

# Children's contexts: Household living arrangements, poverty and care

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The socio-economic contexts in which children live, their families, households and relationships with others impact on their need for social assistance and their access to it. Child grants are paid to adults on behalf of children, so it is important to consider children's household contexts and care arrangements in order to ensure the effectiveness of social assistance. This essay looks at where and with whom children live, and the implications for social assistance.

The essay addresses the following questions:

- How is the child population distributed across South Africa?
- What are the patterns of child poverty?
- With whom do children live?
- How does gendered poverty affect children?
- What do children's households look like and how are they changing?
- How mobile are children and what does this mean for targeting grants?

## How is the child population distributed across South Africa?

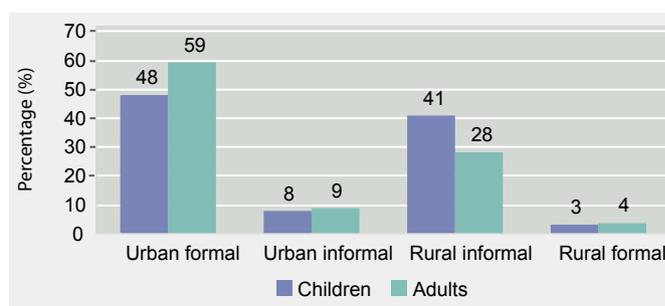
In 2014 there were 18.5 million children in South Africa, who account for one-third (34%) of the total population.<sup>i</sup> The overwhelming majority (84%) of children in South Africa are African, with 8% being coloured, 5% white and 2% Indian. Boys and girls are almost equal in number, whereas among adults women outnumber men because of greater longevity.

### Child and adult populations are distributed differently

There are some striking differences in the distribution of children and adults (see table 1a on p. 106). Poor provinces such as Eastern Cape, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal account for a larger share of children than of adults. Conversely, Western Cape and Gauteng account for larger shares of adults than of children.

Figure 4 shows that children are more likely than adults to be found in the rural informal (or former "homeland") areas, and less likely than adults to live in urban formal areas, which tend to be wealthier. Nevertheless, overall, nearly half (48%, or 8.9 million) of all children live in urban formal areas, and 41% (7.6 million) in the former homelands.

Figure 4: Distribution of children and adults, by area type, 2014



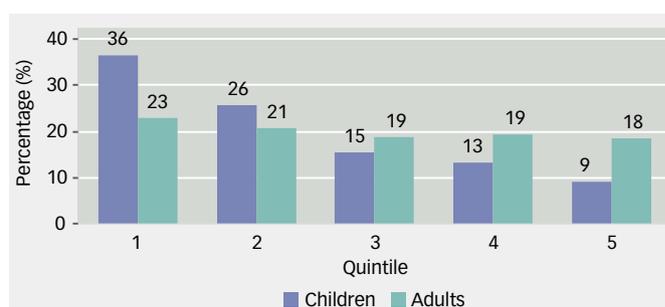
Source: Statistics South Africa (2015) *General Household Survey 2014*. Pretoria: Stats SA. [Weighted data] Calculations by Debbie Budlender.

## What are the patterns of child poverty?

Children are disproportionately concentrated in poor households. The patterns of child poverty can be shown by categorising households into income quintiles,<sup>ii</sup> where quintile 1 contains the poorest fifth of households and quintile 5 the wealthiest fifth. Because poorer households tend to have more members, more than a fifth of the population is found in quintile 1, while less than a fifth is found in quintile 5. However, as with the distribution by province and area type, there are differences between the distributions of children and adults.

Figure 5 shows that children are over-represented in poor households, with more than one-third (36%) in quintile 1, compared to less than a quarter (23%) of adults. At the other end of the spectrum, relatively few children (9%) live in wealthier quintile 5 households, compared to 18% of adults.

Figure 5: Distribution of children and adults, by income quintile, 2014



Source: Statistics South Africa (2015) *General Household Survey 2014*. [Weighted data] Calculations by Debbie Budlender.

<sup>i</sup> Unless otherwise specified, the statistics cited in this chapter are from the authors' analysis of the General Household Survey of 2014, a nationally representative household survey conducted by Statistics South Africa.

