For example, in the context of immigration: “If corruption persists, history has told us, it will be one step forward and two steps back. And we know corruption causes government institutions to collapse from within, preventing people from getting their children educated, from getting a business started, from getting a fair trial.” Corruption is also discussed in relation to education and child protection. Mentions of children in this way made up 36% of the vice president’s mentions of

children on foreign policy. This is the most referenced “root-cause” by the vice president despite issues like lack of resources and access to quality education, or experiences of violence or the impacts of climate change.

Press Releases & Statements

There were 751 press releases, fact sheets, announcements, and statements released by the White House in the first six months of the Biden-Harris administration. Only 75, or about 10%, of these included substantive mentions of children and youth in domestic and foreign policy. Of those 75, just 29 were focused on foreign policy or foreign assistance. **This means that just 3.8% of all documents released by the White House mention children or youth in the context of foreign policy or foreign assistance and in a substantive way.**



The mentions of children and youth covered a range of issues and contexts across domestic and international issues, especially in comparison to the issues later discussed in speeches and executive orders. The most-referenced context (at 24%) of these mentions of children and youth, however, was the context of domestic policy, including the American Rescue Plan or the American Family Plan.

Executive Orders

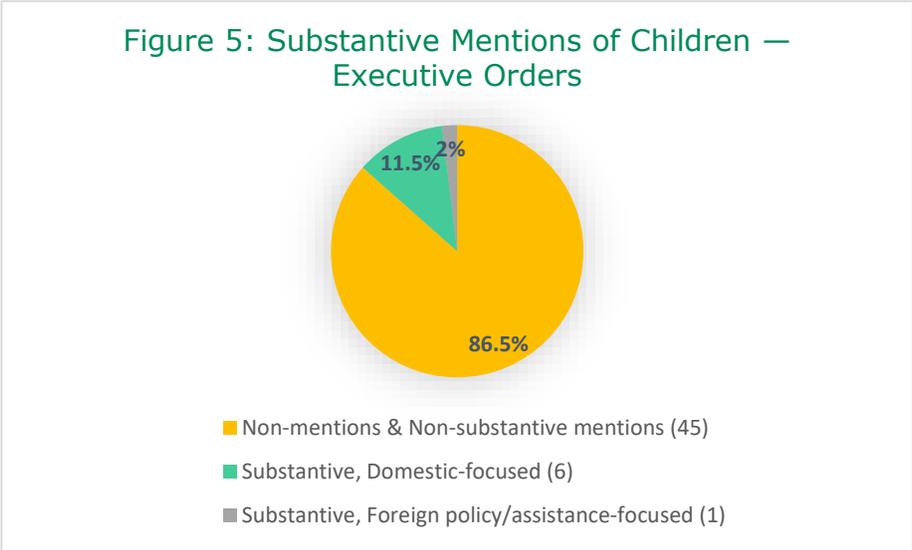
In the first six months of office, President Biden issued 52 executive orders (from EO 13985 through EO 14036). The focus of these executive orders falls mainly into the categories of immigration, border security, dismantling former President Trump’s policies, and the COVID-19 response. In addition to executive orders, President Biden signed most of his executive actions in his first 100 days in office, and with the current trajectory and rate, he is on track to sign the most executive actions since President Truman.^{xxviii} Executive orders are legally binding and remain in place unless rescinded

or modified by a president, whereas executive actions encompass a broader swath of legally non-binding activities that are not included in this analysis.

Due to the relatively high volume of executive orders signed by the president, it could be said that the data from executive orders under President Biden gives a larger insight into what he views as the most urgent and important priorities for his administration. Executive Orders are a vital tool at the president’s discretion, and while they can be contested in court later, they do not have to pass the scrutiny of Congress the way other legally binding policies must. They are also much faster policy mechanisms than legislation can be.

