

HOW MANY STUDENTS DO CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS SERVE GLOBALLY?



Analytics series

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KEY MESSAGES:

- The Catholic Church estimates that in 2018, 61.7 million students were enrolled in its pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools, with an additional 6.5 million students enrolled in higher education.
- Since there are twice as many Christians as Catholics, if other denominations had the same education footprint, there might be twice as many students enrolled in Christian schools and universities. The actual number is however likely smaller. This note suggests that Christian schools and universities may serve about 100 million students globally. This is not a precise estimate, just an order of magnitude.

Introduction

As of 2018, the Catholic Church estimated that 68.2 million students were enrolled in its schools and universities globally (Secretaria Status, 2020). While such estimates are available annually from the statistical yearbooks published by the Catholic Church, similar data are not available globally for other Christian denominations, nor are they available for other faiths with a large number of adherents such as Islam. This makes it difficult to assess the total number of students in Christian or faith-based schools and universities globally.

However, tentative estimates can be suggested at last for Christian schools and universities. After Catholics, Protestants are the second largest group of Christians globally. The leadership of GPENreformation, an organization that federates schools affiliated with some of the Protestant denominations, suggests that there may be 25 million students enrolled in Protestant schools globally, including 10.5 million enrolled in schools that belong to the GPENreformation network. Given that other Christian denominations do not have the same tradition in building schools and universities, this would suggest that Christian schools and universities therefore may serve about 100 million students globally. This note documents the rationale for this (admittedly very rough) estimate.

Box 1: Knowledge Notes

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Which topics are covered in the Knowledge Notes Series? The series explores achievements and challenges for Catholic schools globally, including in terms of enrollment, reach to the poor, academic performance, parental priorities, costs and affordability, and religious education. Interesting innovations are also featured.

What is the focus of this note? The note provides a very rough estimate of global enrollment in Christian schools and universities. The estimate, at 100 million students, is not meant to be precise. It only represents a rough order of magnitude. Additional data collection would be needed to provide a more detailed estimate.

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Background

As noted in a joint contribution by OIEC (International Office of Catholic Education) and GPENreformation (Global Pedagogical Network - Joining in Reformation) to the UNESCO Futures of Education Commission, Christian schools share a common vision (Barber et al., 2020). Operating within a pluralistic and globalized world, and welcoming students from all backgrounds – including all faith affiliations, Christian schools and universities hold dear a common set of values. These values include providing quality of education and care for students; striving for equity in access to education; emphasizing social justice and a preferential option for the poor; educating towards human rights and environmental sustainability or care for the common home; and opening students' minds to spirituality and a global dimension.

While Christian schools and universities educate a large number of students, they are often ignored in public debates on education, whether these debates take place at the national, regional, or global levels. As the saying goes, if you are not at the table, you may be on the menu. In a context where some civil society organizations argue that no support at all should be provided by states or the international community to any type of private schools, including Christian schools, documenting the role played by Christian and more generally faith-based schools and their contributions to communities and societies is important. One of their most basic contributions is simply to educate students – and indeed a large number of students. Yet how many students exactly are enrolled in Catholic schools and universities remains unclear.

In a joint contribution to the UNESCO Futures of Education Commission, OIEC and GPENreformation suggest that Christian institutions may serve 100 million students globally. This note was drafted as a background piece for that joint contribution to explain the rationale for this estimate of global enrollment in Christian schools.

In their joint contribution to the UNESCO Futures of Education Commission mentioned above, Barber et al. (2020) suggested that from preschools to universities, Christian institutions might serve 100 million students globally. This note was drafted as a background piece for the joint OIEC-GPENreformation contribution in order to explain the rationale for this admittedly rough estimate of global enrollment in Christian schools globally. This estimate is not meant to be precise, but rather to provide an order of magnitude.

The note is structured as follows. The next section provides a very simple framework for the analysis. Next, estimates of Christian populations globally and for the countries with the largest such populations are provided. Thereafter, estimates of enrollment in Catholic schools

and universities are provided based on data from the latest available statistical yearbook of the Church. The next section provides tentative estimates of enrollment in all Christian schools and universities. The analysis remains on purpose at a fairly general level as it is only meant to be indicative. Country case studies on the extent of enrollment in Christian schools will be provided separately in this note series based on available data.

