

Inequalities in children’s household contexts: Place, parental presence and migration

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High rates of poverty and inequality are reproduced over time and across generations. Amongst the many factors that perpetuate inequality – such as unequal education, unequal employment opportunities and earnings, and unequal health risks and health services – we need to consider the role of place and the unequal contexts in which children grow up.

Location, or where people live, plays a major role in determining the availability of resources and opportunities that support human development. In the two decades since democracy, there have been improvements in many public goods: road access, the construction of human settlements, service infrastructure, schools and clinics.¹ But vast disparities remain, and these will continue to reinforce human inequalities until more even levels of delivery and opportunity have been achieved.

This essay looks at how children are distributed spatially, and whether this is changing. It is structured by the following questions:

- Why is it important to consider where children live?
- Where do children live?
- Who do children live with?
- What are the implications?

Why is it important to consider where children live?

One of the ways in which South Africa’s unique history of apartheid continues to affect children’s lives relates to where, and with whom, children live. Decades ago, influx controls created a divided country in which most Black households lived outside the well-resourced towns and cities reserved for Whites – on the urban periphery or in “rural homelands”. Entire communities were often forcibly removed from urban areas to townships or “Bantustans”, as well as from rural areas designated for the White population. Pass laws permitted those who were considered economically useful – mainly working-age men and some female domestic workers – to remain in the towns and cities while they were employed. The homelands became dumping grounds for the “surplus” people: the unemployed, the disabled, and particularly old people, women and children. Patterns of circular labour migration were entrenched between urban and rural nodes.

Rural households carried a huge economic and care burden: the apartheid system relied heavily on the supportive networks of extended families and communities to justify ignoring the welfare

Table 3: Household resources, poverty and access to social infrastructure, 2010

Household resources	Urban		Rural	
	Formal %	Informal %	“Formal” (commercial farm) areas %	“Traditional authority” areas %
No piped water to site	9	18	39	65
Inadequate sanitation	4	54	44	62
No mains electricity supply	6	27	44	25
Overcrowding ⁱ	9	17	10	10
More than 30 minutes to nearest clinic	16	20	49	48
No employment in the household	34	35	22	65
Income poor (less than R575 per person per month)	29	41	31	66

Source: Source: Statistics South Africa (2011) *General Household Survey 2010*. Analysis by Katharine Hall, Children’s Institute, UCT.

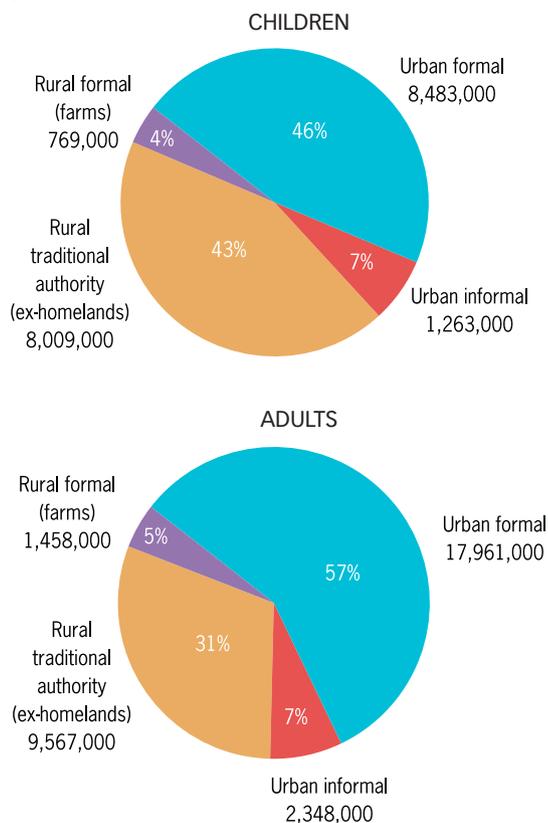
ⁱ Overcrowding is defined as a ratio of more than two people per room, including kitchen and living room, but excluding bathroom. A one-bedroom dwelling with a kitchen and living room would therefore be defined as overcrowded if there were more than six household members.

needs of the families of those it employed on the mines and elsewhere to serve the needs of the White ruling class. However, there has been little research which has investigated how these spatial arrangements continue to determine the quality of life and future opportunities for children growing up in post-apartheid South Africa, and how they contribute to persistent patterns of inequality. The previous essay showed that there has been little change in the spatial distribution of poverty – the former homelands remain the poorest areas on the national map and, at smaller area levels, pockets of extreme poverty are found in small towns and townships on the outskirts of cities.