Given the urgency of issues like COVID-19’s primary and secondary impacts, as well as the safety, health, and other implications of a changing climate, the president’s executive orders do not show children and youth to be a priority for him. Of the 52 executive orders signed by the president in his first six months, only seven mention children or youth. Of these seven, none are exclusively focused on children in foreign assistance. An executive order intended to tackle the climate crisis domestically and globally does mention children, but only in the context of domestic policy. In fact, only one—the establishment of the Gender Policy Council—even mentions foreign policy in the context of children or youth. Aligning policies and practices at home and abroad in key areas such as climate change and gender is crucial to successfully address these issues. However, it is concerning to see children and youth mentioned in these executive orders meant to contain priorities for domestic and foreign policies are often omitted when it comes to foreign policy. An additional two of the seven executive orders mentioning children and youth were in the context of immigration and pathways to citizenship, which are categorized as domestic policies for the purposes of this report.

Figure 5: Substantive Mentions of Children — Executive Orders

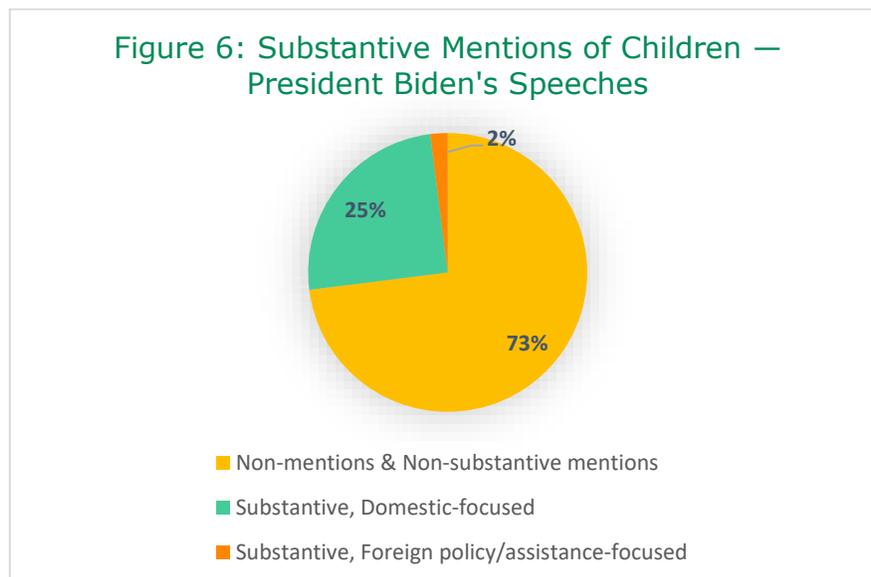


The full list of executive orders mentioning children and youth appears below:

- Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration (2021-02804, P. 1: 168)
- Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad (2021-02177, P. 1: 162)
- Establishment of the White House Gender Policy Council (2021-05183, P. 1: 165)
- Supporting the Reopening and Continuing Operation of Schools and Early Childhood Education Providers (2021-01864, P. 1: 163)
- Establishment of Interagency Task Force on the Reunification of Families (2021-02562, P. 1: 162)
- Guaranteeing an Educational Environment Free from Discrimination on the Basis of Sex, Including Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity (2021-05200, P. 1: 160)
- Organizing and Mobilizing the United States Government to Provide a Unified and Effective Response to Combat COVID- 19 and To Provide United States Leadership on Global Health and Security (2021-01759, P. 1: 162)

Speeches

In the first six months of his presidency, President Biden substantively mentioned children and/or youth in approximately 27% of his archived public speeches. Of these speeches, **98% of the mentions of children or youth are in the context of domestic** issues including domestic policy, education, gun violence, and immigration. That leaves just 2% of substantive discussions of children and youth in foreign policy.

