One in Five Children, Adolescents and Youth is Out of School

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) is the statistical office of UNESCO and is the UN depository for global statistics in the fields of education, science and technology, culture and communication.

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This fact sheet presents the latest UIS data on education available as of February 2018.

Three years after the adoption of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and the promise to provide universal primary and secondary education, there has been no progress in reducing the global number of out-of-school children, adolescents and youth. As the SDG 4–Education 2030 Steering Committee meets in Paris, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) has released this fact sheet, highlighting trends at the global and regional levels, to inform discussions and provide stakeholders with the data needed to target policies, strategies and resources to get all children, adolescents and youth in school and learning.

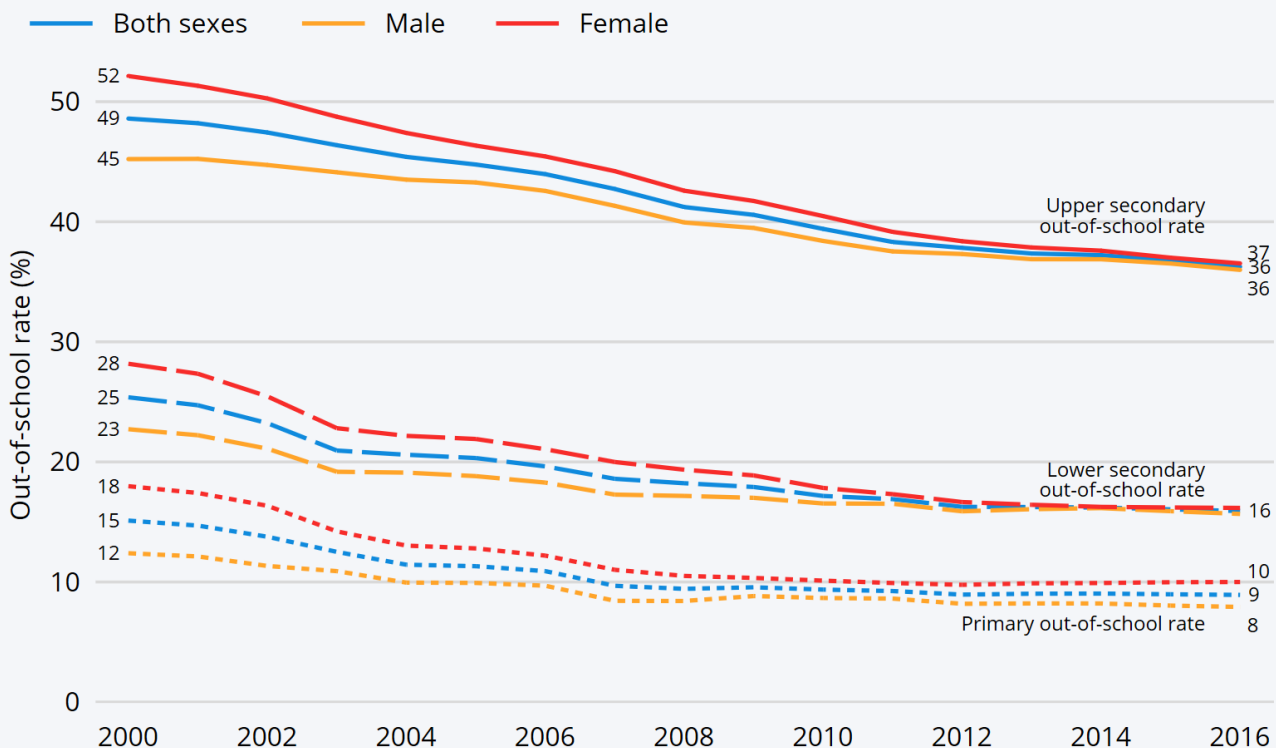## Out-of-school children, adolescents and youth: Global status and trends

No progress in reducing out-of-school numbers

In 2016, 263 million children, adolescents and youth were out of school, representing nearly one-fifth of the global population of this age group *(see **Figure 1** and **Table 1**)*. The number of children, adolescents and youth who are excluded from education fell steadily in the decade following 2000, but UIS data show that this progress essentially stopped in recent years; the total number of out-of-school children and youth has declined by little more than 1 million per year since 2012. Some 63 million, or 24% of the total, are children of primary school age (about 6 to 11 years old); 61 million, or 23% of the total, are adolescents of lower secondary school age (about 12 to 14 years old); and 139 million, or 53% of the total, are youth of upper secondary school age (about 15 to 17 years old).

