

COVID'S EDUCATIONAL TIME BOMB



Save the Children

The clock is ticking to get millions of children back to school

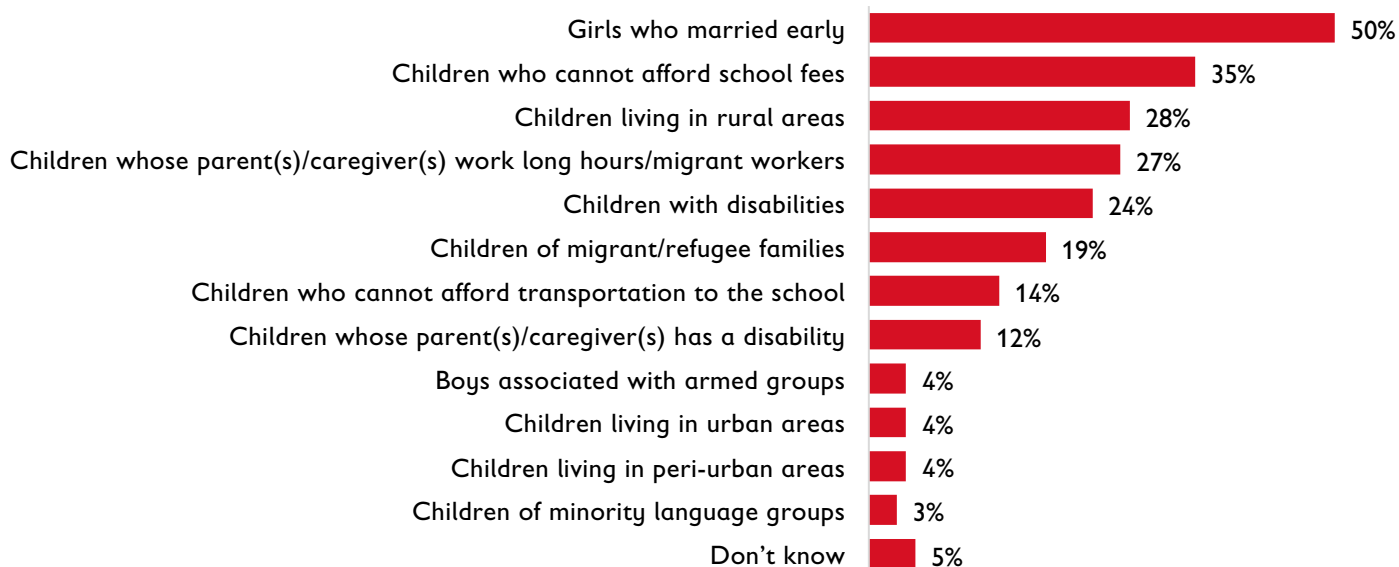
Results of our snapshot survey

A snapshot survey carried out by Save the Children in 6 countries where schools have reopened, shows that 18 months into the COVID-19 pandemic, up to 1 in 5 of the most vulnerable children have not returned.¹ This is not typically because of fear of the virus itself, but a direct result of child labour, child marriage, financial hardship, relocation and other consequences of the pandemic – and girls are particularly at risk. 1 in 5 children at schools we surveyed² have not returned to school and are at risk of dropping out for good – with potentially devastating consequences for their lives and their country's future.

In spring 2020, during the first wave of the global pandemic, schools around the world suddenly shut their doors to 1.6 billion children. Whilst some children learned remotely when their school was closed, this option was not available to most poor children, rupturing their contact with their schools and teachers. Our new snapshot survey of 625 schools in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Malawi, Nigeria, Somalia and Uganda now provides new clarity on how significant numbers of children – including girls, children from low-income households, migrants, internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees – have not returned to school after they reopened. With new school closures still occurring around the world, the number of children dropping out entirely is likely to rise still further.

Eighteen months into this crisis, the clock is ticking. We must act now and invest in getting the world's children safely back to school, to ensure that generations of the most vulnerable children are not left behind.

Figure 1: Which children are out of school?





Key findings

Around 1 in 5 children at the schools we surveyed have not returned to school

- 21% of children enrolled at the schools we surveyed before the pandemic, have dropped out
- Almost three in four of the schools we surveyed said some enrolled students aren't actually attending
- 92% of schools said there are children in their community who could be attending school, but are not

More than half the schools we surveyed said girls are more likely to be out of school

- Fewer girls than boys were enrolled at the schools we surveyed, both before and after the pandemic
- More than half the schools we surveyed (58%) said that girls are more likely than boys to be out of school
- Since the pandemic, more boys than girls have dropped out. This is partly due to more boys enrolled in schools pre-pandemic, and, during the pandemic, increased pressure on the boy child to work to support the family economy.

“Financial limitations at the household level also restricted children’s return to school and many saw a deprioritisation of education within the family – in some cases with children being sent to work instead.”

