Education, Nigeria

How many Nigerian children are really out of school, and why do counts differ?

Mostly, the counts measure different age groups. On the latest survey rates, about 9.8 million children of primary age, 14.1 million aged 6 to 14 and 19.5 million aged 6 to 17 are out of school; three in four live in the North West and North East.

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In short

- Applied to 2024 population estimates, the latest household survey rates give about 9.8 million out-of-school children aged 6–11, 14.1 million aged 6–14 and 19.5 million aged 6–17 (our calculation). Most published figures between 10 million and 20 million count different age groups rather than contradict each other.
- Administrative and survey data agree at primary age (9.07 million in 2023 against 8.98 million in 2020–21) but not at junior secondary, where the 2018 administrative count of 8.1 million is twice the survey's 3.9 million. The often-quoted 18.3 million matches the sum of the 2018 administrative counts for ages 6–14 (10.2 + 8.1 million); no document we found states how it was derived.
- In the 2021 survey, 73.6% of out-of-school children aged 6–17 lived in the North West and North East and 46% came from the poorest fifth of households. Girls were 50.4%, close to parity.

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.

Sources disagree

2018 to 2026

9 to 20 million

children out of school, depending on who is counting, which ages and which year. A count of 6- to 11-year-olds and a count of 6- to 17-year-olds measure different things.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics; UNICEF and NBS (MICS 2021); UBEC; UNESCO; Federal Ministry of Education

How we know this

The table in this brief sets out each count with its age band, method, data year and source. A ministerial projection of 'fewer than eight million' (May 2026) has no published method or age band.

Modelled or projected

2023

9.07 million

children of primary-school age (6–11) were not enrolled in school: 24.3% of the age group.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics, February 2026 release

How we know this

Calculated from enrolment reported by Nigeria to UNESCO and the UN's population estimates (World Population Prospects 2024). UNESCO publishes no secondary-age out-of-school figure for Nigeria.

Survey estimate

2020–21

73.6%

of out-of-school children aged 6–17 lived in the North West and North East. The poorest fifth of households accounted for 46%.

UNICEF Nigeria, Education Fact Sheets 2023, from MICS 2021 (NBS and UNICEF)

How we know this

Our sums of the published headcounts by zone and wealth: North West 8.04 million and North East 5.06 million of 17.81 million. The survey measures attendance; children in Qur'anic-only schooling count as out of school.

✓ Record or count

2024/25

53.7%

of schools returned the 2024 Annual School Census: 124,066 of 230,844. Every administrative count depends on it.

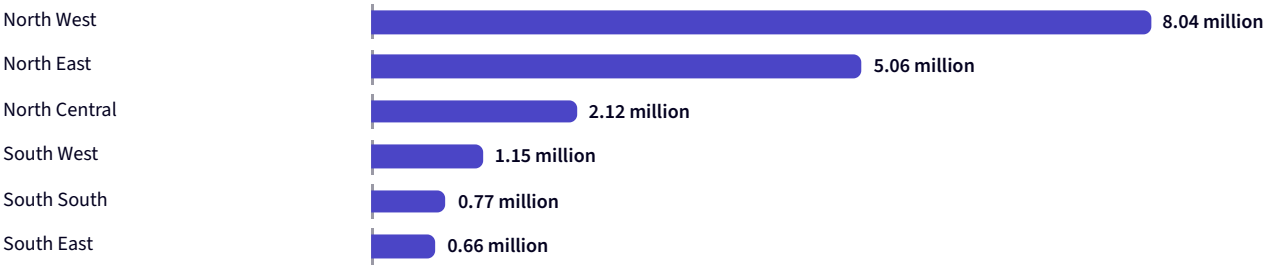
Federal Ministry of Education, Nigeria Education Management Information System

How we know this

The census portal reported 39.8 million learners in reporting schools only. A count of children not in school built on it inherits the gaps of the schools that did not report.

Out-of-school children aged 6–17, by geopolitical zone

Children of primary, junior secondary and senior secondary age not attending school, 2020–21



Sum of the published primary, junior secondary and senior secondary headcounts in each zone. Total 17.8 million. Children in non-formal or Qur'anic-only schooling count as out of school.

Sources: 3.

What the data show

The counts quoted for Nigeria come from three kinds of source: administrative data (enrolment reported by schools, subtracted from a population estimate), household surveys (whether children attend school) and statistical models that combine both. They also cover different ages. Set side by side, most of the spread disappears.

The 2021 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey found 26% of primary-age children, 25% of junior-secondary-age and 34% of senior-secondary-age children out of school [3]. Applied to the UN's 2024 population estimates for each age group [2], those rates give about 9.8 million children aged 6–11, 14.1 million aged 6–14 and 19.5 million aged 6–17. The 'ten million' family of figures counts primary age; the 'eighteen to twenty million' family adds secondary ages. Both can be right; neither is a count of all children.