Framework

Estimating the total number of students in Christian schools and universities is somewhat of a guesswork given the lack of detailed statistics on enrollment in non-Catholic Christian schools and universities. Still, an order of magnitude can be suggested based on simple assumptions that can then be corroborated separately, albeit imperfectly, with case studies for a small group of countries where more detailed data may be available.

Starting with Catholic institutions for which data are more readily available, denote the number of students in Catholic schools and universities by S_{CA} and the number of Catholics by P_{CA} . An implicit parameter capturing investments in Catholic schools and universities in proportion to the population can be defined as I_{CA} , with $I_{CA} = S_{CA}/P_{CA}$. This parameter will prove useful to intuitively compare Catholic education networks with other Christian networks. Specifically, in the absence of detailed global data on enrollment in other Christian schools, in order to suggest an estimate for the number of students enrolled in non-Catholic Christian schools, two estimates would be needed: the number of non-Catholic Christians globally, denoted by P_{CR} and the corresponding investment parameter I_{CR} for non-Catholic Christian schools and universities. If estimates of these two variables were available, then we would have $S_{CR} = P_{CR} \times I_{CR}$ and the overall number of students in Christian schools and universities globally would simply be $S_C = S_{CA} + S_{CR}$.

As will be discussed below, estimating the number of non-Catholic Christians globally (P_{CR}) is easy, at least to get approximate values. However, estimating the parameter capturing investments in schools and universities (I_{CR}) by non-Catholic Christian populations is not straightforward. What seems clear is that historically, non-Catholic denominations have probably not invested as much as Catholics in building networks of schools and universities. This would suggest that $I_{CR} < I_{CA}$, but the key question is to assess how large the differences in these investments parameters and thereby enrollment may be.

Estimates of Christian Populations

The annual statistical yearbook of the Catholic Church provides estimates of the number of Catholics by country, regionally, and globally. In the 2020 edition of the yearbook which provides data for 2018, the Church

estimates that there were 1.3 billion Catholics globally. The estimates by region are 243 million for Africa, 642 million for the Americas, 147 million for Asia, 286 million for Europe, and 11 million for Oceania (Secretaria Status, 2020). These estimates are based on the number of baptisms. To the extent that some children may be baptized but may not remain Catholics as adults, they probably represent an upper bound of the number of Catholics regionally as well as globally.

Projections by the Pew Research Center based on analysis of a wide range of census and survey data put the total number of Christians globally at 2,383 million in 2020 versus 2,168 million in 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2015). The implicit annual growth rate in the number of Christians globally is 0.94 percent per year over the last decade. Applying this annual growth rate to Catholics would generate a number of Catholics (as measured through baptisms) in 2020 of about 1,354 million in 2020 from the base estimate for 2018 in the statistical yearbook of the Church. In that case, given the overall estimate of the number of Christians from the Pew Research Center, the number of non-Catholic Christians would be at about 1,029 millions. This might be considered too low in comparison to commonly cited estimates, probably due to the fact that as mentioned above, relying on baptism may overestimate the number of adherents of Catholicism in comparison to survey and census data based on self-declared affiliations.

Under reasonable assumptions, of a projected total of 2,383 million Christians globally in 2020, there could be 1,194 million Catholics, 284 million Orthodox Christians, 874 million Protestants and 31 million other Christians.