FIGURE 1

Global number of out-of-school children, adolescents and youth, 2000-2016

■ Primary age   ■ Lower secondary age   ■ Upper secondary age
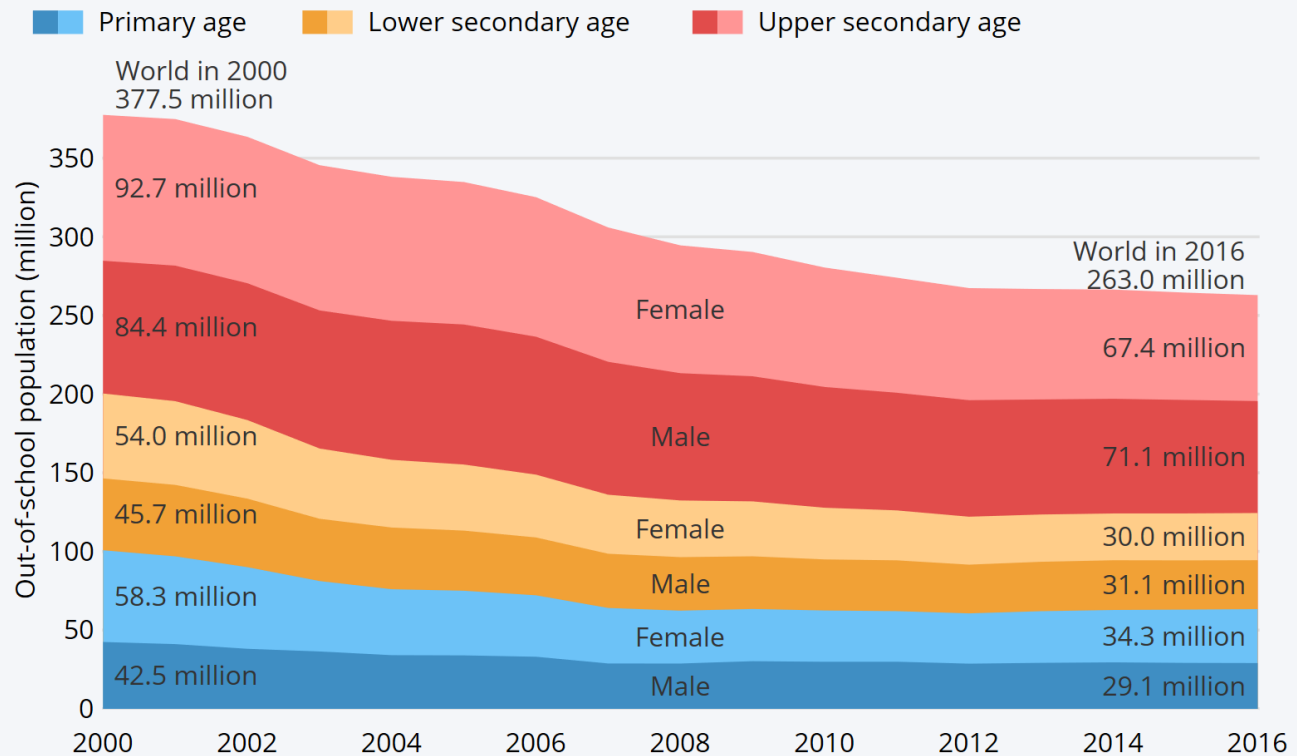
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database.

The rates of out-of-school children, adolescents and youth have followed a similar trend *(see **Figure 2**)*. After an initial decline in the years after 2000, the primary out-of-school rate has barely moved from around 9% since 2008 and the lower secondary out-of-school rate has been at 16% since 2012. The upper secondary out-of-school rate, which was initially at much higher levels than the primary and lower secondary out-of-school rates, has fallen more steadily since 2000, but this trend is flattening out, with the most recent estimate at 36%.

FIGURE 2

Global out-of-school rate by age group and sex, 2000-2016

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database.

Upper secondary school-age youth are four times as likely to be out of school as children of primary school age and more than twice as likely to be out of school as adolescents of lower secondary school age. The high out-of-school rates for older cohorts can be explained by poverty and a variety of other reasons: many youth never had a chance to enter school when they were younger, upper secondary education is often not compulsory, and upper secondary school-age youth may choose employment over continuing their education (UIS and GEMR, 2016). SDG 4 and the commitment to provide universal secondary education have led to a growing focus among policymakers and advocates on the number of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET), which is discussed in **Box 1**.

Box 1. Youth not in employment, education or training (NEET)

Out-of-school rates tend to increase with age as youth find or search for employment. But to what extent do they have the skills to find a first job, for example? Data on employment and vocational training provide an important perspective on the share of out-of-school youth either working or preparing for the job market. But additional sources of information are needed to gauge the extent to which youth are not in employment, education or training (NEET).

SDG Target 4.4 calls for a substantial increase in the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. To monitor this target, additional indicators are required, especially on skills. The risk of falling within the NEET category is generally associated with low educational attainment and weak information-processing skills, such as poor literacy and numeracy.

As part of efforts to respond to the need for better data, the UIS is examining if the youth NEET rate for the population aged 15 to 24 years could represent a valuable indicator. Specific questions studied by the UIS include: What relation exists between youth NEET and youth levels of educational attainment? How could NEET rates by sex, age group, location, educational attainment and national income inform basic skills acquisition by youth and their preparation for labour market entry?

