



Thousands of children have fallen off the radar during lockdown, warns Dame Rachel De Souza

Children's Commissioner launches inquiry to track down youngsters who may be at risk because they are not in the classroom

By Camilla Turner, EDUCATION EDITOR

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Thousands of children have “fallen off the radar”, a government tsar has warned as she launches an inquiry to track down youngsters who are not in the classroom.

School attendance has dropped in the wake of lockdown and is a major “red flag”, according to [Dame Rachel de Souza](#), the Children’s Commissioner for England.

Following two prolonged periods of [school closures during national shutdowns](#), some youngsters have dropped off the school roll altogether, meaning they are not even captured by Department for Education (DfE) data.

“There has always been this problem that some [children were missing from school](#) and we didn’t know where they were, but attendance has become worse because of Covid,” she told The Telegraph.

“People talk about ‘ghost’ children. I hate the term ghost children because for me they are real flesh and blood children and we need to know where they are.”

Dame Rachel said that one of the problems was that there is no national database of children who are not on the school roll.

“A rough number that has been bandied around of children that we are not sure we can account for is about 80,000-100,000,” she said, but added that this is just an estimate.

The most vulnerable children ‘need to be in school’

She told how one police force she met with had a list of children who were at risk of criminal exploitation, but these children were not enrolled at school nor were they known to the local authority.

“We are always worried about children being pulled into gangs because they are not in school, we are worried about children with huge family safeguarding issues, we are worried about their mental health needs not being met, so they are falling right off the radar,” Dame Rachel said.

“I just don't think we should underestimate the safeguarding side as well, [especially coming in wake of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes' murder](#). The most vulnerable children are the children we need to be getting into school, and we need to know about them and know about their lives.”

Arthur, a six-year-old boy was tortured, poisoned and eventually beaten to death in 2020 by his father and stepmother after authorities missed a string of opportunities during the first national lockdown to save him.

[Emma Tustin was found guilty](#) of the “wicked and evil” murder of Arthur last month, while Thomas Hughes, his father, was convicted of his manslaughter.



When Arthur died, he had more than 130 areas of bruising on his body, which Jonas Hankin QC, the prosecutor, described as [“a bruise for every day of lockdown”](#).

The Children’s Commissioner has launched a new probe into youngsters who are not in school. She is running a pilot with 10 local authorities, initially aimed at gathering data on the number of children who are missing from mainstream education.

“We simply asked them the questions: how many children have you got on the school roll? How many children are not in school? It is a statutory duty of a local authority to make sure all children are in education,” she said.

“So it was really worrying for me that despite their absolute best efforts, not every local authority could answer those questions.”

Dame Rachel suggested that some straight-forward, practical steps would help authorities keep track of children who are currently slipping through the net.

“Why are we not just using one identifier for children? At the moment you have a school number, an NHS number, you have a number if you are registered with the police,” she explained.

“We need one identifier number for children and then, whichever service comes in touch with them, they will know that one number and know who they are.”

A DfE spokesperson said: “Our top priority continues to be supporting all children to attend school or college. Our attendance alliance brings together national leaders to spread best practice in improving attendance right across the country.

“They will be responsible for making sure everyone working on the ground with children, as a teacher, football coach, mental health worker or in any other role, has the tools and resources they need to break down barriers to children attending school.”

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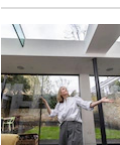
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