Statistics South Africa uses broad definitions of area type, distinguishing between formal and informal urban areas, and between rural areas, which are formally demarcated (the commercial farming areas of the “old” South Africa) and what are referred to as “tribal” or “traditional authority” areas (ie areas under communal tenure which constituted the former homelands).

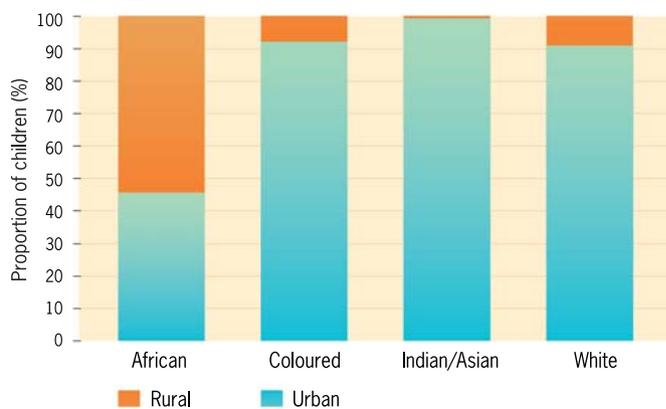
Comparing information on some basic services and resources across these categories, table 3 shows that, as recently as 2010, rural households remained far behind those in urban areas in terms of social infrastructure and employment opportunities. Among all rural households, those in traditional areas are considerably more resource-poor, but even in formal rural areas, approximately two-fifths of households had no access to water on site, or to electricity.

Figure 10: Distribution of children and adults, by area type, 2010



Source: Statistics South Africa (2011) *General Household Survey 2010*. Analysis by Katharine Hall, Children’s Institute, UCT.

Figure 11: Urban–rural distribution of children, by race, 2010



Source: Statistics South Africa (2011) *General Household Survey 2010*. Analysis by Katharine Hall, Children’s Institute, UCT.

Labour migration fragments families, but it may also bring economic benefits to rural households through the transfer of remittances. However, recent evidence suggests that remittance transfers in South Africa are falling, while agricultural production remains limited.² This combination leaves households trapped in deep poverty, without external income sources on the one hand, or local resources on the other. Rural households are disproportionately poor even when taking into account social grants, which are targeted mainly to children and pensioners.

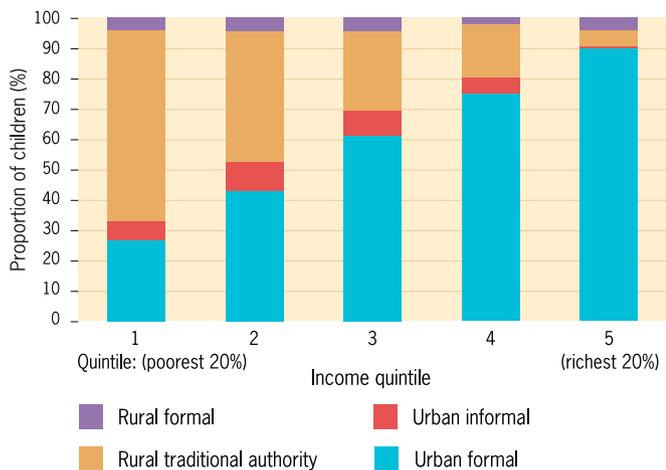
Where do children live?