This work by the UIS makes use of NEET data produced by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The NEET rate is a well-established measure that is also the official indicator for SDG Target 8.6 ("By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training"). Currently, NEET data are available for nearly 100 countries. Preliminary results from the analysis by the UIS were presented to the Technical Cooperation Group on SDG 4–Education 2030 Indicators (TCG), which met in January 2018. The TCG endorsed the work by the UIS and requested a progress report at a future meeting.

Table 1. Out-of-school rates and numbers by SDG region, 2016

Out-of-school children of primary school age						
Region	**Out-of-school rate (%)**				**Out-of-school number (millions)**		
	Both sexes	**Male**	**Female**	**GPIA**	**Both sexes**	**Male**	**Female**
Europe and Northern America	3.8	4.1	3.4	0.84	2.5	1.4	1.1
Latin America and the Caribbean	5.0	5.5	4.4	0.80	3.0	1.7	1.3
Central Asia	3.3	2.8	3.8	1.27	0.2	0.1	0.1
Southern Asia	5.6	4.9	6.4	1.24	10.3	4.7	5.6
Eastern and South-Eastern Asia	4.2	3.7	4.7	1.20	7.2	3.4	3.8
Northern Africa and Western Asia	10.9	10.0	11.8	1.15	5.8	2.7	3.1
Sub-Saharan Africa	20.8	18.1	23.5	1.23	34.1	14.9	19.1
Oceania	7.4	6.5	8.3	1.22	0.3	0.1	0.2
World	8.9	7.9	10.0	1.21	63.3	29.1	34.3
Out-of-school adolescents of lower secondary school age							
Region	**Out-of-school rate (%)**				**Out-of-school number (millions)**		
	Both sexes	**Male**	**Female**	**GPIA**	**Both sexes**	**Male**	**Female**
Europe and Northern America	2.1	2.4	1.9	0.81	0.9	0.5	0.4
Latin America and the Caribbean	7.6	7.9	7.2	0.90	2.7	1.5	1.3
Central Asia	5.8	4.8	6.9	1.30	0.3	0.1	0.2
Southern Asia	17.2	18.3	15.9	0.87	18.2	10.2	8.0
Eastern and South-Eastern Asia	9.0	9.3	8.6	0.92	8.0	4.4	3.6
Northern Africa and Western Asia	13.7	11.1	16.3	1.32	3.9	1.6	2.3
Sub-Saharan Africa	36.6	34.5	38.8	1.11	27.0	12.8	14.2
Oceania	2.4	2.5	2.3	0.92	0.0	0.0	0.0
World	15.9	15.7	16.2	1.03	61.1	31.1	30.0
Out-of-school youth of upper secondary school age							
Region	**Out-of-school rate (%)**				**Out-of-school number (millions)**		
	Both sexes	**Male**	**Female**	**GPIA**	**Both sexes**	**Male**	**Female**
Europe and Northern America	7.6	8.2	7.0	0.86	2.8	1.5	1.3
Latin America and the Caribbean	22.2	22.8	21.6	0.94	6.9	3.6	3.3
Central Asia	18.5	17.5	19.4	1.10	0.5	0.3	0.3
Southern Asia	48.4	47.2	49.7	1.05	67.3	34.4	32.9
Eastern and South-Eastern Asia	19.3	23.0	15.2	0.66	15.8	9.9	5.9
Northern Africa and Western Asia	33.0	30.8	35.4	1.13	8.8	4.2	4.6
Sub-Saharan Africa	57.8	54.3	61.3	1.11	35.8	17.0	18.9
Oceania	32.9	37.9	27.6	0.73	0.5	0.3	0.2
World	36.3	36.0	36.5	1.01	138.5	71.1	67.4
Out-of-school children, adolescents and youth of primary, lower secondary and upper secondary age							
Region	**Out-of-school rate (%)**				**Out-of-school number (millions)**		
	Both sexes	**Male**	**Female**	**GPIA**	**Both sexes**	**Male**	**Female**
Europe and Northern America	4.3	4.6	3.9	0.85	6.2	3.4	2.8
Latin America and the Caribbean	9.9	10.4	9.4	0.90	12.7	6.8	5.9
Central Asia	7.6	6.8	8.4	1.20	1.0	0.5	0.6
Southern Asia	22.4	21.9	22.8	1.04	95.8	49.2	46.5
Eastern and South-Eastern Asia	9.0	9.7	8.2	0.84	31.0	17.6	13.4
Northern Africa and Western Asia	17.1	15.4	18.8	1.18	18.5	8.6	10.0
Sub-Saharan Africa	32.3	29.6	35.1	1.16	96.9	44.7	52.2
Oceania	11.5	12.1	10.8	0.90	0.9	0.5	0.4
World	17.8	17.2	18.5	1.07	263.0	131.3	131.7