<sup>ii</sup> We have used per capita household income to calculate the income quintiles. The total income to the household is divided by the number of household members. The per capita incomes are then ranked at household level to derive the household quintiles.

#### Box 4: Poverty lines and grant amounts

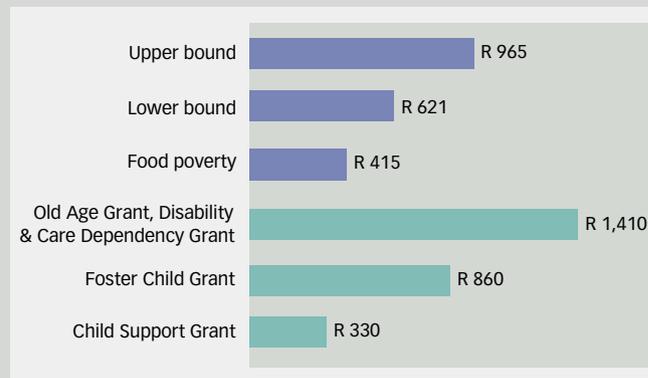
South Africa does not have an official poverty line, but Statistics South Africa has proposed three national poverty lines: an upper bound poverty line, a lower bound poverty line and a food poverty line. The food poverty line is the most severe: people living below this level of income are unable to afford even a minimum balanced diet. The lower bound poverty line allows enough income for people to be adequately nourished, but only if they sacrifice other essential items such as clothing. The upper bound poverty line is the minimum required for people to afford both adequate food and basic non-food items.

The proposed poverty lines were set in 2012. In 2015, the value of the food poverty line (after adjustment for inflation) was R415 per person per month, the lower bound poverty line was R621 per person per month and the upper bound poverty line was R965 per person per month.

As shown in figure 6, the values of social grants are very different. While the Old Age Grant, Disability Grant and Care Dependency Grant are well above the upper bound poverty line, the Child Support Grant (CSG) is below even the food poverty line. This is inconsistent with the recommendations of the Lund Committee, whose proposals formed the basis for the

introduction of the CSG in 1998. In considering the amount of the CSG, the Lund Committee recommended that “the level of the grant would be derived from the Household Subsistence Level [age-based estimates] for food and clothing for children.”<sup>2</sup> The CSG has been successful in reaching large numbers of children, but the value of the grant is clearly below what was originally planned as it does not even cover basic food costs.

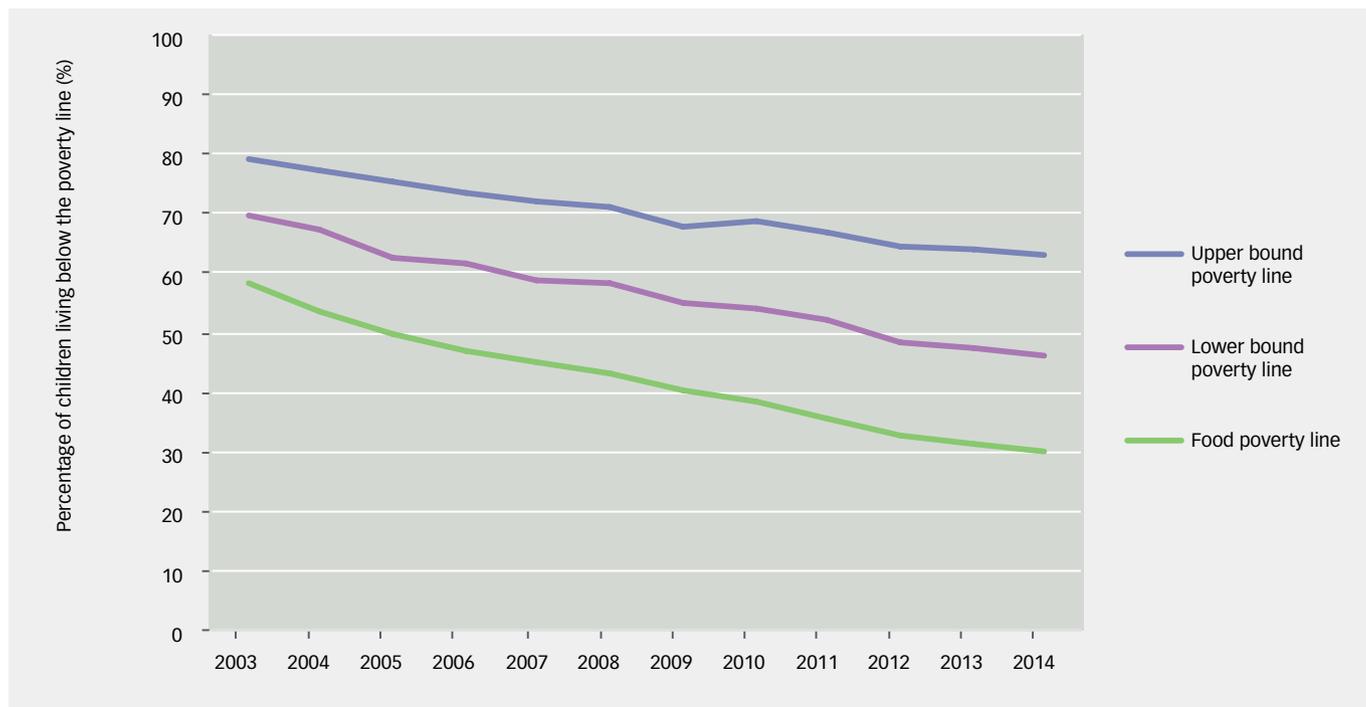
Figure 6: Values of Statistics South Africa poverty lines and grant benefits in 2015 Rand values