Just over 40% of the 14 million households in South Africa consist of adults only. These tend to be relatively small households, with an average of two household members. By contrast, children live in larger households with an average of five members. It is partly for this reason that the spatial distributions for adult and child populations in South Africa are strikingly different.³ Compared with adults, children are disproportionately represented in rural areas, as illustrated in figure 10.

Apart from inter-generational differences in the location of “home”, there are also pronounced inequalities between children. Figure 11 shows that the relatively small Coloured, Asian and White populations are almost entirely urban, while more than half of all African children grow up outside the cities. Nearly a quarter of the 18.5 million children in South Africa live in KwaZulu-Natal, while the Eastern Cape and Limpopo together are home to another quarter (see p. 82). The majority of children in these three provinces live in the former homelands.

Income inequalities between geographic areas are apparent when one divides the child population into income groups based on the per capita income of households. Figure 12 on p. 45 shows that most children in the poorest 40% of the population live in rural households, while the majority of those in the upper quintiles live in towns and cities. These associations between income inequality and geographic location are likely to be related in circular ways: poorly resourced areas with few employment opportunities become poverty traps for those who live there.

Figure 12: Distribution of children by type of area and income quintileⁱⁱ, 2010



Source: Statistics South Africa (2011) *General Household Survey 2010*. Analysis by Katharine Hall, Children’s Institute, UCT.

While the rural child population is quite homogeneously poor (four out of five rural children live in households in the bottom two quintiles), there is great inequality within the urban population – between households in formal and informal settlements, across towns and cities, between and within races. Apart from income inequality, urban children – and particularly those in informal settlements – are exposed to particular risks associated with city life: densely populated settlements, overcrowded households, crime, theft, road accidents, erratic or inaccessible communal services, waste disposal hazards, shack fires, paraffin poisoning, flooding, and a lack of affordable and safe child care facilities.⁴

The pictures of inequality presented here are snapshots in time. But children are highly mobile. Slightly greater proportions of children under two years old live in informal settlements, while older children are more likely to live in the former homelands. This has been consistent over the years, suggesting a pattern of child mobility where children born in informal settlements stay with their mothers for the first year or two, after which some of them are sent to stay with family at the rural home.

Who do children live with?

Only a third of all children in South Africa live in a household together with both their mother and father, and nearly a quarter lives with neither parent (see p. 83). Children who live with only one parent are far more likely to be living with their mother than with their father. Figure 13 shows how patterns of co-residence vary enormously between urban and rural areas: urban children are more likely to live with both parents, or with at least one parent (almost invariably their mother). Single fathers are uncommon, irrespective of where children live.

Many children live separately from one or both of their biological parents for a wide range of reasons including orphaning, cultural

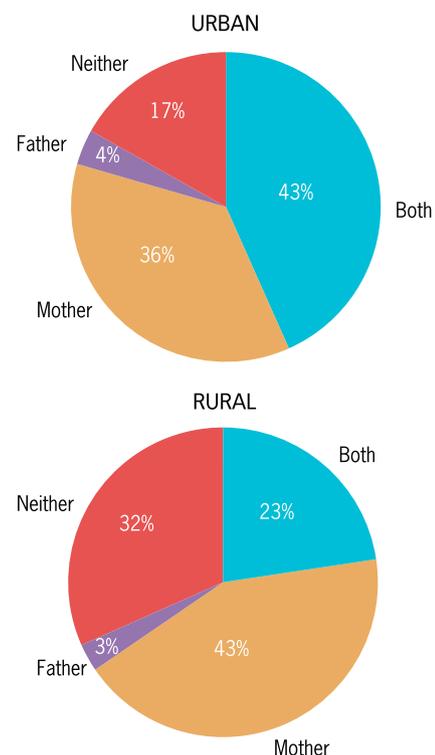
convention, financial or logistical necessity. Although orphanhood rates have risen steadily, mainly due to HIV/AIDS, only a small amount of parental absence can be explained by high mortality rates. In most cases, parents are absent from children’s households because they are living elsewhere. This is partly a result of labour migration – particularly from rural areas – as the temporary or circular migration of adults seeking work in the cities has persisted during the post-apartheid period.⁵

