

Children’s access to housing

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Section 26 of the Constitution of South Africa provides that “everyone has the right to have access to adequate housing”, and section 28(1)(c) gives children “the right to ... shelter”.¹

Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that “every child has the right to a standard of living adequate for his/her development” and obliges the state “in cases of need” to “provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to ... housing”.²

Children living in urban and rural areas

This indicator describes the number and proportion of children living in urban and rural areas in South Africa.

Location is one of the seven elements of adequate housing identified by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.³ Residential areas should ideally be situated close to work opportunities, clinics, police stations, schools and child-care facilities. In a country with a large rural population, this means that services and facilities need to be well distributed, even in areas that are not densely populated. In South Africa, service provision and resources in rural areas continued to lag far behind urban areas.

The General Household Survey captures information on all household members, making it possible to look at the distribution of children in urban and non-urban households and compare this to the adult distribution. Nearly half of South Africa’s children (43%) lived in rural households in 2017 – equivalent to 8.5 million children. Looking back over a decade, there is a clear shift in the distribution of children towards urban areas: in 2002, 48% of children were found in urban households, and this increased to 57% by 2017. Yet children are consistently less urbanised than adults: in 2017, 69% of the adult population was urban, compared with 57% of children.

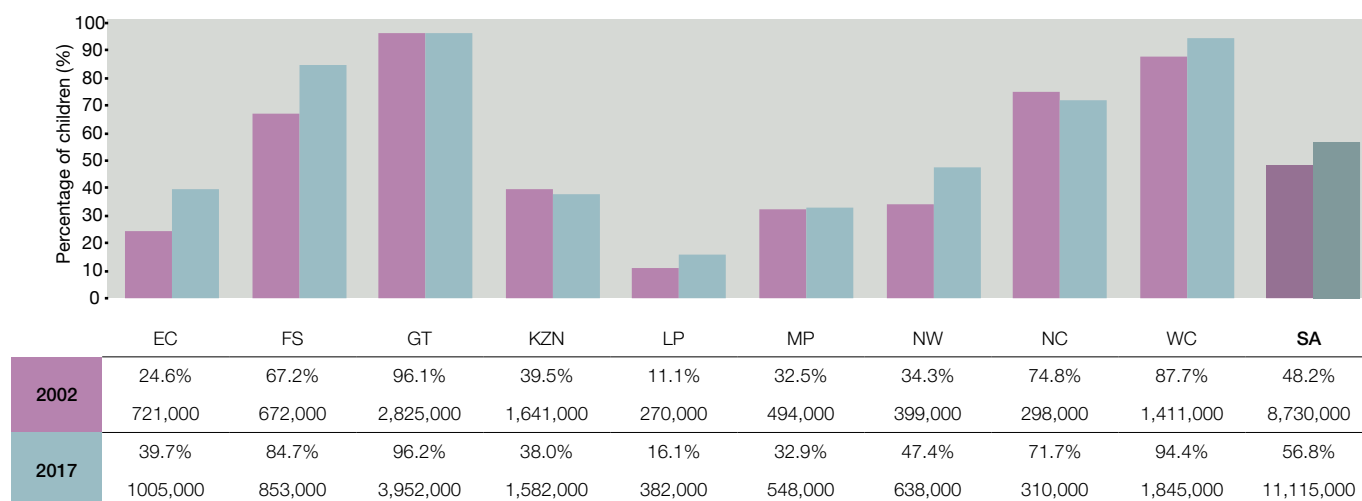
There are marked provincial differences in the rural and urban distribution of the child population. This is related to the

distribution of cities in South Africa, and the legacy of apartheid’s spatial arrangements where women, children and older people in particular were relegated to the former homelands. The Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces alone are home to about three-quarters (72%) of all rural children in South Africa. KwaZulu-Natal has the largest child population in numeric terms, with 2.6 million (62%) of its child population being classified as rural. The province with the highest proportion of rural children is Limpopo, where only 16% of children live in urban areas. Proportionately more children (39%) live in the former homelands, compared with adults (28%). More than 99% of children living in the former homeland areas are African.

In 2017, children living in the Gauteng and Western Cape are almost entirely urban (96% and 94% respectively). These provinces historically have large urban populations. The urban child population in Gauteng alone has grown by over 1.1 million since 2002 and the urban child population in the Western Cape has grown by 430,000. These increases would be partly the result of urban births, but also partly the result of movement within the province and migration from other provinces. Other provinces that have experienced a marked growth in the urban share of the child population are the Eastern Cape, Free State and North West.

Rural areas, and particularly the former homelands, have much poorer populations. Nearly two-thirds of children in

Figure 5a: Children living in urban areas, by province, 2002 & 2017



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2018) *General Household Survey 2002*; *General Household Survey 2017*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall & Winnie Sambu, Children’s Institute, UCT.

the poorest income quintile live in rural areas compared with 10% in the richest quintile. In other words, within the poorest part of the population, it is mainly rural households that care for children – even though many of these children may have parents who live and work in urban areas.

The inequalities also remain strongly racialised. More than 90% of White, Coloured and Indian children are urban, compared with 51% of African children.