Income and area type are inter-related in that nearly half (48%) of all people living in former homeland areas are in quintile 1, as compared to 27% in urban informal areas, and 16% in urban formal areas. The link between area type and income mirrors a similar link between race and income: 41% of African children (and 33%

of Africans of all ages) are in quintile 1, against only 1% of white children and adults. Although African children living in homeland areas are most likely to be poor, there are still high levels of child poverty amongst other race groups and in other area types, and the need for grants is widespread.

Figure 7: Child poverty rates, 2003 – 2014



Source: Statistics South Africa (2004 – 2015) *General Household Survey 2003 – 2014*. Pretoria: Stats SA. [Weighted data] Calculations by Katharine Hall.

### Child poverty rates have decreased over time

Child poverty can be measured in many different ways. Using simple income poverty headcounts (i.e. the number of children in households where per capita income is below the poverty line), it is clear that child poverty has declined substantially. Figure 7 traces income poverty rates for children over a 12-year period, using the three national poverty lines proposed by Statistics South Africa (see box 4 on p. 34 for definitions of the poverty lines).

Arguably, the upper bound poverty line is the most appropriate of the three poverty lines for monitoring child poverty, as children's basic needs must be fulfilled if they are to survive and flourish. It is therefore of concern that over half of children in South Africa still live in poverty when using this measure.

Children living below the lower bound poverty line are likely to be under-nourished, while those below the food poverty line will almost definitely be under-nourished as the poverty line itself is linked to the minimum cost of basic nutrition. At the very least, no children should be below the food poverty line. Malnutrition is an underlying factor in child illness and death – especially in young children – and its negative effects on cognitive development and educational outcomes are well documented. Food poverty therefore perpetuates multiple dimensions of poverty and inequality. While the percentage of children living below the food poverty line has halved (from nearly 60% in 2003 to 30% in 2014), the numbers remain high: over 5.5 million children live in households where per capita income is below the national food poverty line.

### With whom do children live?

The report of the Lund Committee acknowledged that social assistance targeted to children should take into account the prevailing household and care arrangements, particularly those in poor households. It noted that family life had been shaped by apartheid policies, and that a range of household characteristics needed to be taken into account when designing a social security programme for children. Poor households tended to be multi-generational, particularly in rural areas where children lived with both parent/s and grandparent/s. In many households the middle generation was incomplete or absent due to labour migration or parental death. Many men established dual households (for example, having urban and rural homes), and many children were born outside formal partnerships. Household boundaries were also fluid due to the movement of both adults and children. Many children, especially those living in poverty, were not continuously parented by either or both of their biological parents.