To estimate the number of Catholics in 2020, it seems therefore better to rely on estimates of the share of different denominations within Christianity obtained by the Pew Research Center in its landmark study on the global religious landscape (Pew Research Center, 2012). In that study, 50.1 percent of all Christians were Catholics, versus 36.7 percent who were Protestants, 11.9 percent who were Orthodox Christians, and 1.3 percent who belonged to other Christian denominations. Assuming that these proportions did not change too much over the last decade, of a total of 2,383 million Christians projected in 2020, there would then be 1,194 million Catholics, 284 million Orthodox Christians, 874 million Protestants and 31 million other Christians globally¹. Note that these values are slightly below estimates commonly cited. For example, it is often said that there are more than 900

¹ Because the Orthodox Christian population has been declining while the number of Catholics, Protestants, and other Christians has been growing, these estimates may be slightly too high for Orthodox Christians, and too low for other groups, but this will not make much difference in estimates of enrollment in Christians schools and universities.

million Protestants globally. But as is the case for Catholics, this is likely due to a drop in faith affiliations between the time of baptism and adulthood.

Which are the countries with the largest number of Christians? To answer this question, Table 1 which provides estimates of Catholic and other Christian populations in the top 15 countries. The estimates for Christian populations are from the Pew Research Center (values for 2020 based on projections). For the Catholic populations, two estimates are provided. The first estimate is from the latest available statistical yearbook of the Catholic Church (2018 data based on baptisms). The second estimate is scaled to take into account the fact that as already mentioned, some children who were baptized may not consider themselves Catholics in adulthood. As per the discussion above, in 2020, the projected number of Catholics according to baptisms is 1,354 million, while the projected number based on data from the Pew Research Center would be 1,194 million. The total estimate based on baptisms in 2018 is 1,329 million. Therefore the estimates in the third column of Table 1 have been scaled back by a factor equal to $1,194/1,329$. For simplicity, across all countries estimates have been scaled back uniformly even though it is clear that the rate of disaffection from the faith in adulthood may differ between countries.

Subtracting the (scaled) number of Catholics in 2020 from the estimate of Christians provides an order of magnitude for the number of non-Catholic Christians. Note that in Table 1, the first country in terms of the size of its non-Catholic Christian population is the United States where there are more Protestants than Catholics. In that country, lack of funding from governments (at the federal, state, and local levels) has led to smaller sizes for networks of Protestant as well as Catholic schools than is observed in many other majority Christian countries of a similar level of development. This will matter for the estimates of global enrollment in Christian schools and universities.

Note also that the second country with the largest non-Catholic Christian population is Russia. Here again, the networks of Christian schools are small, but for a different reason. Under communist rule, government regulations almost prevented the establishment of (Orthodox) Christian schools. As will be discussed below, given such contexts as well as due to historical factors, one would expect the levels of enrollment in non-Catholic Christian schools and universities to be on average lower in comparison to the respective populations affiliated with these denomination than is the case for Catholics.

Table 1: Catholic and Other Christian Populations
(Millions, 2020)

	Christians (2020)	Catholics (baptism, 2018)	Catholics (scaled, 2020)	Difference (2020)
United States	252.9	73.7	66.2	186.6
Brazil	185.4	175.6	157.8	27.6
Mexico	118.6	114.4	102.8	15.8
Philippines	102.3	87.8	78.8	23.5
Russia	101.9	0.3	0.3	101.6
Nigeria	96.1	30.6	27.5	68.6
DR Congo	81.5	47.2	42.4	39.1
China	72.4	-	-	72.4
Ethiopia	62.6	0.9	0.8	61.8
Germany	53.2	24.0	21.6	31.6
Italy	48.7	57.9	52.0	-3.3
Colombia	48.2	46.6	41.9	6.2
Kenya	44.5	15.9	14.3	30.1
South Africa	43.5	3.9	3.5	40.0
Uganda	39.4	18.7	16.8	22.6
15 countries	1,351.2	697.6	626.8	724.4

Source: Compiled by the author.

Note: in the absence of data on Catholics in China in the statistical yearbook of the Church, all Christians are assumed to belong in the above table to other denominations, but in practice some of them are likely to be Catholics.

