



DROPOUT RATES IN KARNATAKA'S GOVERNMENT PRIMARY SCHOOLS: CAUSES AND POLICY INTERVENTIONS - A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

Ravikumar K¹ & Dr. Santhosh Naik R²

¹*Research Scholar, Department of Studies & Research in Sociology, Karnataka State Open University Mysuru -570006 And, Assistant Professor Department of Sociology, Government First Grade College Kunigal- 572130, Tumkur District,*

Email: ravikg.kumar@gmail.com

²*Assistant Professor and Research Guide, Department of Studies & Research in Sociology, Karnataka State Open University Mysuru -570006 Email: santhoshnaikr@gmail.com*

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Abstract

Dropping out of school is not just an educational statistic it is a social signal of inequality, poverty, and lost opportunity. This paper examines dropout rates in Karnataka's government primary schools through the lens of sociology, using only secondary data sources such as UDISE+, ASER, government reports, and peer-reviewed studies. While Karnataka has made steady progress in expanding access to primary education, the state still struggles with keeping children in school, especially among poor households, migrant families, and marginalized communities.

The study identifies multiple, interconnected causes behind dropout: household poverty that pushes children into labour, seasonal migration disrupting school continuity, gender and caste-based inequalities, and institutional gaps like teacher shortages and weak remedial support. These findings are interpreted using sociological frameworks such as Bourdieu's cultural capital, theories of social exclusion, and functionalist perspectives on education.

The analysis shows that dropout cannot be reduced by educational policies alone; it requires multi-sectoral action linking education, labour, health, and social protection. Policy suggestions include expanding conditional cash transfers, improving early-grade learning, strengthening mid-day meals, recruiting more teachers and school counsellors, and designing migration-sensitive schooling models. Above all, building stronger community participation and robust tracking systems for out-of-school children is essential.

The paper concludes that addressing dropout in Karnataka is not merely about retaining children in classrooms but about creating a more just and inclusive society where education is a lived right rather than a fragile opportunity.

Keywords: dropout, Karnataka, primary education, poverty, migration, child labour, cultural capital, social exclusion, policy interventions

1. Introduction

Education is often described as the great equalizer, but in practice it is also where inequality is most visibly reproduced. In India, the Right to Education (RTE) Act gave every child the legal right to free and compulsory education up to the age of 14. Yet, in many states, the challenge is not only enrolling children but ensuring they remain in school long enough to complete their primary education.

Karnataka, one of India's relatively better-performing states in education, offers a revealing case study. On the one hand, enrollment rates at the primary level have improved over the past two decades. On the other, UDISE+ data and ASER surveys show worrying patterns: government schools are losing students, dropout persists in certain districts, and marginalized groups remain especially vulnerable. The numbers may seem small sometimes just 1–2% at the primary level but behind each number lies a child whose education has been cut short, and with it, opportunities for a better life.

This paper explores these dropout trends through a sociological lens. It asks: Why do children leave school early? What does the evidence say about the root causes? And how can policies respond in ways that are not only efficient but also socially just? Using secondary data sources National surveys, state reports, peer-reviewed studies, and international agency publications the study builds a holistic understanding of dropout in Karnataka's government primary schools.

2. Review of Literature

To understand dropout in Karnataka, we first turn to existing literature and evidence. Six major strands stand out:

1. Administrative Data UDISE+ Reports: The Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+) remains the backbone of education statistics in India. It provides state-level indicators on dropout, completion, and infrastructure. For Karnataka, UDISE+ data highlight relatively low official dropout percentages at primary level but also reveal a sharp fall in government-school enrollment in recent years. This indicates that the problem is not just dropout but also a silent shift towards private schools.

2. Household Perspectives ASER 2023: The Annual Status of Education Report complements official data by going directly to households. It finds that while most children are enrolled, learning outcomes remain poor, and many out-of-school children go unrecorded in official statistics. ASER's findings remind us that dropout is often a gradual process

starting with irregular attendance, followed by disengagement, and eventually leading to withdrawal.

3. Qualitative Insights from Northern Karnataka (Ramanaik et al., 2018): A powerful qualitative study documented how girls from marginalized communities in northern Karnataka face layered vulnerabilities caste discrimination, gender norms, and poverty. These factors combine to push them out of school, especially during adolescence when risks of child marriage and domestic labour intensify.

4. Household Determinants (Kumar et al., 2023): Broader national analyses have identified poverty, early marriage, and migration as statistically significant drivers of dropout. These determinants are highly relevant for Karnataka as well, given its large rural and migrant population.

5. Child Labour and Migration (ILO, UNICEF, UNESCO reports): International agencies stress the link between child labour and school dropout. In contexts where families rely on children's earnings, school becomes secondary. Migrant children are particularly at risk, as mobility disrupts school continuity and exposes them to labour markets at a young age.

6. State-Level Reports and Media Accounts: Karnataka's own Samagra Shikshana reports, along with media investigations, show concrete examples of dropout clusters districts where migration or poverty pushes children out of classrooms. Headlines such as "Government schools lose 5 lakh students in three years" make clear that dropout is not just an abstract statistic but a pressing social concern.

Together, this literature points to dropout as a complex outcome of household poverty, social norms, and institutional shortcomings.

3. Research Gap

While the literature is rich, three key gaps emerge:

- **Primary vs. Secondary Levels:** Much research focuses on secondary school dropouts, whereas primary dropout though numerically smaller is critical because it shapes long-term educational trajectories.
- **Household vs. Institutional Factors:** Studies often examine either family-level causes (poverty, gender norms) or school-level issues (teacher shortages, infrastructure), but fewer synthesize both.