All of these considerations were documented by the Lund Committee,<sup>3</sup> which from the start recommended that the CSG be targeted at the primary caregiver of the child (as opposed to the biological mother), and that the grant should “follow the child”, thus taking into account mobility and changing care arrangements. As outlined in the Lund report, the advantage of this approach is that it “resolves the problem of how to define the family in such a complex and multi-cultural society. It says that children, however many in a household, of whatever status, are important and need to be protected”.<sup>4</sup>

The success of the CSG in reaching vast numbers of beneficiaries is largely due to this carefully considered approach to targeting at its inception. As will be shown below, many of the social factors, household forms and care arrangements described by the Lund Committee continue to hold true.

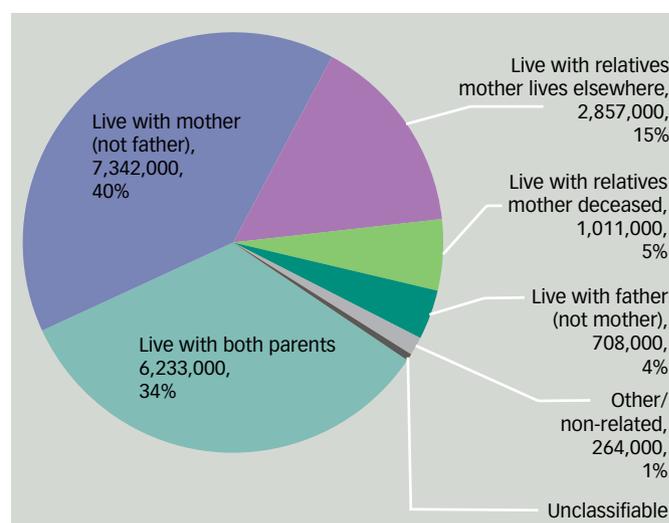
### Parental co-residence and child care arrangements

The number of children living without their parents in South Africa is unusually large, relative to the rest of the world and even within the region.<sup>5</sup> This is partly due to orphaning, but mostly due to parents living elsewhere<sup>6</sup> – for example, because the child's parents are not married or living in a partnership, or the partnership dissolved, or because parents need to work elsewhere and cannot care for children at the place where they work. In these instances, other family members, such as grandmothers, play an important role in caring for children.

Children are far less likely to live with their fathers than with their mothers. Again, this is partly due to orphaning (children are more likely to be paternally than maternally orphaned), but in the majority of cases it is related to gender relations and gender roles: men have historically been more likely than women to migrate for work, fathers are often not in ongoing relationships with the mothers of their children, and are simply more absent from children's lives. In 2014, three-quarters of children lived with their biological mother, while 39% lived with their biological father, and only a third of children lived with both parents.

Figure 8 shows the variety of co-residence arrangements for all children in South Africa. Just over one fifth (21%), or 3.7 million, do not live with either of their parents. In virtually all these cases, the child is living with other relatives – most usually grandparents. In the absence of parents, the responsibility for child care and financial support often falls on grandmothers and other female relatives.

Figure 8: Children's co-residence arrangements, 2014



Source: Statistics South Africa (2015) *General Household Survey 2014*. Pretoria: Stats SA. [Weighted data] Calculations by Katharine Hall.

As with the distribution of child poverty, parental co-residence is linked to spatial and racial inequalities as well as to income. Only 17% of children in the poorest quintile had both their parents living with them, compared to 76% in the richest quintile. Given that it is mostly children in poor households who do not have co-resident parents, social grants help to alleviate some of the financial burden on relatives who provide for them.

Nearly half of children living in urban formal areas live with both their biological parents, compared with only 19% of children in the former homelands. Nearly a third of children in the former homelands have no co-resident parents. Rural households have historically taken on the burden of care for dependents of migrant workers.