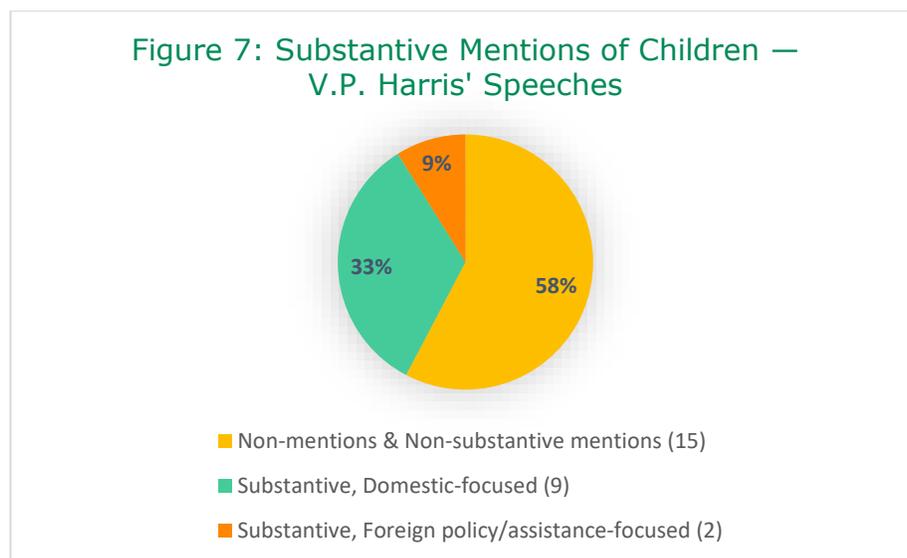


Of all the child- or youth-related mentions President Biden made in speeches, 39% involved domestic policy, including the American Rescue Plan and the American Families Plan, which focus on childcare and financial support for parents and caregivers. However, children and youth were not the exclusive focus of the speeches, and the mentions often lacked data or explanation in support of why children specifically needed the support of these plans.

For instance, rebuilding safe infrastructure, especially roads, schools and water pipes has been a huge focus of the Biden-Harris administration and is often reflected in his speeches. Children are mentioned, but in an indirect way, such as: this remark by President Biden: "...[The American Jobs Plan] is going to put plumbers and pipefitters to work replacing this, so every child in America can turn on a faucet and not worry about drinking polluted water."^{xxix} While it may be fair to assume that polluted drinking water is harmful to children, perhaps even more so than adults, the specific consequences of lead and pollutants in drinking water to young populations is not explained or made explicit. Many of the most famously vocal advocates for clean drinking water in the U.S. have been children and their families; however, young people like Amariyanna "Mari" Copeny, often referred to as "Little Miss Flint,"^{xxx} and their advocacy on behalf of themselves and their communities are not specifically highlighted by the president.

In her first six months of office, Vice President Harris mentioned children and youth substantively in 11 of her 26 speeches, or approximately 42% of speeches. Of the vice president's mentions, 21% were focused on or mentioned an element of international context, and most (over 79%) included mentions of children and youth in a domestic/U.S.-centered focus. Child protection and the services and policies to keep kids safe from harm, such as rebuilding and making safe roads and clean pipes, accounted for 25% of the mentions of children and youth by the vice president.

Figure 7: Substantive Mentions of Children — V.P. Harris' Speeches



Twitter Analysis

Social media, especially the Twitter platform, has become a powerful tool for politicians as they seek to grow political will, communicate with the public, and, sometimes, to create or test the popularity of potential policies. President Obama was the first sitting president to have a Twitter account, and each president to follow has utilized the platform in new ways to communicate with the American public and the world. Due to the degree to which this platform has been used to highlight key

priorities and communicate directly with the public, it has been included in this report. This report analyzed mentions of children and youth in social media, specifically the active and official Twitter accounts of the president (@POTUS), vice president (@VP) and the White House (@WhiteHouse). Because Twitter includes both official policies and more unofficial discussions, its numbers are included separately from more official policy documents.

Every administration uses social media differently, and it is a constantly evolving tool that can do many things. In the first six months in office, this administration has largely used social media to disseminate policies and communicate official stances. We have analyzed these social media messages and are viewing them as a way to highlight the top priorities the White House wishes share with the public. Given the character restrictions for Twitter, it is impossible to give the same degree of background and context to messages; therefore, the criteria for substantive versus non-substantive mentions were more relaxed for this analysis. Due to the more nuanced different criteria, Twitter mentions are separated from the other mentions described above.

