

# CAPSULE



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## ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

The Gap Between Public Spending and Child Outcomes in Jamaica



Jamaica spends on its children. Education receives 16 to 17 percent of total government expenditure and approximately 5 percent of GDP—above the Latin American and Caribbean regional average, comparable with the world's highest-performing education systems. Social protection transfers reach a third of all households. A dedicated paediatric hospital is structurally complete. School feeding serves 180,000 students daily. Across nine fiscal years and eight sectors, this report identifies 34 specific commitments the government made to children and assesses each against the budget and the evidence. The question it asks is not whether Jamaica has expressed political will toward children: it plainly has. The question is whether the resources committed to children actually reach them; the answer, across most sectors, is that they

**The constraint on better child outcomes in Jamaica is no longer primarily financial. It is the absence of reporting architecture, institutional accountability, and investment at the right stage of the life cycle.**

do not, or not fully, for two structural reasons that this report traces through the data in detail.

The first is wage bill absorption. In education, compensation of employees consumed 83 percent of child-focused recurrent expenditure in 2017/18 and 86 percent by 2024/25. In child protection, the share rose from 34 to 48 percent over the same period. In public safety and security, it stands at 75 percent. Across labour-intensive social sectors, a growing majority of what is classified as child-focused spending is absorbed by the wage bill before it reaches any child, leaving a thin and in some cases contracting operational envelope for the goods, services, and capital investments that constitute direct delivery. The 2022 public sector compensation restructuring accelerated this pattern without a commensurate increase in the operational resources within which that labour functions, and without the performance frameworks that would be required to establish whether better-compensated public servants are producing better outcomes for children.



The second structural problem is accountability. Jamaica's public financial management system does not require any ministry or agency to identify what it spends on children, to set child-specific output targets, or to report against them. Budget templates contain no such requirement, and no legislative mandate compels it. The 2024 Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability assessment found that only 30 percent of ministries include output and outcome indicators in the Estimates at all. The consequence is that even where money is allocated to child-focused programmes, there is no public basis on which to assess whether it is reaching children who need it most, or reaching them at all. Most agencies consulted during the preparation of this report confirmed they had never previously been asked to account for what they spend on children.

Of the 34 commitments assessed, four are aligned—each has a named institutional home, a traceable and sustained budget line, and a reporting mechanism. Twenty-two are partially aligned: commitment confirmed, delivery incomplete or unverifiable. Nine are not aligned: a commitment was made, but no traceable budget evidence and no confirmed delivery exists. Housing yields no assessable commitment at all; no child-specific allocation with a traceable central government budget line was identified across nine years of Estimates.

There is a third structural dimension that the category findings taken together make visible. Jamaica's child investment is heavily concentrated at the formal schooling stage of the life cycle—the stage where the evidence suggests returns are lower—and insufficiently resourced at the stage where they are highest. The cognitive and developmental foundations that determine whether a child can benefit from schooling are set in the first three years of life. A 20-year longitudinal study tracking Jamaican children who received structured early stimulation found that participants earned 43 percent higher wages as adults than a comparison group who received none. The categories that serve children in the first thousand days—health, nutrition, housing, child protection—are precisely the categories where Jamaica's spending is thinnest, most opaque, and least protected. More investment in education, absent that developmental foundation, cannot be expected to produce proportionately better outcomes.

For the first time in a generation, Jamaica has the fiscal space to get its investment in children right. The constraint is no longer primarily financial: it is the absence of the reporting architecture, institutional accountability, and compositional reorientation that would ensure the resources Jamaica already commits to children actually reach them at the stage of life, and in the form, that the evidence shows makes the greatest difference.



## Recommendations

- 1. Introduce child-disaggregated reporting requirements into Jamaica's public financial management framework.** All ministries and agencies with child-focused mandates should include, in their annual budget submissions, a statement of child-specific programme targets, output indicators, and prior-year reported outturn against those targets.
- 2. Rebalance child investment toward the earliest years:** grow the budgets for early childhood health, nutrition, housing stability, child protection, and family support at a rate commensurate with the evidence on where returns are highest.
- 3. Require the CPFSA when it resumes annual reporting to establish a minimum reporting standard.** This should include caseload, social worker complement, foster care beneficiary numbers, and per-child subvention values against inflation.
- 4. Revise the adoption statute,** establish a foster care financing model indexed to an adequacy standard, and make family-based placement the operational (not merely the stated) default.
- 5. Establish enabling legislation and appoint a fund manager** for the HOPE For Children Trust Fund ahead of the committed 2026/27 seed-funding date.



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