Notes: GPIA = adjusted gender parity index (female/male out-of-school rate).
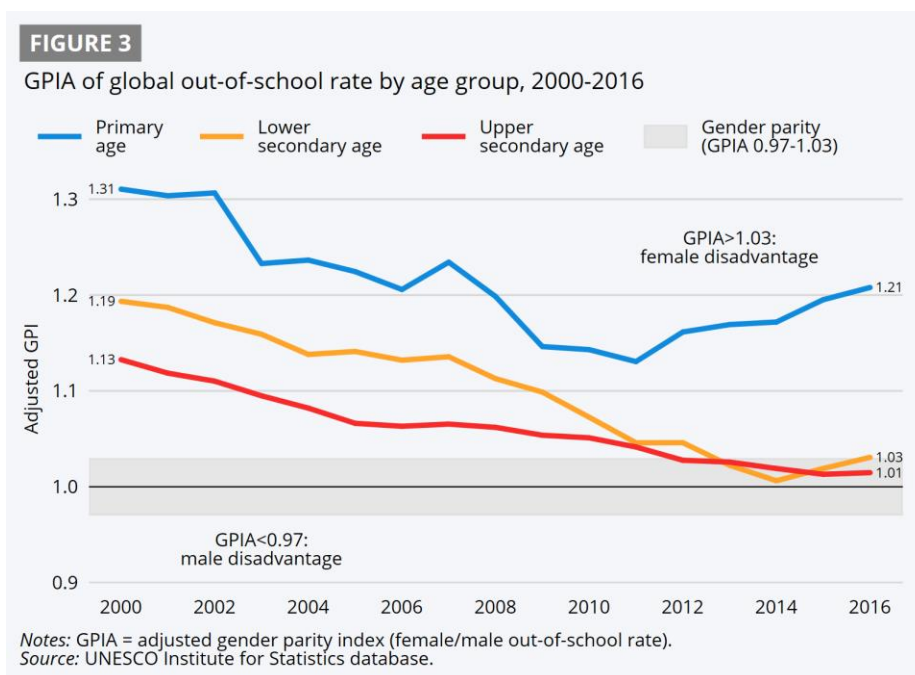*Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database.*

The world is moving towards gender parity in out-of-school rates, although inequalities persist at regional and country levels

The decline in out-of-school rates and numbers over the past one and a half decades occurred with a reduction in gender disparity at the global level. Historically, girls and young women were more likely to be excluded from education. However globally, the male and female out-of-school rates for the lower secondary and upper secondary school-age populations are now nearly identical, while the gender gap among children of primary school age dropped from more than five percentage points in 2000 to two percentage points in 2016.

The trend in gender parity can also be seen in the values of the adjusted gender parity index (GPIA) of the out-of-school rate in **Figure 3**, a new indicator developed by the UIS and published for the first time in 2017 (UIS and GEMR, 2017). The adjusted GPI of the global primary out-of-school rate fell from 1.31 in 2000 to a low of 1.13 in 2011, but in recent years, there was a small uptick. This was due to the continued decline of the male out-of-school rate combined with a small increase in the female out-of-school rate. This means that, globally, girls of primary school age are still more likely to be out of school compared to boys.

In contrast, the most recent values of the adjusted GPI for the lower secondary and upper secondary out-of-school rates are in the gender parity range between 0.97 and 1.03, meaning that males and females in these age groups have the same probability of being out of school.

It is important to note that global averages mask disparities at regional and country levels, which are discussed below. In many countries, girls of all ages face considerable barriers to education (see the UIS global education database).

FIGURE 3

GPIA of global out-of-school rate by age group, 2000-2016

Notes: GPIA = adjusted gender parity index (female/male out-of-school rate).
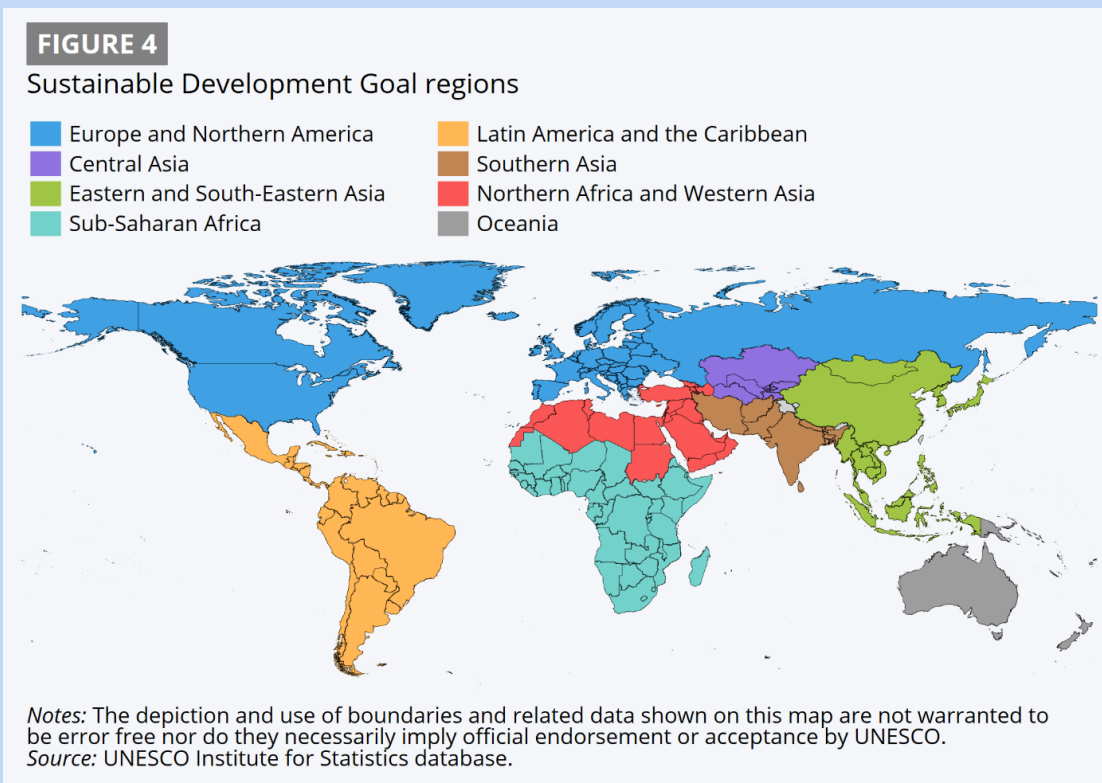Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database.