On social media, President Biden tweeted about children and youth 36 times, Vice President Harris has tweeted about them 26 times, and the White House 46 times. Of the mentions from all three accounts, **only four mention children in an international or foreign assistance context.** As noted previously, to qualify as a substantive mention for Twitter, a tweet must contain a reference to a specific policy or an issue specific to children or youth or contain a direct quote from a child or young person. The four specific substantive mentions were:

- The bill provides \$888 million to expand access to more fruits and vegetables for moms and babies participating in the WIC program, \$37 million for senior nutrition through the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, and \$1 billion in nutrition assistance for the territories (The White House, 2021).^{xxxi}
- I spoke with President Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of the Congo about good governance and reforms, COVID-19, Ebola, trade, girls' education, the environment, and economic opportunity. We agreed to deepen our partnership to advance the shared interests of our people (Harris, 2021).^{xxxi}
- Today, President Biden signed two executive orders to establish the White House Gender Policy Council and ensure education free from sexual violence. Learn more [fact sheet linked] (The White House, 2021).^{xxxiii}
- On this #InternationalWomensDay, I signed two executive orders to establish the White House Gender Policy Council and ensure education free from sexual violence. As president, I'm committed to uplifting the rights of women and girls in the U.S. and around the world (Biden, 2021).^{xxxiv}

Although the sample size is limited to four, thematically it is interesting to note that girls' education is mentioned three times, sexual violence twice, and infant nutrition once. The tweets are from all three accounts: two tweets are from the White House, one is from Vice President Harris, and one is from President Biden.

Data Limitations

The data analyzed for the purposes of this report all originated between January 20, 2021, through July 20, 2021, and includes only publicly available information. Six months does not allow for significant reforms or actions to address gaps in current approaches to working with and for children and youth. The president and vice president play a foundational role in setting and communicating policy decisions, but are not the only leaders responsible for conceiving, implementing and communicating about U.S. foreign policy. The data exclude public statements and policy documents by foreign policy leaders at the U.S. Department of State, USAID, Peace Corps, and other agencies. Also excluded were supplementary materials related to the president's FY22 budget request, actual allocations of previous fiscal years' budgets, and any conversations that do not have public transcripts, or policy documents being created or updated that were not released by July 20, 2021. As was previously noted, several leaders had not yet been appointed during this period, and thus the report was intentionally left high-level.

Recommendations

The recommendations laid out below are goals that ChildFund believes the Biden-Harris administration should strive for in the next three and a half years to more effectively and efficiently leverage the U.S. government's work for and with children and youth. These are not goals shared or articulated by the administration.

Recommendation One: Leadership

Support from the highest levels of government is crucial to implement truly holistic policies and programs and signal that children are a priority. We recommend a direct mandate from the president or vice president in the form of the following:

- An executive order should be issued requiring all U.S. foreign assistance-implementing agencies to coordinate and create a government-wide response to integrate and meaningfully address issues affecting children and youth. The resulting **whole-of-government strategy** should incentivize, institutionalize, and elevate an intentional child- and youth-centered lens and approach across all relevant agencies.
- The president, vice president, and White House should **substantively discuss children and youth** and directly quote children and youth themselves in public speeches, executive orders, press releases, statements, and social media related to foreign policy and foreign assistance. The rhetoric of the executive branch sets the tone and articulates priorities for agencies. When children and youth are not discussed, their absence indicates that addressing the many issues facing children and youth or listening to children and youth voices are not a priority for leadership and could send a message that children and youth should not be a priority for staff and implementing organizations, either.

Specifically, the president, vice president, and White House should **prioritize children and/or youth in publicly available speeches, executive orders, statements, press releases, and social media.** The current analysis reveals that these individuals, offices and affiliated social media are substantively mentioning children or youth in only 50% of remarks, and that any mention of children or youth in foreign or domestic policy—substantive or not—is extremely limited. Most issues have an aspect that affects different populations differently, but almost every issue is a children’s or youth issue and deserves to be addressed as such. Children should not be lumped in alongside women or used as grammatical substitutes for the future. Rather, mentions of children or youth should qualify as substantive and include ties to named policies, specific funding, or direct quotes by children or youth. Future reports will look both at substantive mentions and the degree to which these substantive mentions include direct quotes by children or youth, or to reference children and youth who are also present. The White House should seek to increase the number of opportunities for children and youth to speak directly on their own behalf whenever possible.

- The president should **appoint a senior official** to report to the president, vice president, or a cabinet member to oversee the development and implementation of the above strategy with the authority to allocate sufficient resources across a variety of agencies. Currently, named positions at USAID and the Department of State that focus on children and youth lack such authority. The USAID Youth Coordinator should be elevated with authority to control no less than \$5 million for training and technical support. Senior-level point people should be named at the departments of State and Labor, Peace Corps, and other relevant agencies to coordinate and report on children and youth-related activities.

