A Data Descriptor on the Impact of a School-Based Handwashing Programme on Absenteeism from Diarrhoeal and Respiratory Illnesses in Monrovia Primary Schools

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Abstract

Diarrhoeal and respiratory illnesses are leading causes of school absenteeism in low-resource settings, affecting educational outcomes. Handwashing with soap is a recognised cost-effective intervention, but detailed, open-access datasets evaluating its impact within school programmes in West Africa are scarce. This data descriptor presents a curated dataset from an evaluation of a school-based handwashing with soap programme's impact on pupil absenteeism attributed to diarrhoea and respiratory infections in Monrovia's primary schools. The objective is to provide a resource for secondary analysis to inform public health planning and research. A longitudinal, quasi-experimental design was used. The dataset contains daily absenteeism records, with causes classified by trained school staff, from a sample of primary schools over one academic year. Intervention schools received handwashing stations, soap, and behaviour change education, while control schools did not. All data were anonymised. The dataset indicates a reduction in illness-specific absenteeism in intervention schools. Analysis shows absenteeism attributed to diarrhoea was approximately 30% lower in intervention schools compared to control schools. A similar, though less pronounced, trend was observed for absenteeism due to respiratory illnesses. This dataset provides evidence supporting an association between a structured handwashing programme and reduced illness-specific absenteeism in this context. It constitutes a foundation for further epidemiological and health economic analyses. Researchers are encouraged to use this dataset for meta-analyses or modelling studies. Public health practitioners may consider the monitoring framework for programme evaluation. Further data collection on behavioural compliance and intervention sustainability is recommended. Hand hygiene, school health, absenteeism, diarrhoea, respiratory infections, dataset, Liberia, public health surveillance The data were

collected and curated by the Monrovia Public Health Initiative in collaboration with the Liberian Ministry of Education. The dataset was prepared for sharing and documentation by the study epidemiology team.

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