Regional out-of-school figures

The global out-of-school figures hide large regional differences. This section presents data for the regions used to monitor the SDGs *(see **Box 2**).*

> **Box 2. SDG regions**
>
> For SDG monitoring, the world's countries are grouped by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) into a set of geographical regions that are also used by the UIS for its reporting. However, for one SDG region, Central and Southern Asia, the UIS reports data for two sub-regions, Central Asia and Southern Asia, because they are very different with regard to their respective patterns of exclusion from education. The regions used in this fact sheet are displayed in **Figure 4**.
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>
>
> **FIGURE 4**
> Sustainable Development Goal regions
>
> - Europe and Northern America
> - Central Asia
> - Eastern and South-Eastern Asia
> - Sub-Saharan Africa
> - Latin America and the Caribbean
> - Southern Asia
> - Northern Africa and Western Asia
> - Oceania
>
> *Notes:* The depiction and use of boundaries and related data shown on this map are not warranted to be error free nor do they necessarily imply official endorsement or acceptance by UNESCO.
> *Source:* UNESCO Institute for Statistics database.

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest out-of-school rates

As in previous years, sub-Saharan Africa remains the region with the highest out-of-school rates for all age groups *(see Table 1 and **Figure 5**).* Of the 63 million out-of-school children of primary school age, 34 million, or more than one-half, live in sub-Saharan Africa. Southern Asia has the second-highest number of out-of-school children with 10 million. Sub-Saharan Africa also has the highest rate of exclusion, with 21% of primary
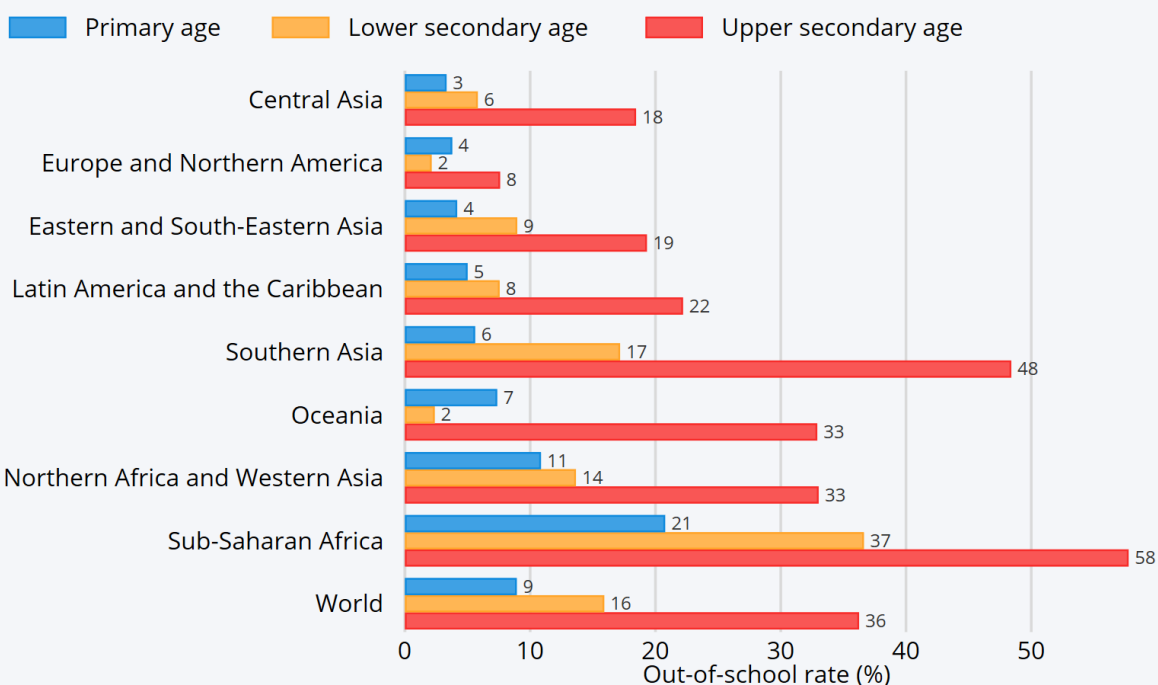
school-age children denied the right to education, followed by Northern Africa and Western Asia (11%) and Oceania (7%).