All of these individuals in named positions that are focused on children and youth should have official social media and publicly available speeches to facilitate the dissemination of clear policy priorities and directives from administration and government agencies. In public statements that focus on children and youth, no less than 65% of discussions should be substantively tied to political will, named policies or explicit funding, or should include direct quotes from young people themselves. The remaining 35% of discussions may fall into the non-substantive category but should still strive to avoid using children and youth as proxies for discussions of the future and recognize that children and youth are a powerful force even before they reach adulthood.

- The White House should **convene a White House Council on Children and Youth** that includes regular discussions with young people affected by U.S. foreign assistance and provides consistent and transparent public reports on progress against any policies and strategies for children and youth. The council should amplify child and youth policy commitments by fostering a platform for whole-of-government planning and policy implementation and programs aimed at optimizing the healthy development of all children. The council can convene high-level meetings and events to raise awareness among implementers, donors, and other governments of the challenges facing children, youth, and their families globally. No less than 80% of council-related policy documents, funding recommendations, speeches, press releases, and social media should contain substantive messages about and by children and youth.

Recommendation Two: Funding

The president's budget request should include a recommendation **of no less than 25% of all funding for international assistance to reach children** and youth ages 0-24. Investments by the U.S. government are urgently needed to address the multitude of issues facing children and youth that demand cross-sectoral and whole-of-government responses. Any supplemental funding for COVID-19 response and recovery should include a 25% goal for work related to addressing the needs and improving the engagement of children and youth.

This funding should be flexible and mandated in such a way that it encourages implementers' abilities to address holistic child well-being. This funding could also go toward child-focused research and pilot programs that combine funding from multiple streams to improve impacts and outcomes. Initial funding to systematize and implement a whole-of-government approach should come in the form of new or unallocated existing funding and should instruct agencies to integrate children and youth issues explicitly into their budget plans. The president's annual budget request should also outline a plan that prioritizes children and youth, and a senior-level U.S. government lead should have sign-off authority on budget allocations across agencies, aligned with the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) practices.

Recommendation Three: Enhanced Coordination

Administration decisionmakers and their staff should **increase and enhance coordination within and across agencies**. Cabinet- and senior-level representation from all relevant agencies should participate in whole-of-government coordination to ensure transparency, accountability, and consistency. This should include regular convenings between the White House and top agency leads authorized to make decisions on funding and programming to coordinate with senior officials, as well as

regular meetings with relevant civil society leaders. Leaders should meet regularly to ensure that every sectoral and programmatic strategy (e.g., climate, disability, gender, food security, etc.) includes a child and youth focus, is informed by meaningful consultation with affected children and youth, ensures that all relevant government agencies have strategies that directly address the needs of children and youth, and systematizes their engagement throughout policy and program cycles.

While different agencies may define the life stages of children and youth differently, consistent and comparable metrics should be integrated throughout the government to ensure that policies and programs are able to track and understand the efficacy of different approaches and more easily coordinate across offices.

- **Intra- and cross-governmental coordination** should use participatory, evidence-based strategies and methodologies proven to make progress in protecting and empowering vulnerable children and families. This should include duplicating best practices, like PEPFAR.
- **Indicators for children and youth** should be embedded across USAID programs and throughout the program cycle (e.g., RFP requirements, F indicator) to determine the degree to which programming impacts children and youth, even if it is not the primary objective.
- **A children and youth impact statement**, similar to gender and environmental impact statements, should be required in the Automated Directive Systems (ADS).

