Education, Africa

How much of sub-Saharan Africa's rising out-of-school count is population growth?

Out-of-school numbers in sub-Saharan Africa rose by 19.3 million between 2015 and 2024. Population growth alone would have added 23 million; lower out-of-school rates removed fewer than 4 million.

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In short

- Sub-Saharan Africa had 108.4 million out-of-school children and youth of primary and secondary age in 2024, up from 89.1 million in 2015. Outside the region the number fell by about 10 million, so the world's rise is entirely a sub-Saharan one.
- The region has 23% of the world's school-age children but 40% of its out-of-school children, and half of those of primary and lower-secondary age.
- Lower secondary is the only level where the out-of-school rate itself rose, from 32.3% to 34.4%. The growth in primary-age children since 2015 equals about 564,000 trained primary teachers at the 2022 ratio of 56 pupils per trained teacher (our calculation).

The evidence

Each figure carries its source, its date and a label for how much weight it can bear. Open 'How we know this' for the method.

Modelled or projected — 2024

108.4 million

children and youth of primary and secondary age were out of school in sub-Saharan Africa, up 19.3 million since 2015.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics, February 2026 release

How we know this

UNESCO and the GEM Report's model estimates, which combine administrative and household survey data. Primary 39.24 million, lower secondary 32.14 million, upper secondary 36.98 million.

Modelled or projected — 2015–2024

+23.1 million

out-of-school children were added by population growth alone. Lower out-of-school rates removed 3.8 million.

Probatio Africa calculation from UNESCO Institute for Statistics data

How we know this

A standard decomposition. Population effect = 2015 rate × growth in the school-age population implied by UNESCO's numbers and rates; rate effect = change in rate × the implied 2024 population, for each level. The two sum exactly to the observed rise of 19.3 million. Using UNESCO's published school-age populations instead gives +21.7 million and −3.7 million.

Modelled or projected 2024

40%

of the world's out-of-school children and youth are in sub-Saharan Africa, which has 23% of the world's school-age population.

Probatio Africa calculation from UNESCO Institute for Statistics data

How we know this

108.36 million of 272.82 million out of school; 365.7 million of 1,607.6 million of school age. At primary age the region holds 49.8% of out-of-school children, and at lower-secondary age 50.4%.

Modelled or projected 2022

55.9

pupils per trained primary teacher in sub-Saharan Africa, twice the world ratio of 27.8. 69.4% of primary teachers have the minimum required training.

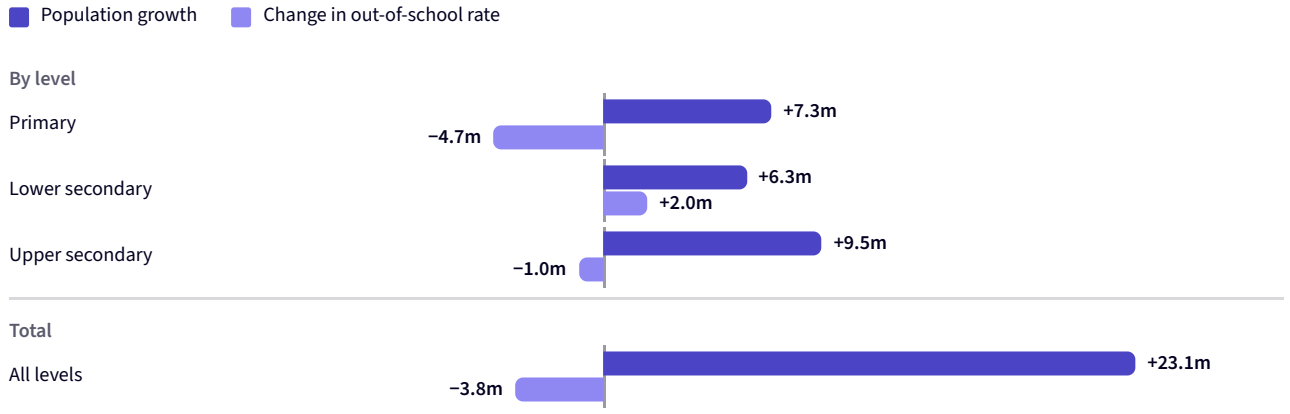
UNESCO Institute for Statistics

How we know this

SDG indicators 4.c.1 and 4.c.2, regional estimates for 2022, the latest year available for the region. World: 82.5% of primary teachers trained.

