

POLIO IN PAKISTAN: PROGRESS AND PERSISTENT CHALLENGES IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA (KP)

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Polio, a highly contagious viral disease that can lead to permanent disability and even death, continues to pose a significant public health challenge in Pakistan. ¹ The country remains one of the few in the world where polio transmission is still a concern. ² A closer look at the reported cases from 2019 to 2024 reveals both progress and worrying trends, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), a province that has consistently reported the heaviest burden of this disease. ³

The data from 2019 to 2024 (table-1) paints a picture of both progress and lingering threats in the fight against polio. Nationwide, the number of reported cases has significantly decreased, from 147 cases in 2019 to 63 cases in 2024, a 62.5% reduction over the period. This overall decline is a testament to the tireless efforts of health workers, vaccination campaigns, and the collective will of the government and various stakeholders to eradicate polio. ³ However, the situation in KPK remains a concern. In 2019, KPK accounted for 63.3% of Pakistan's total polio cases, with 93 reported cases, a disproportionate share compared to other provinces. Although the number of cases in the province decreased in subsequent years, KPK still reported 18 cases in 2024, representing 28.6% of the national total. While this marks a substantial improvement from 2019, KPK's contribution to the national total is still significant, underscoring that the province is far from achieving polio-free status. The trend in KPK illustrates a fluctuating pattern, with cases dropping from 93 in 2019 to just 22 in 2020, followed by a small resurgence in 2022 (20 cases). The dramatic decrease in 2023 to only 4 cases

could have been seen as a hopeful sign of progress, yet the resurgence in 2024 to 18 cases indicates that challenges remain. Despite the decline, KPK's relatively high proportion of national cases suggests that eradication efforts in the region need to be intensified.

KP's polio burden can be attributed to a combination of factors, including socio-political instability, difficult terrain, and vaccine refusal or hesitancy in certain areas. ⁴ The province's rugged, mountainous terrain presents logistical challenges for vaccination teams, often making it difficult to reach remote villages where the disease remains a threat. Additionally, the social and cultural dynamics in some areas contribute to vaccine resistance, where misinformation about the vaccine leads to refusals. These issues are compounded by conflicts and displacement, which further complicate immunization efforts. However, it is not all bleak. The efforts to combat polio in KP have made substantial strides, with enhanced surveillance, improved community engagement, and focused vaccination campaigns. The significant decrease in polio cases over the years indicates that these measures are working, albeit slowly. The role of local communities, particularly in high-risk areas, in accepting and supporting vaccination campaigns is crucial in achieving polio-free status.

The national decline in polio cases must not be seen as a cause for complacency, especially in KP. The persistence of cases in the province highlights the need for more tailored, localized approaches that address the unique challenges faced by its communities. This includes expanding public awareness campaigns to combat mis-

S.No:	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
Punjab	12	14	-	-	-	2	28
Sindh	30	22	-	-	2	17	71
Balochistan	12	26	1	-	-	26	65
KP	93	22	-	20	4	18	157
Total	147	84	1	20	6	63	320

information, improving access to healthcare in remote areas, and engaging local leaders to advocate for vaccination.

Moreover, the recent rise in cases in 2024 should serve as a reminder that polio eradication is not just about numbers; it is about reaching every child, in every part of the country, consistently. There must be a renewed focus on the remaining hot spots in KP to ensure that no child is left unvaccinated. Special attention must be paid to areas where refusal rates are high, and where access to healthcare services remains difficult. While the numbers indicate a positive trend in the fight against polio, KP's continued contribution to the national total shows that the battle is far from over. The country is close, but it must remain vigilant. The ultimate goal of a polio-free Pakistan is within reach, but only with sustained effort, community cooperation, and adaptive strategies tailored to local realities can this goal be achieved.

In conclusion, the decline in polio cases nationwide is a commendable achievement, yet the situation in KP underscores that polio eradication efforts must be intensified. As Pakistan moves closer to achieving its goal of a polio-free future, the lessons from KPK must serve as a guide for overcoming the remaining challenges. Only

through perseverance, innovation, and collaboration can Pakistan ultimately rid itself of this debilitating disease.

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