

Number of Welsh speakers has declined—pandemic disruption to education may be a cause

December 16 2022, by Rhian Hodges and Cynog Prys



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The recent 2022 census held unexpected news for Wales. It found the number of Welsh speakers in the country had decreased by 1.2% since the previous 2011 census, from 19% to 17.8%.

This represents an estimated loss of almost 24,000 Welsh speakers between 2011 (562,000) and 2021 (538,300). Despite the introduction of the Welsh government's [language](#) strategy, the number of Welsh speakers in Wales has continued a downward trajectory begun in 2001.

One of the reasons for this decline could be found in the disruption caused to Welsh-medium education by the [global COVID-19 pandemic](#).

The revitalisation of the Welsh language is seen by many as a story of success. The 2011 [Welsh Language \(Wales\) Measure](#) gave Welsh equal legal standing with English in Wales. Welsh speakers can access their language [on radio](#), [on TV](#) and online.

Welsh was even broadcast to the world at the 2022 men's football world cup, spoken by players at a [press conference](#)—and used by Brazilian football legend Cafu in an [advert for Budweiser](#).

This confidence is reflected by the Welsh government's current [Welsh language strategy](#), introduced in 2017, which aims to have one million people speaking Welsh by 2050.

This has included growth in [Welsh-medium education](#). This sees pupils receive the majority of their school education in Welsh, in many parts of the country. It's particularly notable in urban locations where Welsh had declined as a community language.

So the recent decline will be troubling for those involved in promoting the Welsh language, especially as the largest decreases were found among school-age pupils. Education is a [key strategic theme](#) within the government's language strategy—which aims to increase the number of young Welsh speakers and see them go on to use their language beyond the education system and within their daily lives.

The 2021 census showed that the [largest decreases](#) in the number of Welsh speakers were in the five- to 15-year-old age range. The number of school-age Welsh speakers decreased by 6%, from 40.3% in 2011 to 34.3% in 2021, and the number of three- to four-year-old Welsh speakers fell from 23.3% in 2011 to 18.2% in 2021.

Learning in lockdown

Before the release of the census results, the impact of the pandemic was noted as a [possible concern](#) for language acquisition and [educational attainment](#) within schools in Wales.

The annual census data collection day was March 21 2021, which followed periods of lockdown and school closures where many families were working and [learning from home](#). School closures had a significant impact on the number of opportunities available to children and young people to learn and use the Welsh language consistently.

New Welsh speakers who had learnt the language in the educational system and did not have Welsh speakers in their households may have been particularly disadvantaged. The pandemic may have led to a loss of skills for some young Welsh speakers over a sustained period of time.

[Recent research](#) funded by the Welsh government looked into how the pandemic affected children who were not in regular contact with the Welsh language at home. The study noted that this group would require additional support to get back on track with their Welsh—but also that this is feasible if appropriate support is put in place.

The lack of exposure to the Welsh language may also have negatively affected children's perceptions of themselves as Welsh speakers. Their linguistic [confidence and fluency](#) is likely to have been affected by a significant period of isolation away from Welsh-speaking teachers and

peers.

Similarly, this could have influenced how non-Welsh speaking parents viewed their children's Welsh language skills. Opportunities for children to showcase these skills were limited, as school events such as sportsdays and schools concerts were postponed indefinitely. This may have led to parents, who complete the census on behalf of their children, to under-report their children's Welsh language ability.

Generation COVID

There is evidence that the pandemic affected the [educational attainment](#) of children and [young people](#) on [a global scale](#).

In Wales, the pandemic also highlighted a range of social inequalities based on gender, ethnicity and social class, and has been followed by an increase of [poverty](#). For children who do not have Welsh-speaking family members at home, these factors may have led to inequality in access to Welsh language activities.

The decrease in Welsh speakers can also be attributed to many complex factors beyond the influence of COVID-19. There are [fewer people aged under 15](#) in Wales than there were in 2011, and fewer school-age pupils in the population could dilute the important influence of education on the Welsh language.

However, the reality remains that a generation of children have had their lives and education affected by the pandemic. Further research and a policy response is now needed to assess this impact, and to provide the necessary support for this generation of Welsh speakers in Wales.

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