What drove the change in out-of-school numbers, 2015 to 2024

Contribution to the change in out-of-school children and youth in sub-Saharan Africa, millions



Our decomposition of UNESCO model estimates. Bars to the right added out-of-school children; bars to the left removed them. Net change: +19.3 million.

Sources: 2, 3, 5.

What the data show

UNESCO reported in March 2026 that the number of children and young people out of school worldwide had risen for the seventh year in a row, to 273 million in 2024, with progress slowing sharply in sub-Saharan Africa, 'mostly due to population growth' [1].

UNESCO's series shows how. Between 2015 and 2024, out-of-school numbers in sub-Saharan Africa rose at every level: from 36.6 to 39.2 million at primary age, 23.9 to 32.1 million at lower-secondary age and 28.5 to 37.0 million at upper-secondary age [2]. Over the same period the out-of-school rate fell at primary (22.4% to 20.0%) and upper secondary (47.8% to 46.5%), and rose at lower secondary (32.3% to 34.4%) [3]. The school-age population grew by 23%, from 297.2 million to 365.7 million [5].

Separating the two effects: had rates stayed at their 2015 levels, population growth alone would have added 23.1 million out-of-school children. Lower rates removed 3.8 million. Even at primary age, where the rate fell, numbers rose by 2.6 million.

The result is concentration. Sub-Saharan Africa has 23% of the world's school-age children and 40% of its out-of-school children, including half of all those of primary and lower-secondary age [2,4,5]. Outside the region, out-of-school numbers fell by about 10 million between 2015 and 2024.

Lower secondary is the bottleneck. The number out of school at that age grew by 34%, faster than the age group (26%), and 2 million of the increase came from a rising rate. More children reach secondary age; places and progression have not kept up.

Teachers are the constraint behind places. In 2022 there were 55.9 pupils per trained primary teacher in sub-Saharan Africa, against 27.8 worldwide, and 69.4% of primary teachers had the minimum required training[6]. UNESCO estimates the region needs 15 million new primary and secondary teachers by 2030[7]. The 31.5 million extra primary-age children since 2015 equal about 564,000 trained primary teachers at today's ratio (which improved slightly, from 57.6 in 2015); enrolling every primary-age child out of school would take about 702,000 at today's ratio, or 1.4 million at the world's.

Where sources disagree

UNESCO's model re-estimates the whole history with each release. In September 2022 it put sub-Saharan Africa's out-of-school total at 98 million, without stating the year[9]; the current series puts 2020 at 101.9 million and 2021 at 104.0 million[2]. Comparing figures from different releases creates false trends. This brief uses one release throughout.

The official total undercounts children in crises. UNESCO's 2026 report says the count misses at least 13 million children in the 10 countries most affected by conflict[8]; its VIEW estimates put the world total at about 286 million with them[10]. Four of those ten countries are in sub-Saharan Africa, so the region's true number is higher than 108.4 million.

The figures use the UN's sub-Saharan Africa grouping, which places Sudan in Northern Africa.

What this means for decisions

- Rates measure progress; numbers measure cost. A plan built on falling rates will under-provide classrooms and teachers where the school-age population is growing by a quarter a decade.
- The transition from primary to lower secondary is where sub-Saharan Africa is losing ground on rates as well as numbers.
- Population growth sets the hiring floor: the 31.5 million extra primary-age children of 2015–2024 equal about 564,000 trained primary teachers at the current ratio, before any improvement in class sizes.
- In the crisis-affected countries that the official count already misses, the real number is least known.

Method

- Data: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, February 2026 release (UIS–GEM model estimates): out-of-school numbers and rates by level for the UN's sub-Saharan Africa and world groupings, 2015 and 2024; school-age population by level; teacher indicators for 2022.
- Decomposition: for each level, population effect = 2015 rate × (2024 population − 2015 population); rate effect = (2024 rate − 2015 rate) × 2024 population. Populations are those implied by the published numbers and rates, so the parts sum exactly to the observed change. Using the published school-age populations instead gives +21.7 million and −3.7 million.
- Shares: sub-Saharan Africa's out-of-school and school-age totals divided by the world totals for 2024.
- Teachers: 31,516,240 extra primary-age children (2015–2024) ÷ 55.91 pupils per trained teacher = 563,700; 39.24 million out of school ÷ 55.9 = 702,000, or ÷ 27.8 = 1.41 million.

Limitations

- The data show who is not enrolled, not who is learning.
- Regional figures are model estimates, published rounded to the nearest 10,000. Each component of the decomposition is accurate to about half a million.
- Teacher data stop at 2022 and include UNESCO's estimates for countries without data.
- Population estimates for several large countries rest on old censuses.

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