

Out-of-school Children: Sub-Saharan Africa

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Sources: UNESCO, UNICEF, ESBD

Statistical Overview

Sub-Saharan Africa has made impressive gains in literacy and enrollment since 1990. The literacy rate has increased from 49% in 1990 to 60% today. The primary education net enrollment rate (NER) increased from 55% in 1990 to 63% in 2000/2004, and the gross enrollment rate (GER)¹ increased from 74% in 1990 to 92% in 2002/2003. This progress has resulted from sharp increases, mainly of girls, in attendance and from improvements in the capacity of African school systems to absorb students.

However, the number of out-of-school children in Africa remains significant. In 1990, there were 38m primary-age children out of school in Sub-Saharan Africa. Today there are 45m primary-age children out of school, equaling nearly 40% of the primary-age population. Of this number, 24m are in West and Central Africa where 45% of primary-age children are out of school, and 21m are in East and Southern Africa where 38% of primary-age children are out of school.

While the out-of-school figures for Sub-Saharan Africa are indeed high, it is important to note that the rate of out-of-school children has not changed significantly over time. In fact, the population of school-age children has grown at a high rate (the “youth bulge”), and most of these children are being absorbed by African school systems. The school-age (primary and secondary) population is now 31% of Sub-Saharan Africa’s population. It increased by 61m, about 40%, from 1990 (152m) to 2002 (213m). Of this increase, 30m were primary-age children. Almost all of these primary-age children are in school, meaning “we are getting ahead of the problem” (per Tracy Brunette, AFR/SD).

African school systems are handling the challenge of increased numbers in impressive ways -- and USAID assists these efforts -- but particularly in some countries, this is not the case. At the sub-regional and country levels, a handful of countries greatly impact the out-of-school averages. Somalia has the highest rate (88%) of out-of-school children in the world, and Niger and Burkina Faso have rates above 60%. Of USAID countries, DRC, Mali, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Sierra Leone also have very high rates of out-of-school children. As a result, literacy rates in countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso are among the lowest in the world, and a child once enrolled in school receives less than five years of education on average.

The number of secondary-age children out of school is estimated to be three times that of the number of primary-age children out of school. The secondary GER rate is 28%, while the tertiary GER rate is 2.5%. These rates indicate that additional educational statistics must be examined in order to get a more complete picture of educational achievements beyond enrollment. Low persistence, survival, and completion rates point to the challenges African children face to staying in school. In addition, improvements in the quality of education do not yet match the progress made in access.

“Out-of-school” Methodology

Estimating out-of-school children is complicated by the fact that figures have to date been based on various data and methodologies. UNESCO (*Education for All*), for example, uses administrative data on enrollment derived from national management information systems. It estimates that 104m children are out of school globally. UNICEF (*State of the World’s Children*) uses administrative data and household survey data. It estimates that 121m children are out of school globally.

A main challenge to counting out-of-school children is the variance in the definitions related to children in school. Countries define the primary-age range differently, and they may define “school” and “participation” differently. For example, using enrollment and registration data can overestimate figures because those registered may not show up or may drop out. At the same time, they can underestimate figures because students who did not register or officially enroll may actually attend school.

Household surveys may help counter some of these problems by estimating attendance as reported by parents and guardians. However, the timing of the surveys can present problems in accuracy because results can be low due to temporary absenteeism (family illness, harvest season, etc.).

In Africa, another major issue impacting the figures on children in and out of school is that the methodology often does not include non-formal education or primary-age children who are in pre-primary school. In Angola, for example, more than 10% of primary-age children are still participating in pre-primary education.

A recent report (*Children Out Of School*) represents the joint efforts of UNESCO and UNICEF to draw on a range of sources from administrative data to household surveys and other national reporting. The effort relied on an expert panel to make decisions about the most accurate data to use on a country-by-country basis, and it revised the definition of “out-of-school.” For example, it included primary-age children attending secondary school, resulting in a decrease in the number of out-of-school children. Using this revised definition, applied consistently across countries, the report concludes that there are 115m children out of school globally.

Resources

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http://www.unesco.org/education/GMR2006/full/africa_eng.pdf

UNESCO Institute for Statistics. *How Many Children in Africa Reach Secondary Education?* Fact Sheet No. 01, January 2006.

http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/pdf/EducGeneral/UIS_Fact%20Sheet_2006_02_SecAfr_EN.pdf

UNESCO and UNICEF. *Children Out of School: Measuring Exclusion from Primary Education*. 2005.

http://www.uis.unesco.org/template/pdf/educgeneral/OOSC_EN_WEB_FINAL.pdf

UNICEF. *State of the World's Children 2006*. 2006.

<http://www.unicef.org/sowc06/index.php>

USAID. Economic and Social Database (ESDB). PPC/CDIE.

<http://cdie.usaid.gov/esds/>

ⁱ The gross primary enrollment ratio (GER) measures the enrollment of primary students of all ages expressed as a percentage of the primary school-age population. **The GER describes the capacity of a school system in relation to the size of the official school-age population.** For example, a ratio of 100 percent indicates that the number of children actually enrolled, including those outside the official age range, is equivalent to the size of the official primary school-age population. It does not mean that all children of official primary school-age are actually enrolled. If the ratio were so misinterpreted, it would overstate the actual enrollment picture in those countries in which a sizable proportion of students are younger or older than the official age owing to early or delayed entry or to repetition.