Although racial restrictions on the permanent settlement of migrants and their families in urban areas were lifted during the late 1980s, many adults continue to migrate to find work, leaving their children and spouses behind. Labour migration rates peaked during the early 2000s, when about 17% of all households, and 37% of African households in rural areas, included at least one household member who was a labour migrant.⁶

Historically labour migration was male dominated. But research indicates that female labour migration has been increasing,⁷ and that women are more likely to migrate when a (rural) “household of origin” receives a social pension. The fact that there are family members, and particularly grandmothers, who can care for children at the rural household enables working-age women, including mothers, to migrate to cities in search of employment.⁸

The enduring nature of the migrant labour system helps explain why only 22% of children in rural areas are co-resident with both their parents, compared to 42% of children in urban areas.

Figure 13: Children’s co-residence with parents, 2010



Source: Statistics South Africa (2011) *General Household Survey 2010*. Analysis by Katharine Hall, Children’s Institute, UCT.

ⁱⁱ Income quintiles are calculated on the basis of per capita income for all households. Households with children tend to be poorer than households without children, as discussed in the essay on pp. 32 – 37.

Higher rates of labour migration among men than among women also help to explain why far more fathers are absent from children's households than mothers. However, there are other important reasons for why children are more likely to live with, and be supported by, their mother than their father, including low marriage rates and low cohabitation rates among unmarried mothers.

Since at least the 1960s, marriage rates among African women have fallen considerably.⁹ By 2010, only a quarter of all African women were married compared to over 60% of White women. Declining marriage rates (in part associated with poverty and unemployment, and men's inability to pay *lobola*, or "bride wealth") reflect an "uncoupling of marriage and motherhood both as practice and as social identity".¹⁰ This has been accompanied by an increase in the number of children with absent fathers, and a decline in households built on a co-habiting partnership. Data from a 2008 national household survey indicate that less than 40% of all African mothers aged 20 – 50 years had ever been married compared to 92% of White mothers in the same age group.¹¹ Unmarried African mothers are also far less likely than unmarried White mothers to be cohabiting with the father of their child (23% compared to 59%).¹²

The absence of a parent from a child's household masks a range of possible contact between the parent and the child. Parents who migrate from the household of origin to find employment, for example, may return regularly or send remittances for the support of their children while they are away. Even in the event of divorce or separation, or when mothers are unmarried, an absent father may have extensive contact with his child, providing regular income (and other support) for his child. Nonetheless, in 2008 almost 60% of children with an absent mother or father, or an absent mother, did not receive any income support from their absent father, while slightly less than 50% did not receive income support from their absent mother.¹³

Who children live with, therefore, has significant implications for their economic status. Children who live with both their parents are more likely than other children to live in relatively wealthy households. Among children who live with only one parent, those living with their mother are more likely to be in poorer households. This reflects gender differences in employment opportunities and earnings. The role of women not only as caregivers of children but also as the primary providers is therefore important in understanding the context of child poverty in South Africa. (See pp. 83 – 85 for more data and commentary on children's living arrangements.)

Children are often mobile themselves. Movement across households and places is a feature of childhood which is highly relevant for social policy and the targeting of poverty alleviation programmes, such as child grants. Retrospective reporting on child mobility suggests that a fifth of all children (21%) are geographically mobile in that they have moved since they were born. The percentage of children who are mobile increases with age. While 14% of children aged 0 – 4 have ever moved, this increases to around 22% for children 5 – 14, and 31% for teenagers aged 15 – 17 years.¹⁴

National surveys between 2002 and 2010 suggest that child populations are increasing in provinces with large metropolitan

areas (Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape), and declining in more rural provinces (notably Limpopo, the Eastern Cape and North West).¹⁵ The proportion of children found in urban households has increased from 46% in 2002 to 53% in 2010. This apparent urban trend is a combined effect of internal migration and urban births, and the extent of it will need to be confirmed when the 2011 Census becomes available.