The global lower secondary out-of-school rate (16%) is nearly twice as high as the primary out-of-school rate, but because it is calculated for a smaller age cohort, the global number of out-of-school adolescents (61 million) is only slightly lower than the number of primary school-age out-of-school children. Three regions are home to nearly nine out of ten out-of-school adolescents: sub-Saharan Africa (27 million), Southern Asia (18 million) and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (8 million). Sub-Saharan Africa is also the region with the highest rate of out-of-school adolescents (37%), followed by Southern Asia (17%), and Northern Africa and Western Asia (14%).

In all regions, out-of-school rates and numbers are far higher among youth of upper secondary school age than among younger cohorts. In total, 139 million upper secondary school-age youth were not in school in 2016, 14 million more than the combined number of out-of-school children and adolescents of primary and lower secondary school age. The largest proportion, 67 million, live in Southern Asia, a further 36 million in sub-Saharan Africa, and 16 million in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia. More than one-half of all youth are out of school in sub-Saharan Africa (58%) and nearly half of all youth in Southern Asia (48%).

FIGURE 5

Out-of-school rate by region and age group, 2016

Legend: Primary age | Lower secondary age | Upper secondary age

Central Asia — 3, 6, 18
Europe and Northern America — 4, 2, 8
Eastern and South-Eastern Asia — 4, 9, 19
Latin America and the Caribbean — 5, 8, 22
Southern Asia — 6, 17, 48
Oceania — 7, 2, 33
Northern Africa and Western Asia — 11, 14, 33
Sub-Saharan Africa — 21, 37, 58
World — 9, 16, 36

Out-of-school rate (%)

Notes: Regions are sorted by the primary out-of-school rate.
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database.

Gender disparities persist at the regional level

In 2000, 54% of the 378 million out-of-school children, adolescents and youth were female. By 2016, the female share of the global out-of-school population had fallen to 50%. However, these global averages mask considerable differences at regional and national levels.

Primary school-age girls face a disadvantage in most regions, with the exception of Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe and Northern America, where boys are more likely to be out of school *(see Table 1).* The widest gender disparities at the primary level are observed in Central Asia, with an adjusted GPI of 1.27, although this is an artifact of very low out-of-school rates at which GPI values tend to take on extreme values. No region has achieved gender parity among children of primary school age.

For lower secondary out-of-school rates, the widest gender disparity is observed in Northern Africa and Western Asia, where there are 132 female adolescents out of school for every 100 male adolescents not in school (adjusted GPI of 1.32).

Girls of every school-age group are more likely to be excluded from education than boys across sub-Saharan Africa. For every 100 boys of primary school age out of school there are 123 girls denied the right to education. Data suggest that girls who are able to start school tend to pursue their studies. While the gender disparities persist, the adjusted GPI falls slightly from 1.23 for the primary school-age group to 1.11 for lower secondary and upper secondary school-age populations.

Among regions where male adolescents are more likely to be out of school, Europe and Northern America has the widest gender gap with an adjusted GPI of 0.81. Similar to Central Asia, this GPI value can be explained by very low out-of-school rates in the region. As among children of primary school age, no region has achieved gender parity, but Oceania and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (adjusted GPI 0.92) are closest to parity for the lower secondary school-age group.

Among upper secondary school-age youth, the largest disparities in favour of females are observed in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (adjusted GPI 0.66) and Oceania (adjusted GPI 0.73). Southern Asia (adjusted GPI 1.05) and Latin America and the Caribbean (adjusted GPI 0.94) are close to gender parity.

National out-of-school figures

The countries with the highest out-of-school rates are in Africa

Turning to national data, the map in **Figure 6** shows that more than one out of five children of primary school age is out of school in several countries of sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa, Western Asia, and Southern Asia. The countries with the highest out-of-school rates include South Sudan (68%), Liberia (62%), Eritrea (57%), Equatorial Guinea (56%), Sudan (44%), and Djibouti (41%).

