

Eight in ten children learned little or nothing during school closures while violence at home doubled, survey finds

Save the Children estimate that Covid has triggered the largest education emergency in history and is widening the gap between rich and poor

By Georgina Hayes 10 September 2020 • 3:09pm



It is feared that ten million children may never return to school Credit: Sami M Jassar/Save the Children

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a “devastating” impact on the education of children from poorer backgrounds, a new global survey has found, with eight in ten children surveyed saying they have learned little or nothing while schools have been closed.

Meanwhile violence at home doubled, with the reported rate at 17 per cent compared to eight per cent when the child was attending school in person.

The pandemic is also “widening the gap between rich and poor” according to Save the Children, the charity which conducted the 25,000 strong survey of children and caregivers across 37 countries.

During the six months since the pandemic was announced, the most vulnerable children have “disproportionately” missed out on access to education, healthcare and food, and suffered a significant increase in violence at home.

Two thirds of children have had no contact with teachers at all during lockdown, while less than one per cent of poorer students interviewed had internet access for distance learning. Among households that classified themselves as non-poor, this figure was still just nineteen per cent.

As such, Save the Children estimate that the Covid-19 pandemic has triggered the largest education emergency in history, with children who fall behind in education at greater risk of dropping out completely or falling victim to child labour and child marriage.



Aiman*, who has brain atrophy, dreams of being a pharmacist and president of Yemen when he grows up, and is tired of staying at home for fear of getting infected Credit: Sami M Jassar/Save the Children

There are concerns that in some countries, the hidden impacts of the pandemic may now outweigh the risks posed by the virus itself.

“Unless urgent action is taken now the long-term legacy of this crisis will be the huge numbers of children whose learning will be disrupted or cut short completely. We estimate that ten million children may never return to school following this pandemic as a result of rising poverty,” Rachael Sweet, Save the Children’s head of UK influencing, told the Telegraph.

“In Uganda for example, schools have been shut since March, affecting fifteen million children of which 600,000 are refugees. In some districts teenage pregnancy has doubled and calls to the national child helpline has increased by 70 per cent. Yet the number of cases of Covid are low.

“These impacts on children’s lives, safety and wellbeing by keeping schools closed may now outweigh any potential public health risks of reopening them.”



Due to Covid, Almaz* had to quit her job and her husband's salary is not enough to cater for their needs. The family is food insecure and has been supported by Save the Children with cash and free health services Credit: Seifu Asseged/Save the Children

Priscovia, 17, from Zambia, said: “We ask for governments to spend more money to make sure that we can continue learning while at home by providing radios, TVs and internet learning. They must make sure that children in rural areas and from poor families also get to learn. We want to see mobile libraries passing in our communities delivering books for us to learn.”

The survey also found that more than three in four households had reported an income loss since the beginning of the pandemic, with poorer families more likely to see their incomes hit (82 per cent) than non-poor (70 per cent).

This loss of income had a knock-on effect on family healthcare, the charity found, with nine in ten households that lost over half their income reporting difficulties in accessing health services. Almost two-thirds of households (62 per cent) also found it difficult to provide their families with nutritious food.

Girls are also more heavily impacted by the pandemic than boys: 20 per cent of girls said they had learned nothing during school closures, compared with 10 per cent of boys. Worse still, it is estimated that the pandemic could cause thirteen million additional child marriages by 2030, and disruptions to health services could lead to a loss of access to contraception for 47 million women.

“A 16 year old girl in the Democratic Republic of Congo told us how following the closure of the market due to lockdown measures girls from families who can’t feed themselves are forced to turn to older men for support,” said Ms Sweet.

“Young women and girls are likely to suffer disproportionately from the crisis. Many have weaker safety nets to start with,” she added.

“The crisis might exacerbate existing inequalities, jeopardising or reversing hard-won gains towards gender equality. On a final sombre note, women and girls face specific challenges – such as gender-based violence (GBV), child marriage, and teenage pregnancy. All of these are proven to rise during and in the aftermath of pandemics, with devastating effects for women and especially for adolescent girls.”

Save the Children say the results of the survey show that now is a “critical” moment for the UK’s new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to start “delivering on its aim to be a force for good in the world”, and the UK Government must use its leadership to “bring world leaders together and make an urgent plan to get girls and boys back into education”.

“We must continue to prioritise child survival and make sure children have access to essential health services, free at the point of use,” Ms Sweet told the Telegraph.

“When vaccines and treatments for Covid-19 become available, they must be accessible to everyone irrespective of their ability to pay and where they live. To make sure children grow up to fulfil their potential, the UK Government should lead the way in making a plan to get girls and boys across the world back into education.

“The world’s poorest countries need help from the IMF and World Bank to invest in their health systems and protect the most vulnerable children who are being hardest hit by the economic fallout, for example through cash transfers and social protection.”

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