There are no statistically significant differences in child population in urban and rural areas across age groups.

Children living in formal, informal and traditional housing

This indicator shows the number and share of children living in formal, informal and traditional housing. For the purposes of the indicator, “formal” housing is considered a proxy for adequate housing and consists of: dwellings or brick structures on separate stands; flats or apartments; town/cluster/semi-detached houses; units in retirement villages; rooms or flatlets on larger properties provided they are built with sturdy materials. “Informal” housing consists of: informal dwellings or shacks in backyards or informal settlements; dwellings or houses/flats/rooms in backyards built of iron, wood or other non-durable materials; caravans or tents. “Traditional dwelling” is defined as a “traditional dwelling/hut/structure made of traditional materials” situated in a rural area.

Children’s right to adequate housing means that they should not have to live in informal dwellings. One of the seven elements of adequate housing identified by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is that it must be “habitable”.⁴ To be habitable, houses should have enough space to prevent overcrowding, and should be built in a way that ensures physical safety and protection from the weather.

Formal brick houses that meet the state’s standards for quality housing could be considered “habitable”, whereas informal dwellings such as shacks in informal settlements and backyards would not be considered habitable or adequate. Informal housing in backyards and informal settlements makes up the bulk of the housing backlog in South Africa. “Traditional” housing in rural areas cannot necessarily be assumed to be inadequate. Some traditional dwellings are more habitable than new subsidy houses – they can be more spacious and better insulated, for example.

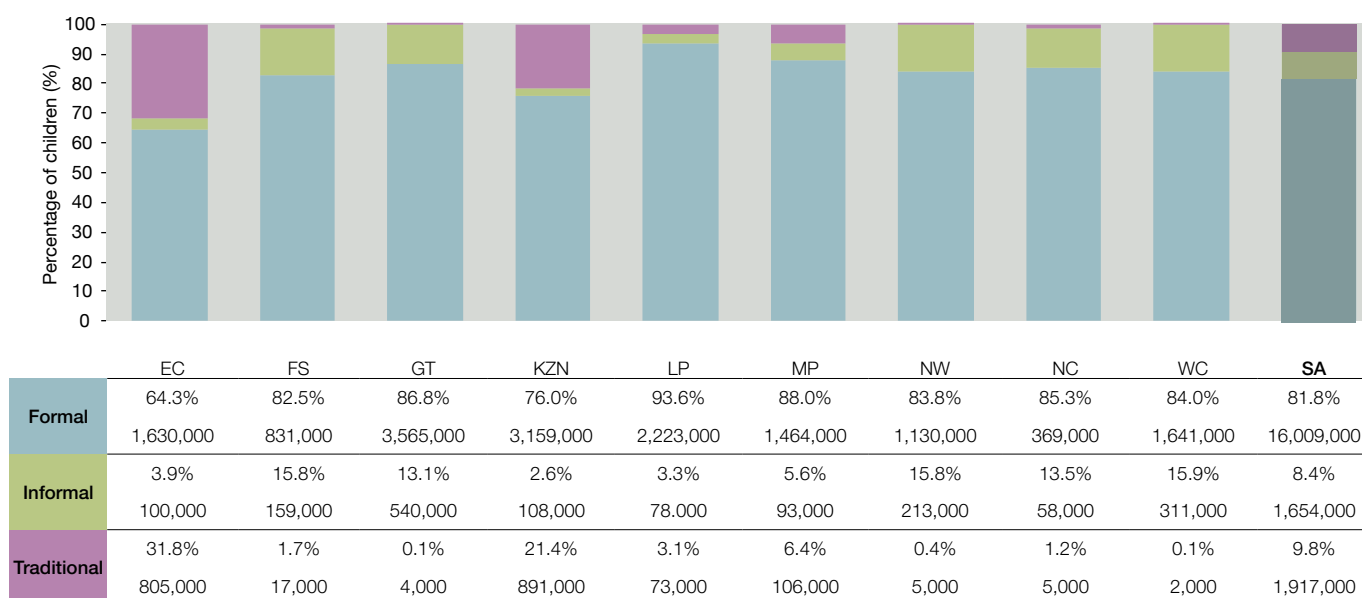
Access to services is another element of “adequate housing”. Children living in formal areas are more likely to have services on site than those living in informal or traditional dwellings. They are also more likely to live closer to facilities like schools, libraries, clinics and hospitals than those living in informal settlements or rural areas. Children living in informal settlements are more exposed to hazards such as shack fires and paraffin poisoning.

The environmental hazards associated with informal housing are exacerbated for very young children. The distribution of children in informal dwellings is slightly skewed towards younger children and babies: 43% of children in informal housing are in the 0 – 5-year age group.

In 2017, more than 1.6 million children (8%) in South Africa lived in backyard dwellings or shacks in informal settlements. The number of children in informal housing has declined slightly from 2.3 million (13%) in 2002. The provinces with the highest shares of informally-housed children are the Western Cape, North West and Free State (all with 16% of children living in informal housing). The Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal have by far the largest shares of children living in traditional dwellings (32% and 21% respectively).