Adult labour migration continues to fragment families. Rates of labour migration have risen among women<sup>7</sup> and the number of children with absent living mothers has not decreased since 2002. In fact, it is the availability of other family members, particularly older women, to provide free child care that enables some mothers to leave their children to go in search of work.<sup>8</sup>

### Contact between children and absent parents

Some critics of the social grant system may argue that grants let parents off the hook because absent parents no longer need to send money to support their child. There are three main counter-arguments to this. First, the amount of the CSG is not enough to provide for a child's basic needs. Second, unemployment rates are high, and many absent parents who have migrated to seek work are not in a position to send money home. Third, as outlined below, the majority of absent mothers remain in contact with their children at least a few times a year, and a substantial proportion send money at least occasionally.

As shown in table 3, more than half of children whose mothers are living elsewhere see their mothers every month or more frequently. The rate of contact is lower for children with absent fathers, but just over 40% see their father at least every month. Only 8% of absent mothers "never" see their child, compared to a much higher percentage of absent fathers.

**Table 3: How often do children see their absent mother or father?**

|                       | Mother      | Father      |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Every day             | 5%          | 5%          |
| Several times a week  | 13%         | 12%         |
| Several times a month | 38%         | 24%         |
| Several times a year  | 31%         | 25%         |
| Never                 | 8%          | 28%         |
| Don't know / missing  | 6%          | 5%          |
| <b>Total</b>          | <b>100%</b> | <b>100%</b> |

**Source:** Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (2008) *National Income Dynamics Study: Wave 1* [dataset]. Version 6.1. Cape Town: Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit [producer], 2016. Cape Town: DataFirst [distributor], 2016  
**Note:** Based on children whose mother/father is alive but not living in the household.

Nearly half (48%) of children with absent mothers are reported to receive some financial support from their mothers, and 39% of children from absent fathers.<sup>9</sup>

### Time use of parents

Child grants assist with the financial costs of caring and providing for children. Yet these are not the only costs incurred by caregivers of children. Women, in particular, spend substantial amounts of time providing physical, emotional and other forms of care for children.

**Table 4: Time spent on child care by sex of adult household members, and the age and location of their children**

| Situation of adult household members in respect of children | Child care time spent on children under 7 years |               | Child care time spent on children under 18 years |               |
|---|---|---------------|--|---------------|
|   | Adult males                                     | Adult females | Adult males                                      | Adult females |
| Does not have any biological children                       | 2   | 9             | 1  | 8             |
| Has children, but not in household                          | 1   | 4             | 3  | 16            |
| Has children living in household                            | 13  | 80            | 8  | 56            |

**Source:** Statistics South Africa (2013) *A Survey of Time Use*. Pretoria: Stats SA.  
**Note:** Time calculated as mean number of minutes per day.

In Statistics South Africa's 2010 time use survey, more than 80% of men living with children under seven years of age did not report having done any child care in the previous 24 hours. In contrast, only 32% of women living with one young child, and 25% of women living with three young children, reported no child care.

Table 4 shows that mothers living with one or more of their own children under seven years did an average of 80 minutes of child care per day, compared to only 13 minutes for fathers. Living in the same household as a young child is an even stronger determinant than gender of the amount of time spent on unpaid care work and child care in particular.<sup>10</sup>

### How does gendered poverty affect children?

We have already seen that the burden of child care falls mainly on women. Women also carry a large responsibility for children's material support, particularly as large numbers of children are born outside of marriage or stable partnerships.

### Low marriage rates

Population censuses in South Africa provide evidence of declining marriage rates dating back at least as far as 1960. The reasons offered for this trend differ across analysts, and it is likely that multiple factors have contributed. What is, however, clear is that the decline in marriage is not something new.

In 2014, only 32% of women and 30% of men aged 18 years and above were legally married under civil or customary law, with a further 11% of both women and men living together “like husband and wife”. Among those aged 50 years and above, 14% of women and 10% of men had never been married.

Childbearing and rearing is to a large extent delinked from marriage in South Africa. More than nine in every 10 infants under a year (92%) live in the same household as their mother. However, only 28% of the mothers are married, with a further 16% living together with a partner. These already low numbers may in themselves constitute an over-estimate in that the spouse or partner of the mother may not be the father of the young child. The low rate of marriage or co-habitation of parents serves as a further indicator of the extent to which the responsibility for supporting children both financially and in other ways falls predominantly on the shoulders of women. Legally, non-resident parents are required to contribute to their children’s maintenance whether or not they are or were legally married to the other parent.