At present there is a shortage of national data to describe patterns of child mobility accurately, or to explain the reasons for movement of children. The availability of better social resources such as schools and health care facilities are possible pull factors. Push factors may include inadequate accommodation, concerns about crime and child safety, and the costs of child care if there are free alternatives to accommodate children with relatives elsewhere. (illustrated in case 4 on p. 47). There is some evidence that poorer children are more likely to migrate, implying that migration is a child care strategy for poorer households.¹⁶ The few studies that do focus on children's care and mobility in the context of labour migration¹⁷ are derived from surveillance site data, which present a particular problem in that households and individuals who move out of the study site are lost to the panel.

What are the implications?

The spatial map of poverty has changed little, with the previous homelands remaining the poorest and most under-resourced parts of the country.¹⁸ Half of all children continue to live in rural parts of the country, particularly the relatively under-resourced former homelands. Many more live in informal settlements, which tend to be inadequately serviced and are associated with particular risks to children's safety and healthy development. This distribution is an important consideration from a child poverty perspective, because, while development imperatives prioritise centres that are economic hubs, this kind of spatial targeting risks leaving a large proportion of the population in places that are under-serviced and under-developed.

Household fragmentation through temporary or circular migration remains a distinguishing characteristic of living arrangements in South Africa. Research suggests that this migration pattern is a means of survival, driven by a combination of economic and social strategies to maximise household income, minimise economic risk and increase exposure to social resources such as health care.¹⁹ Low employment opportunities in rural areas are a key factor explaining high rates of labour migration particularly from rural households.

Decisions about where children live, and who cares for them, are likely to be influenced by a range of considerations, which require further qualitative research. A better understanding of where children live and the directions in which they move, as well as the drivers (and constraints) to child mobility between households and across geographical areas will put planners in a better position to proactively target services and plan for growing child populations in places of in-migration, and to think about targeted programmes to ameliorate poverty in outlying areas.

Case 4: Deterrents and enablers of fluid care arrangements

I met Mrs Xumalo at her home in Krakrayo, a small rural village in the Amathole district of the Eastern Cape. She was caring for five grandchildren, all under the age of 14, while her daughter (the children's mother) was living in Cape Town. The understanding between Mrs Xumalo and her adult daughter was that once the daughter had found work and a suitable place for the family to live, the children would join her in Cape Town. In the meantime, the migrant daughter was sharing a shack belonging to acquaintances of the family from the same village.

Mrs Xumalo spoke about why it was both infeasible and inappropriate for the children to join their mother in this "temporary" accommodation: it would be too much of an imposition on the host family, who were from the same area but not relatives; there was not enough space for children in their small home; the mother did not want her children to live in the informal settlement, which was dangerous; things were too uncertain – their mother needed to find a job and have some kind of secure tenure before undertaking the risk and expense of bringing the children to join her.

It was because the care arrangement was considered temporary that the mother had applied for and was claiming the children's Child Support Grants in Cape Town, using some of the money to support herself while she looked for work and sending the rest to her mother in the Eastern Cape to spend on the children's needs.

This explanation suggested a series of strategic decisions around the care of the children in relation to her adult daughter's rather precarious housing and employment situation on the one hand, and the availability of free care and accommodation for the children on the other. Thus a combination of deterrents (which discourage simultaneous child migration) and enablers (which encourage continued residence at the place of origin) resulted in a decision to separate the children from their mother.

Source: Katharine Hall, Children's Institute, UCT. Based on field notes from the Eastern Cape, 2005.

Urbanisation is both necessary and unavoidable, and is not only about the movement of adult workers. Without good planning that takes into account the specific needs of children, urbanisation could exacerbate inequality, trap children in poverty (at either the urban or rural periphery) and perpetuate intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality.²⁰

Work on child migration and mobility is relatively new in South Africa, and analyses thus far have been constrained by the limitations of available household surveys. From a policy perspective, there is a need for an expanded and rigorous evidence base on patterns, predictors and outcomes of child mobility.

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- 12 See no. 11 above.
- 13 See no. 11 above. In this survey, information on financial assistance from absent parents was collected only for children younger than 15 years.
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