Enrollment in Catholic Schools and Universities

This section documents levels of enrollment in Catholic schools and universities based on data available at the country, regional, and global levels in the annual statistical yearbooks of the Church. The latest edition of the yearbook at the time of writing was published in 2020 with data for 2018. Statistics on enrollment are collected through a questionnaire sent to the chancery offices of ecclesiastical jurisdictions worldwide. The data are self-reported and may not always be fully accurate, especially in contexts where local conditions are not favorable to data collection. In addition, not all ecclesiastical jurisdictions are able to fill the questionnaire every year. Each year a small number of the more than 3,000 jurisdictions that should fill the questionnaire are not able to do it. Yet these jurisdictions tend to be small, so that the missing data as well as other potential inaccuracies should not affect the validity of the data substantially for most countries and at the regional and global levels.

Trends in enrollment in Catholic K12 schools as well as higher education are provided in two separate notes in this series as well as in Wodon (2018a, 2018b, 2020a). Here, only estimates for 2018 are provided. The estimates for K12 schools are provided in Table 2. Globally, the Catholic Church estimates that 35.0 million children were enrolled in Catholic primary schools in 2018, with 19.3 million children enrolled in Catholic secondary schools and 7.4 million children enrolled at the preschool level.

Enrollment in K12 education more than doubled between 1975 and 2018, from 29.1 million to 61.7 million students.

Most of the growth was in Africa, and within that region, in sub-Saharan Africa. This is not surprising, given that the continent has a high rate of population growth. In addition, thanks to efforts to achieve education for all, enrollment rates have risen substantially over time. Globally, primary schools account for 56.7 percent of K12 enrollment in Catholic schools in 2018, versus 31.3 percent for secondary schools, and 12.0 percent for preschools. In Africa however, primary schools account for 71.3 percent of total enrollment, while in Europe, they account for only 36.0 percent of K12 enrollment. India has the largest enrollment in K12 Catholic schools, followed by four sub-Saharan African countries: the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Kenya, and Malawi. Together, the top 15 countries in terms of enrollment size account for about two thirds of global enrollment in K12 Catholic schools.

Table 2: Enrollment in K12 Catholic Schools
(Thousands, 2018)

	Preschool	Primary	Secondary	Total
Africa	2,327.0	19,365.1	5,462.8	27,154.8
Americas	1,235.3	6,143.7	3,684.0	11,063.0
Asia	1,846.2	5,608.8	5,993.4	13,448.3
Europe	1,890.0	3,126.7	3,657.7	8,674.5
Oceania	78.3	767.7	509.6	1,355.5
World	7,376.9	35,012.0	19,307.3	61,696.2

Source: Statistical yearbook of the Church, 2020 edition.

Globally, the Catholic Church estimates that 35.0 million children were enrolled in its primary schools in 2018, with 19.3 million children enrolled in its secondary schools and 7.4 million children enrolled at the preschool level. The Catholic Church also estimates that it provided post-secondary education to 6.5 million students.

As shown in Table 3, the Catholic Church also estimates that it provided post-secondary education to 6.5 million students globally in 2018. This includes 2.3 million students in non-university higher institutes, 0.5 million students in ecclesiastical studies at the university level, and 3.7 million students in other types of university studies. As for K12 education, enrollment in Catholic higher education more than doubled globally between 1975 and 2018, from 2.5 million students to 6.5 million. While for K12 education most of the growth in absolute terms was in Africa, for tertiary education most of the growth took place in the Americas, Asia, and Europe.

However, in proportionate terms from the base, the highest growth rates in enrollment are observed in Africa. Globally, students in universities account for most of the enrollment. Yet in India and thereby in Asia, there are more students enrolled in higher institutes. Globally, the shares of students enrolled in higher institutes and universities did not fundamentally change over the last four decades despite ups and downs. But among university students, there has been a rise in the share of students enrolled in ecclesiastical studies especially in

Africa, the Americas, and Asia. Together, the top 15 countries in terms of total enrollment account for four fifths of global enrollment. Enrollment in higher education remains concentrated in high and middle income countries. The country with the largest enrollment is the United States, followed by three large middle income countries: India, the Philippines, and Brazil. Italy is next, probably in part because of the special role of Rome in terms of a concentration of Catholic institutions.