Staff member at a peri-urban primary school in Nigeria

Children from low-income households,³ married girls, migrants and refugees are most likely to be out of school

According to the schools we surveyed, the children most likely to be out of school are:

- Girls who have married early
- Children who cannot afford the school fees
- Children living in rural areas
- Children of migrant labourers/parents who work long hours
- Children with disabilities

COVID caused schools to close, but fear of catching or spreading the virus is not the main reason why children are still out of school

The schools we surveyed said that the main barriers to children attending school are more likely to be:

- They are working to help their family
- They are looking after their parents and/or their siblings
- They have married
- Their family has relocated (or been displaced)
- They cannot afford the costs of school, such as fees and transport
- Parents or community are not encouraging children to go to school
- The school is too far away

Very few schools said that COVID-related factors such as fear of catching the virus, or a lack of personal protective equipment, were the main barriers to children returning to school.

Getting children safely back to school

Save the Children's biggest global priority right now is getting children safely back to school, because we know that when a child misses out on their education, it can have a devastating impact on their health, their safety, their future life chances and their future earnings. **The longer children are out of school, the less likely it is that they will ever return – so we must act now before it is too late.**

Each year of learning that a child loses leads to around a 10% loss in their expected lifetime earnings⁴ and children who are out of school often lack essential skills, which reduces their ability to participate effectively in society and the workforce⁵ and further increases social inequality.

Children that are already vulnerable and disadvantaged – including girls, children from low-income households, children with disabilities, and migrant and refugee children – are at the greatest risk of being left even further behind. Disproportional drop-out rates for girls results in greater rates of early marriage and pregnancy, significantly affecting mortality rates and educational outcomes for the next generation⁶.

Unless we respond quickly, and get this generation of children back into school, we risk losing many of the development gains of the last 20 years – and we will all feel the consequences. But the vital thing to remember is that **it is not too late**. We **can** do something to stop this tragedy, but time is running out.

For example, schoolteachers we surveyed said that to get children back to school, we need more community awareness campaigns; more teachers (especially female teachers); more school feeding programmes; more financial support for girls and low-income households; investment in and distribution of books, uniforms and sanitary products for young girls; and better transport and school infrastructure:

“The support given to the children (school materials – bags, books, writing materials, uniforms...) helped in keeping the children in school as well.”

Staff member at a peri-urban primary school in Nigeria



What we are calling for

- **Governments and donors invest substantially in education now**, so we can build better education systems for the future. This includes investing in fast-track interventions⁷ that will get children back into school before they drop out for good.
- **Ensure every child is supported to return to school** when it is safe to do so, by prioritising **vulnerable and marginalised children** including girls, children from low-income households, children with disabilities, and migrant and refugee children. Ways of doing this include:
 - **National back-to-school communications campaigns** to inform communities of school reopening plans, the available support to children and measures being taken to make schools safer
 - Establish an **inclusive, flexible registration system** that allows students to enrol in school even if they lack the usual documentation. This includes removing gender-based barriers and arbitrary restrictions that deny access to school for children who have been ‘too long’ out of the educational system.
 - **Prioritise cash transfers to the poorest families** to mitigate against the financial barriers that deter a return to school.
- **Global equitable access to vaccines** and rapid action to close the global vaccine divide between high-income and low-income countries
- **Ensure all teachers and school staff are prioritised to receive the COVID vaccine** (once frontline health workers and high-risk populations are vaccinated)
- **Collection and ongoing collection and publication of national and global data** on how many children are out of school, to enable timely and targeted action:

For a comprehensive series of recommendations on ensuring more resilient and inclusive education systems, please see Save the Children's recent '[Build Forward Better](#)' report.



Get in touch

It's not too late to make a difference.

For more information or to discuss how you can support our essential work to get millions of children safely back to school, please get in touch with:

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- ¹ Children who are out of school include those who have dropped out (not enrolled) or have enrolled but are not attending
- ² From May – July 2021, Save the Children carried out a survey with 625 schools that had fully or partially reopened or were on an academic break in [Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Malawi, Nigeria, Somalia and Uganda](#) to gather information about how many children were out of school, who they were, and the reasons why they had not returned or dropped out. Data was collected online, face to face and by phone via Kobo.
- ³ Defined as parents who work long hours or families who cannot afford the school fees or cannot afford the transport to school
- ⁴ Patrinos, H. [Estimating the return to schooling using the Mincer equation](#). IZA World of Labor 2016: 278 doi: 10.15185/izawol.278
- ⁵ United Nations (2020), [Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond](#)
- ⁶ UNICEF (non-dated), [Girls' education: Gender equality in education benefits every child](#)
- ⁷ Save the Children's [Catch Up Clubs](#) (CUCs): A pioneering approach to getting children safely back to school
- ⁸ As of 25th September 2021, vaccine doses administered in low-income countries stands at 0.7% [Data dive: The astoundingly unequal vaccine rollout | ONE](#)

A note about using this data

Gathering detailed data on how many children are out of school at any one time is a complex task, particularly in vulnerable contexts. In light of the urgent need to get the world's children safely back to school as soon as possible, we carried out a small-scale, light-touch survey to quickly gather indicative information that will act as a foundation for more detailed data collection and future programme interventions.

The findings reflect what is happening in the schools we surveyed and will help us to tell the story about how many children are out of school and why, so that we can provide support, fundraise and advocate to get millions of children safely back to school. However, the findings are not representative of all children and should not be scaled up to describe the situation nationally or globally.