FIGURE 6

Primary out-of-school rate, 2016 or latest year

| 0% - <5% | 5% - <10% | 10% - <20% | 20% - <40% | 40% or more | No data |
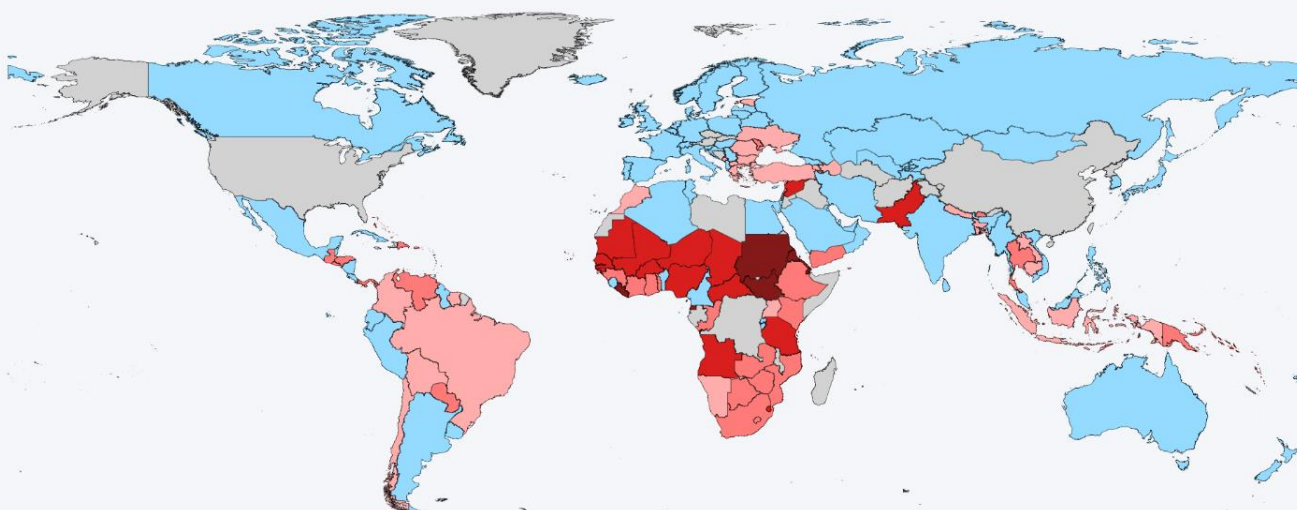
Note: The depiction and use of boundaries and related data shown on this map are not warranted to be error free nor do they necessarily imply official endorsement or acceptance by UNESCO.
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database.

The countries with the highest out-of-school rates also tend to be among the poorest countries in the world. The World Bank assigns countries to four groups according to their gross national income (GNI) per capita (World Bank, 2018). In low-income countries, out-of-school rates are systematically higher than in lower-middle-, upper-middle- and high-income countries *(see **Figure 7** and **Table 2**).* The primary out-of-school rate is 20% in low-income countries and 3% in high-income countries. The lower secondary out-of-school rate is 38% and 2%, respectively, and the upper secondary out-of-school rate is 59% and 6%, respectively. As a group, low-income countries combined have higher out-of-school rates than all individual SDG regions, except for sub-Saharan Africa, which has a marginally higher primary out-of-school rate.

Poverty levels are also closely linked to gender disparities in education. A comparison of male and female out-of-school rates shows that in low-income countries females are more likely to be out of school than males, while the opposite can be observed in high-income countries *(see Table 2).* This is especially true for youth of upper secondary school age, where female out-of-school rates are higher in low-income and lower-middle-income countries, while male out-of-school rates are higher in upper-middle-income and high-income countries.

## Table 2. Out-of-school rates and numbers by country income level, 2016

Out-of-school children of primary school age							
Region	Out-of-school rate (%)				Out-of-school number (millions)		
	Both sexes	Male	Female	GPIA	Both sexes	Male	Female
Low-income countries	20.3	17.9	22.9	1.22	21.9	9.7	12.2
Lower-middle-income countries	9.4	8.2	10.7	1.23	31.0	14.0	17.0
Upper-middle-income countries	4.0	3.8	4.2	1.11	7.9	3.9	4.0
High-income countries	3.5	3.8	3.1	0.83	2.6	1.5	1.2
World	8.9	7.9	10.0	1.21	63.3	29.1	34.3
Out-of-school adolescents of lower secondary school age							
Region	Out-of-school rate (%)				Out-of-school number (millions)		
	Both sexes	Male	Female	GPIA	Both sexes	Male	Female
Low-income countries	38.1	34.8	41.4	1.16	19.7	9.1	10.7
Lower-middle-income countries	18.2	18.9	17.4	0.92	32.7	17.6	15.1
Upper-middle-income countries	7.2	6.9	7.5	1.08	7.9	4.0	3.9
High-income countries	1.7	1.9	1.5	0.76	0.7	0.4	0.3
World	15.9	15.7	16.2	1.03	61.1	31.1	30.0
Out-of-school youth of upper secondary school age							
Region	Out-of-school rate (%)				Out-of-school number (millions)		
	Both sexes	Male	Female	GPIA	Both sexes	Male	Female
Low-income countries	59.2	55.6	62.9	1.12	24.1	11.4	12.7
Lower-middle-income countries	46.0	44.9	47.1	1.05	91.2	46.2	45.0
Upper-middle-income countries	20.3	22.8	17.6	0.77	20.6	12.0	8.5
High-income countries	6.4	7.0	5.8	0.83	2.7	1.5	1.2
World	36.3	36.0	36.5	1.01	138.5	71.1	67.4
Out-of-school children, adolescents and youth of primary, lower secondary and upper secondary age							
Region	Out-of-school rate (%)				Out-of-school number (millions)		
	Both sexes	Male	Female	GPIA	Both sexes	Male	Female
Low-income countries	32.8	29.9	35.8	1.16	65.7	30.2	35.5
Lower-middle-income countries	21.9	21.3	22.6	1.06	154.9	77.9	77.0
Upper-middle-income countries	8.9	9.3	8.4	0.91	36.4	19.9	16.5
High-income countries	3.8	4.1	3.4	0.83	6.0	3.4	2.6
World	17.8	17.2	18.5	1.07	263.0	131.3	131.7

Notes: GPIA = adjusted gender parity index (female/male out-of-school rate).
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database.