Recommendation Four: Meaningful Child and Youth Engagement

The perspectives of children and youth must be integrated into policy and programming at all stages—from conception to implementation to project closeout. This must include key milestones such as program design, policy formulation, and program evaluation. To accomplish these goals, we recommend that the U.S. government institute the following:

- **Training:** The Foreign Service Institute should create child- and youth-focused curricula and ensure that all staff are trained on child safeguarding and youth engagement best practices. USAID, Peace Corps, the Department of Labor, the CDC, and all other agencies should similarly engage in consistent and mandated trainings for staff to understand key policies and priorities for the agency as they pertain to children and youth.
- **Youth advisory councils** should be set up in each USAID region and their engagement required to support program design and monitoring.
- **Youth consultations** should include meaningful engagement with diverse youth- and girl-led organizations, including LGBTQI+ youth, youth with disabilities, girls, and young women. Mission staff are well-placed to ensure country-level strategy consultations take place. Consultations with youth

should not be singular requests but meaningful two-way communication between the U.S. government and young people, since those most affected must be centered in identifying solutions. This should include program implementers providing program reports translated into local languages and in child- and youth-friendly ways so that transparency around aid effectiveness is ensured not only with donors but with aid recipients themselves.

- **Platforms for youth activism, leadership, and government engagement** should be supported, including COVID-19 recovery and response processes.

Conclusion

The first six months of the Biden-Harris administration have demonstrated that the U.S. government can be nimble and responsive in the face of an unprecedented global challenge. Despite enormous hurdles, progress has been made in several areas that affect children and youth. Disappointingly, the administration has simultaneously failed in these first six months to demonstrate a commitment to the world’s most vulnerable in the form of statements or policy actions. While every administration has a multitude of issues to address in domestic and foreign policy, it is critical that children and youth—who make up between 35-42% of the world’s population—are not overlooked in policy decisions. Inaction not only does a disservice to young people today but will set progress in the world back by an estimated 20 years.^{xxxv} However, there is still time to take the kind of decisive and bold action necessary to support children and youth globally.

A whole-of-government response for children and youth would have the dual benefit of reaching some of the world’s most vulnerable and serve as one of the greatest returns on investments. It equally values all aspects of a child’s well-being—social, emotional, physical, intellectual, cultural, and creative—and would leverage the full force of the U.S. government’s diplomacy, development, and humanitarian aid. Holistic programs coordinated within and across agencies would eliminate siloed approaches or regional divisions that artificially silo the way aid is currently delivered. Ultimately, this approach ensures that all young people are included in decision-making processes that impact their lives and are given access to the holistic resources they need to reach their full potential.

Annex

Data Collection Methods

- Sources

Sources used to collect speeches, executive orders, press releases, and public addresses were collected by using public records and public facing methods. The public archives/sources used are listed below

- www.whitehouse.gov
- www.state.gov
- www.usaid.gov
- www.usun.usmission.gov
- www.twitter.com

➤ Key Terms

Data were collected and organized by key words and hashtags. The relevant documents and transcripts were gathered through the processes of evaluation based on the below key words:

Children/child, childhood, youth, young people/person, girl, boy, kid/kids, adolescents, adolescence, adolescent girl/boy, mother, daughter, son, father, student, education

The Twitter analysis also used key words as a basis for gathering relevant data. Along with key words, the use of hashtags that are often applied when discussing children and youth were considered. Below is a list of hashtags that were used in the data gathering process:

#youthempowerment #youth #youthdevelopment #education #youthpower
 #socialimpact #youthactivism #EndChildMarriage #EndChildLabor
 #SaveOurEducation #earlychildhood #ClimateAction #ClimateJustice
 #FridaysForFuture #EveryIssuesAKidsIssue #ForEveryChild #KidsInCrisis
 #ItsAKidsIssue

➤ Coding Terms and Software

The platform used to gather and code data was the software MAXQDA. All data and quotes analyzed through this software can be shared with interested parties. The data collected was coded thematically to show the sectors in which children and youth are most mentioned. Speeches, public addresses, press releases, and executive orders were coded independently of the Twitter data.

The coding terms represent the sector priorities and are broken into the following categories coded by the relevant terms:

1. **Education:** Early childhood education, girls' education, inclusive education school, learning, child labor, digital learning, online learning, etc.
2. **Health & Nutrition:** MNCH, COVID-19, vaccine, hunger, malnutrition, mental health, HIV & AIDS, etc.
3. **Gender:** GBV, child marriage, girls, gender norms, LGBTQ+, transgender, etc.
4. **Child Protection:** Violence, emergencies, conflicts, natural disasters, IDPs, refugee, etc.
5. **Immigration:** DACA, children in detention, children on the move, refugee, etc.
6. **Climate:** drought, climate justice, climatization, etc.

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