Table 3: Enrollment in Catholic Higher Education
(Thousands, 2018)

	Higher Institutes	Universities Ec. Studies	Universities Other Studies	Total
Africa	137.2	49.6	177.5	364.3
Americas	591.9	233.1	2,187.0	3,012.0
Asia	1,205.6	129.3	518.2	1,853.0
Europe	308.5	89.2	788.0	1,185.6
Oceania	8.6	6.7	36.9	52.2
World	2,251.6	507.9	3,707.6	6,467.1

Source: Statistical yearbook of the Church, 2020 edition.

Enrollment in All Christian Schools and Universities

Using the information provided so far, this section pulls together the various data points to suggest why an estimate of about 100 million children enrolled in Christian schools may be an appropriate order of magnitude. Recall the simple framework mentioned earlier. If enrollment in Catholic schools and universities is denoted by S_{CA} and the number of Catholics by P_{CA} , an implicit parameter capturing investments in Catholic schools and universities in proportion to the population is defined as I_{CA} , with $I_{CA} = S_{CA}/P_{CA}$. Based on the estimates provided so far of total enrollment in schools and universities ($S_{CA} = 68.2$ million) and the Catholic population globally ($P_{CA} = 1,194$ million), the parameter for investments in schools and universities is 5.7 percent ($5.7=68.2/1,194$). Note that this assumes no changes in Catholic enrollment in 2020 versus 2018, which is realistic due to the potential impact of the COVID-19 crisis which may have led to school closures (on the potential impact of the crisis on Catholic schools, see Wodon, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d).

The same logic can be applied to other denominations. Consider first Protestant denominations. As mentioned in the introduction, the leadership of GPENreformation suggests that based on data they have for a few key countries², a total of about 25 million students may be enrolled in Protestant schools globally, including 10.5 million enrolled in schools that belong to the GPENreformation network. Based on the estimate of 874 million Protestants globally provided above, the investment in schools and universities parameter for Protestant schools would be estimated at 2.9 percent ($2.9=25.0/874$), which is half the value for Catholics.

² Country estimates were not available for this note as they were still being checked and gathered by GPENreformation.

Does this estimate of the investment parameter for Protestant denominations seem reasonable? While a precise value would require more detailed data on enrollment in Protestant schools than is currently available, the parameter does not seem unrealistic for two main reasons. Firstly, historically, while Protestants have been active for centuries in setting schools and universities globally, it seems fair to say that they have not done so to the same extent as Catholics have. Secondly, in comparison with Catholics, a larger share of Protestants live in countries where setting up large networks of faith-inspired schools and universities has been difficult due to lack of support from the state to do so. As mentioned earlier, in the United States in particular, federal and state-level support for faith-based schools is almost non-existent. This has led to smaller market shares for both Catholic and Protestant networks of schools, but in our framework, it affects the global investment parameter for Protestants more than it does for Catholics because a larger share of all Protestants globally live in the United States than is the case for Catholics. In other words, geographic patterns in faith affiliations combined with regulatory frameworks related to public funding (or the lack thereof) for faith-based schools contributes to a lower investment parameter for Protestants than for Catholics in our simple framework.

The fact that as a whole, Protestant denominations may have smaller investment profile in schools and universities than has been the case for Catholics does not mean that this applies to all individual denominations. For example, the Seventh-day Adventist World Church is one of the fastest growing Protestant churches and is also very active in development work including in Africa among other through the Adventist Development and Relief Agency. The Church states that it had by the end of 2018 a total of 21.4 million members³. As part of its education ministry, it operated globally 6,106 primary schools and 2,549 secondary schools with global enrollment of 1,130,026 and 576,456 students, respectively. The Church also operated 118 tertiary institutions with an enrollment of 167,739 students. This yields a combined enrollment for all three levels of education of 1.9 million students. Comparing this figure with the membership of the Church yields an investment parameter of 8.8 percent ($8.8=1.9/21.4$), which is much higher than the estimate for all Protestants, but also higher than that for Catholics.