FIGURE 7

Out-of-school rate by income level and age group, 2016

Primary age   Lower secondary age   Upper secondary age
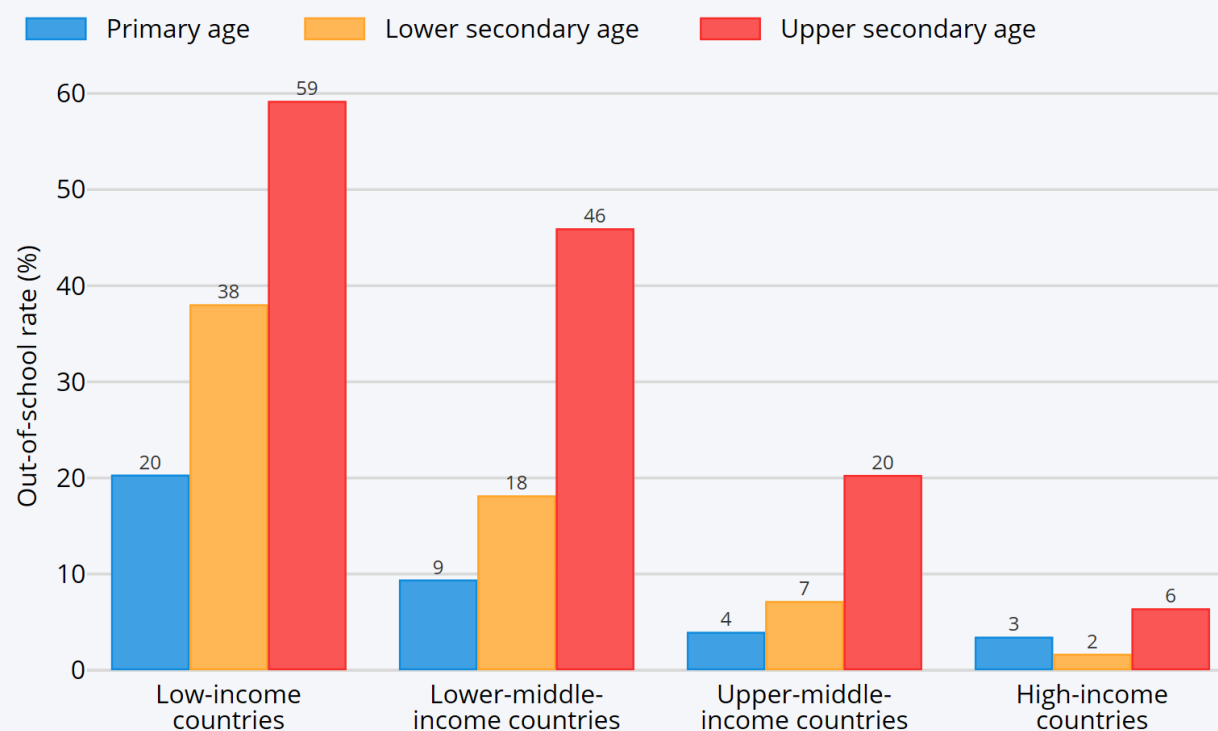
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database.

The large number of children, adolescents and youth not in school is one reason for the global learning crisis. The UIS estimates that more than 617 million – or six out of ten – children and adolescents of primary and lower secondary school age do not achieve minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics (UIS, 2017). Many of these children never attended school or dropped out early, while others are in school but do not learn the basics.

As with the out-of-school population, the large majority of those who do not achieve minimum proficiency levels live in poorer countries. More than 80% of the 617 million children and adolescents who are not learning enough to meet minimum proficiency levels come from low- and lower-middle-income countries, although these countries are home to only 60% of the global school-age population.

Time is already running out

The international development community has just 12 years to provide high-quality and equitable education. The data in this paper show that a business-as-usual approach will not bring us close to achieving universal

primary and secondary education by 2030. There is an urgent need for greater investment in education at the global, regional and national levels, including more resources for data collection and analysis.

As the official source of SDG 4 data, the UIS is producing the indicators and developing the methodological tools to help countries and development partners better target policies and resources. However, the most sophisticated indicators and methodologies will amount to little if countries are unable to collect the data. The calls for greater investment in SDG 4 must include support to help countries leverage their data to get every child in school and learning.

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