Ideally, South Africa would have systems to ensure that fathers provide maintenance for their children. But given the ineffectual maintenance system, combined with high unemployment and gendered poverty, grants are vital for alleviating the strain on women who are sole providers for children.

### Employment and earnings

The gender differences in poverty rates between women and men can partly be explained by differences in earnings. For example, a 2009 analysis of women and poverty found that 57% of people earning less than R600 per month were women.<sup>11</sup> Administrative tax data provide further evidence of the disparities. In 2014, women accounted for 44% of assessed individual taxpayers, but earned only 37% of taxable income. On average, women earned 24.5% less than men when measured by taxable income.<sup>12</sup>

The disparity in earnings is experienced by women who are fortunate enough to be employed. In late 2015, the unemployment rate for women stood at 26.9% as against 22.5% for men.<sup>13</sup> Women are thus less likely than men to be employed and, if employed, they are likely to earn substantially less than men.

The 2009 study<sup>14</sup> also found that women are far more likely than men to live in households where there are no resident employed men, where there are only employed women or where no resident household member has employment. Over the period 1997 – 2006 women became increasingly reliant on income received by women – whether earnings or grants.

### What do children’s households look like, and are they changing?

A nuclear family household is defined as one that consists of a mother and father, their children, and no other members. In 2014 only 20% of children lived in nuclear households, and only 17% of the 14.5 million households in the country were nuclear families.

In 2014, more than half (55%) of South Africa’s children lived in two-generational households, with a further 40% in three-generational households. Three-generational households tend

to be vulnerable because they have more mouths to feed. Only about 50,000 children – about two in every thousand – were found to be living in child-headed households. These patterns have not changed substantially since 2004.

Only 11% of children lived with only one adult in 2014. Thus in most cases single parents who live with their children also have other adults living in the household. However, these other adults do not have a legal obligation to contribute to the child’s upkeep unless they are grandparents of the child. Even if grandparents are receiving a pension, the means test for the CSG is clear that other social grants should not be counted into the caregiver’s income.

### How mobile are children and what does this mean for targeting grants?

Most children live in “complex” rather than nuclear family households. Households are fluid and may be constantly changing due to birth, death, migration and/or inter-household movement of both adults and children. Children may move together with their mothers, other caregivers or entire households, in which case the adult recipients of child grants would not change but grants may be received in a different place. Children or their caregivers also sometimes move separately between households. This can result in a change in care arrangements, in which case their grants may need to be received by different adult caregivers.

Ten percent of children under 15 years in 2011 had moved municipality at some stage in the 10 years between the 2001 and 2011 censuses. This represents 1.5 million child movers and accounts for 18% of all those who moved across municipalities over the decade. Migration rates peak in the 20 – 34-year age group which are also the prime years for child-bearing, after which both fertility rates and migration rates decline. The overall picture is that both children, and adults in their child-bearing years, are highly mobile.

Targeting programmes and interventions to such a mobile population is challenging, and the success of the social assistance programme is partly due to its flexibility, which allows it to follow individual beneficiaries (or, in the case of child grants, allows for the adult beneficiary, the “caregiver”, to change).

### Conclusion

The social assistance programme for children has succeeded in reaching vast numbers of children despite the unusual and complicated household and child-care arrangements in South Africa. Targeting of the CSG has been successful despite low marriage rates, low parental co-habitation rates, high orphaning rates, changing care arrangements, adult migration, household fluidity and child mobility. This is because the targeting mechanism was well thought through from the outset: It targets individuals rather than households or families; it is meant to target *de facto* caregivers rather than mothers specifically; and it is designed to follow the child, thereby (in theory if not always in practice), accommodating mobility and changes in care arrangements.

This success is something to build on. There are opportunities for improving the reach and increasing the impacts of social assistance to children. Possible approaches and options are discussed in subsequent chapters of this issue.

## References

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- 3 See no. 2 above. (Lund Committee)
- 4 See no. 2 above (Lund Committee) P. 95.
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- 14 See no. 11 above.