- **Sociological Framing:** Although statistics are abundant, fewer studies explicitly apply sociological theory such as cultural capital or social exclusion to interpret dropout in Karnataka.

This study addresses these gaps by bringing together recent data, household insights, and sociological analysis into a single, policy-focused narrative.

4. Objectives of the Study

The study has four main objectives:

1. To map recent trends in primary school dropout in Karnataka using UDISE+ and ASER.
2. To analyze socio-economic and institutional causes of dropout identified in secondary literature.
3. To interpret these causes using sociological perspectives.
4. To propose actionable, evidence-based policy interventions that address both household and institutional dimensions.

5. Methodology

This is a secondary-data based study. Instead of conducting new surveys, it synthesizes existing sources:

- Administrative data from UDISE+ reports.
- Household survey data from ASER.
- Peer-reviewed studies (e.g., PLOS ONE, PMC articles).
- Government reports (Samagra Shikshana, Karnataka economic survey).
- International agency publications (UNESCO, ILO, UNICEF).
- Reputable media articles for current developments.

The analysis involved three steps:

1. Mapping official dropout and enrollment trends.
2. Synthesizing determinants of dropout from literature.
3. Framing findings through sociological theory to generate policy suggestions.

Limitations are acknowledged: administrative data often undercount out-of-school children; definitions of “dropout” vary; and household surveys may not be comparable year to year. These caveats are considered when interpreting evidence.

6. Theoretical Framework

Education does not exist in a vacuum; it reflects and reproduces wider social structures. Three sociological lenses are particularly useful:

Bourdieu's Cultural Capital: Children from poorer or illiterate households often lack the "cultural capital" valued by schools such as fluency in dominant languages or familiarity with literacy practices. Without school support, they fall behind and eventually drop out.

Social Exclusion Theory: Dropout is not only about individual choice but also about systemic exclusion caste discrimination, gender inequality, and economic marginalization limit children's ability to participate fully in schooling.

Structural-Functionalism and Sen's Capability Approach: From a functionalist perspective, schools are supposed to integrate children into society. When they fail due to teacher shortages or poor infrastructure dropout reflects a breakdown of that function. Sen's capability approach adds that education is meaningful only when children have the freedom and resources to attend school regularly.

These theories remind us that dropout is not merely a personal failing but a structural and institutional problem.

7. Findings

- **Trends in Enrollment and Dropout**

Official UDISE+ data show low percentages of dropout at primary level (often below 2%), yet the state has lost nearly half a million government school students in three years. This indicates silent dropout or migration to private schools. Household surveys like ASER suggest that the true scale of out-of-school children is higher than administrative data capture.

- **Economic Pressures**

Poverty is a consistent driver. Families struggling with daily survival often view children's labour as more immediately valuable than schooling. Reports from ILO and UNICEF confirm that economic shocks push children out of classrooms and into informal work.

- **Migration**

Seasonal migration, common in rural Karnataka, interrupts schooling. Children who move with their families often drop out temporarily but many never return. District reports show migration as one of the top causes of dropout.

- **Child Labour**

Linked closely with poverty and migration, child labour whether in agriculture, construction, or domestic work remains a major reason children cannot continue school.

- **Gender and Caste**

Girls face unique challenges: early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and safety concerns. Studies in northern Karnataka highlight how caste and gender intersect, with lower-caste girls most at risk.

- **Institutional Shortcomings**

Teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, weak remedial support, and occasional disruptions in mid-day meals reduce the appeal of government schools. Parents may withdraw children if they feel schooling is not delivering quality.

- **Data Gaps**

The definition of “dropout” differs between surveys. Administrative data often undercount children who are absent for long periods but not officially struck off rolls. This creates blind spots in policy responses.

8. Suggestions and Policy Interventions

- **Expand Social Protection:** Provide scholarships, conditional cash transfers, and food support to reduce the economic burden of schooling.
- **Migration-Sensitive Schools:** Develop flexible enrollment systems, bridge courses, and portable student IDs so migrant children can continue schooling across locations.
- **Strengthen Early Learning:** Invest in foundational literacy and numeracy programs so children do not fall behind and disengage.
- **Guarantee Nutrition:** Ensure uninterrupted mid-day meals and extend them to vulnerable seasons, as meals are a key incentive for poor families.
- **Fill Teacher Vacancies:** Recruit teachers where shortages are acute and deploy counsellors or social workers to support vulnerable students.
- **Engage Communities:** Strengthen School Management Committees and involve parents in monitoring attendance and discouraging child labour.
- **Improve Data Systems:** Create reliable, district-level registries of out-of-school children and integrate household survey insights with administrative tracking.
- **Focus on Equity:** Tailor interventions to marginalized groups especially girls, lower-caste communities, and migrant families.
- **Multi-sectoral Coordination:** Education departments must work with labour, health, and social welfare agencies to tackle dropout holistically.

9. Conclusion

Dropout in Karnataka's government primary schools is more than an educational challenge; it is a mirror of social inequality. Behind every dropout is a story of poverty, migration, gendered expectations, or institutional neglect. Reducing dropout requires more than keeping children enrolled; it demands addressing the root causes that push them out.

Sociological theories help us see dropout as a structural issue where lack of cultural capital, systemic exclusion, and weak institutional capacity combine to reproduce inequality. Secondary data from UDISE+, ASER, and related studies confirm that while Karnataka has made progress, worrying gaps remain.

If education is to be a true equalizer, Karnataka must commit to stronger policies that combine social protection, quality schooling, and community engagement. Only then can we move from counting dropouts to ensuring every child completes primary education with dignity and hope for the future.

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