What might be the corresponding investment parameter for other Christian denominations, and especially for Orthodox Christians given that they account for most of the Christians who are neither (Roman) Catholics nor Protestants? According to the Pew Research Center, most Orthodox Christians live in Europe, although Ethiopia also has a large number of adherents (about 36

³ See <https://www.adventist.org/articles/seventh-day-adventist-world-church-statistics-2018/>.

million in 2010). Within Europe, most Orthodox Christians live in countries that were for many years under communist rule. This includes Russia which has by far the largest number of adherents (101 million in 2010). Levels of religiosity have tended to be low among many Orthodox Christians, and their ability to set up schools for their children was curtailed by their governments. For this reason, it is likely that the parameter for investments in schools and universities among those groups has been much smaller than for Protestants or Catholics.

For the sake of the argument, assume that the investment parameter for schools and universities is indeed much lower for Orthodox Christians, at 0.50 percent. Finally, for other Christians, assume that the parameter is more in line with that for Protestants, at 2.50 percent. In that case, as shown in Table 4, the estimate of enrollment in Christian schools globally would be at about 95.4 million students, just shy of the value of 100 million mentioned in the joint OIEC-GPENreformation note for the UNESCO Commission (Barber et al., 2020). However, on top of the estimates for pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary education, it makes sense to also in some way students enrolled in non-formal education programs managed by Christian institutions. This number could well be of the order of a few million students globally, so that the estimate of 100 million students enrolled in education programs managed by Christian institutions seems to be a reasonable ballpark given the information available.

Table 4: Enrollment in Christian Education

	Population (million)	Investment Parameter	Enrollment (million)
Catholic	1,194	5.71%	68.2
Protestant	874	2.86%	25.0
Orthodox	284	0.50%	1.4
Other Christian	31	2.50%	0.8
Formal	2,383	4.00%	95.4
Non-formal	-	-	~5.0
Total			100.4

Source: Statistical yearbooks of the Church, 2020 edition.

Under what seems to be reasonable assumptions given the lack of detailed data, it is estimated that Christian schools serve approximately 100 million students globally.

As an example of non-formal education programs, consider the case of Fe y Alegría, a Jesuit network of schools and training centers that aims to provide educational opportunities to the poor. Founded in Venezuela in the 1960s, the network operates today in 19 countries. According to the Fe y Alegría Federation website⁴, on top of serving 0.8 million students in its primary and secondary schools, the network also provides non-formal education and training to about 0.5 million additional students. As other networks are providing

similar services, assuming the participation of 5 million students in non-formal education programs seem justified (the actual figure could actually be higher).

Finally, it should be noted that some categories of education broadly defined are not included in the estimates of Table 4. For example, in its latest statistical yearbook, the Catholic Church estimates that it operated globally 9,295 orphanages, 10,747 nurseries (*jardins d'enfants* in French) and 3,225 special centers for education or social education (this is the term used in the yearbook). Other Christian denominations are also likely to operate similar institutions. Many of these institutions are likely to focus at least in part on providing education, but since estimates of the number of individuals served are not provided, they have not been included in Table 4.

Conclusion

In a joint contribution to UNESCO's Futures of Education Commission, a team from the International Office of Catholic Education and the Global Pedagogical Network - Joining in Reformation suggested that 100 million students may be enrolled in Christian schools and universities globally. For Catholic school and universities, the estimates of enrollment I likely to be relatively precise. For other Christian denominations, this is much less the case. The objective of this note was to share the rationale for the estimation of 100 million students enrolled. While this estimate may be a reasonable order of magnitude, a more refined estimate could be provided with better data, especially for Protestant and Orthodox Christian networks of schools and universities.

One last point is worth mentioning. The focus in this note has solely been on documenting the rationale for the estimate of 100 million students served by Christian schools and universities globally, as suggested in the OIEC-GPENreformation statement. However, where these students are located geographically is changing rapidly. As noted by Wodon (2019b) in the case of Catholic education, the share of Africa in the total number of children enrolled in Catholic pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools is rapidly growing. Given that Protestant schools also have a large footprint in some of the same Central and West African countries, the same applies for their pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools. This has implications for policy, as well as for the resources that Christian denominations may bring to bear to maintain and strengthen their school networks.

⁴ <https://www.feyalegria.org/cuantos-somos/>.

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