At primary age, administrative and survey data agree closely: UNESCO's administrative estimate is 9.07 million (24.3%) for 2023 [1] and the survey's is 8.98 million (26%) for 2020–21 [3]. At junior secondary they do not. The Universal Basic Education Commission's 2018 count of 8.1 million [6] is about 55% of the age group on UN population estimates, against the survey's 25%, or 3.9 million. Added to the 10.2 million of primary age, that 2018 count gives 18.3 million, the figure most often quoted [5,6].

Where the children are is clearer than how many. In the 2021 survey, the North West and North East held 73.6% of out-of-school children aged 6–17 and 77.9% of those of primary age; the poorest fifth of households held 46%, and rural areas 80% [3]. The primary out-of-school rate was 58% in the poorest fifth and 5% in the richest. Girls were 50.4% of out-of-school children aged 6–17 [3]; the 2023–24 Demographic and Health Survey found 94 girls attending school for every 100 boys [4].

The published counts, side by side

Count	Ages	Method	Data year	Source
Fewer than 8 million (projection)	Not stated	Ministerial projection from household mapping	2026	[10]
8.98 million	6–11	Household survey (attendance)	2020–21	[3]
9.07 million	6–11	Administrative enrolment and UN population	2023	[1]
10.19 million	Primary age	Administrative (school audit)	2018	[5]
About 10.5 million	5–14	Not stated	Not stated	[8]
12.89 million	6–14	Household survey	2020–21	[3]
An estimated 15 million	Not stated	Not stated	2026 statement	[9]
17.81 million	6–17	Household survey	2020–21	[3]
18.3 million	6–14	Administrative (10.2 + 8.1 million)	2018	[6], our sum
20.2 million	Primary to upper-secondary age (not stated by source)	UNESCO model (administrative and survey data)	2022 release	[7]

Counts from household surveys treat children in non-formal or Qur'anic-only schooling as out of school; so does the government [8].

Where sources disagree

In April 2026 a federal press release reported the Minister of Education citing 'an estimated 15 million out-of-school children' [9]. Two weeks later, in a television interview reported by THISDAY, he called the 18.3 million figure outdated and projected that national household mapping would show 'fewer than eight million' [10]. Neither statement gives an age band or a method. In September 2026, in a podcast interview again reported by THISDAY, he disputed the estimates of 15 million and more, put the figure at around 7 to 8 million, and said a National Bureau of Statistics household survey would cover all 36 states and the FCT [13].

The Kaduna State household mapping illustrates the problem. A federal press release in July 2026 reported a fall from 'approximately 550,000 to fewer than 180,000' [11]; the minister had earlier been reported giving 700,000, compared with 1.8 million in UNICEF data [10]. Until the method, age band and coverage of the mapping are published, these figures cannot be compared with the survey or administrative counts.

The sex balance also differs by source. The 2018 school audit reported 68% boys among out-of-school primary-age children [5]; the 2021 survey found near parity [3].

Population denominators matter. The audit's 10.19 million, described as about 25% of primary-age children, implies a primary-age population of 40 to 42 million in 2018 [5]; the UN's estimate for that year is 34.2 million [2]. Administrative counts are population minus enrolment, so a larger population estimate raises the count one for one. They also depend on the annual school census, to which only 53.7% of schools reported in 2024/25 [12].

What this means for decisions

- Any target or budget for out-of-school children needs to state its age band and its source. Comparing a 6–11 figure with a 6–17 figure can make progress, or deterioration, appear where neither has happened.
- Junior secondary is where administrative and survey data disagree most, by a factor of two. It is also where the problem is likely to grow as larger cohorts finish primary school.
- Household mapping could replace estimates with counts, but only if its method, ages and coverage are published and the results are checked against a survey.
- Whatever the national total, the children are concentrated: the North West and North East, rural areas and the poorest households.

Method

- Age-band estimates: survey out-of-school rates for 2020–21 (primary 26%, junior secondary 25%, senior secondary 34%) multiplied by UN population estimates for 2024 by level (37,563,564; 17,347,944; 15,902,482), as published by UNESCO. Primary 9.77 million; 6–14 14.10 million; 6–17 19.51 million. Because the rates are published as whole numbers, the results carry a range of about ±0.2 to ±0.4 million.
- Zone, wealth and sex shares: our sums of the survey's published headcounts by level for each group, divided by the total of 17.81 million children aged 6–17.
- Junior secondary comparison: 8.1 million (2018 administrative) ÷ 14,781,274 (UN estimate of the 12–14 population in 2018) = 55%.

Limitations

- The breakdowns use the 2021 survey. The 2023–24 Demographic and Health Survey's tables by zone and wealth were not available to us in readable form before publication; its national figures are used where stated.
- The survey published rates as whole numbers and gave no confidence intervals in the fact sheets we used.
- UN population estimates for Nigeria rest on projections from the 2006 census.
- Out of school is not the same as not learning. None of these counts shows children who are enrolled but rarely attend, or who learn to read in Tsangaya schools.
- Insecurity may have pushed rates in the North East and North West above 2021 levels, and is also where surveys are hardest to carry out.

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