The distribution of children in formal, informal and traditional dwellings has remained fairly constant since 2002. But racial inequalities persist. Almost all White children (99.5%) live in formal housing, compared with only 80% of African children. Access to formal housing increases with income. Ninety-nine percent of children in the wealthiest 20% of households live in formal dwellings, compared with 75% of children in the poorest quintile.

Figure 5b: Children living in formal, informal and traditional housing, by province, 2017



Source: Statistics South Africa (2018) *General Household Survey 2017*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall & Winnie Sambu, Children’s Institute, UCT.

Children living in overcrowded households

Children are defined as living in overcrowded dwellings when there is a ratio of more than two people per room (excluding bathrooms but including kitchen and living room). Thus, a dwelling with two bedrooms, a kitchen and sitting-room would be counted as overcrowded if there were more than eight household members.

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights defines “habitability” as one of the criteria for adequate housing.⁵ Overcrowding is a problem because it can undermine children’s needs and rights. For instance, it is difficult for school children to do homework if other household members want to sleep or watch television. Children’s right to privacy can be infringed if they do not have space to wash or change in private. The right to health can be infringed as communicable diseases spread more easily in overcrowded conditions, and young children are particularly susceptible to the spread of disease. Overcrowding also places children at greater risk of sexual abuse, especially where boys and girls have to share beds, or children have to share beds with adults.

Overcrowding makes it difficult to target services and programmes to households effectively – for instance, urban households are entitled to six kilolitres of free water, but this household-level allocation discriminates against overcrowded households because it does not take account of household size.

In 2017, 3.6 million children lived in overcrowded households. This represents 18% of the child population – much higher than

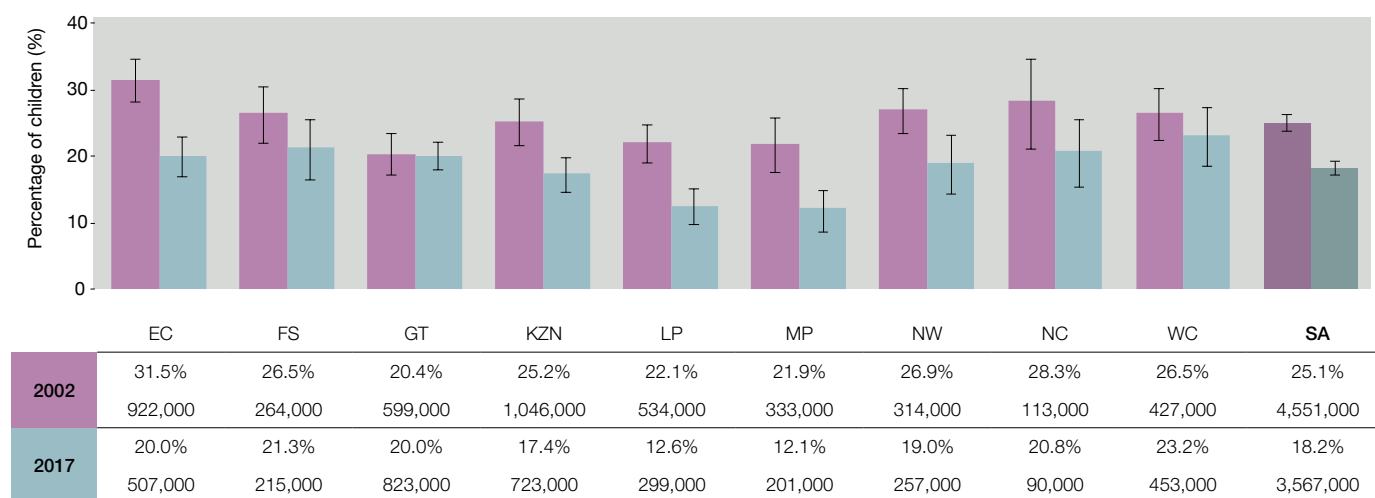
the proportion of adults living in crowded conditions (10%). Overcrowding is associated with housing type: 59% of children staying in informal dwellings live in overcrowded conditions, compared with 26% of children in traditional dwellings and 13% of children in formal housing.

Young children are more likely than older children to live in overcrowded conditions: 21% of children below six years live in crowded households, compared to 18% of children aged 6 – 11, and 15% of children over 12 years.

There is a strong racial bias: While 19% of African and 22% of Coloured children live in crowded conditions, 6% of Indian children and almost no White children live in overcrowded households. Children in the poorest 20% of households are more likely to live in overcrowded conditions (24%) than children in the richest 20% of households (1%).

Average household size has gradually decreased from 4.5 at the time of the 1996 population census, to around 3.3 in 2017, indicating a trend towards smaller households, which may in turn be linked to the provision of small subsidy houses and the splitting of households into smaller units, as well as a rapid growth in single-person households where adults live alone. Households in which children live are larger than the national average, although they have also declined in size over time. The mean household size for adult-only households is 2.2, while the mean household size for households with children is 4.7.⁶

Figure 5c: Children living in overcrowded households, by province, 2002 & 2017



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2018) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2017*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall & Winnie Sambu, Children’s Institute, UCT.

References

- 1 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996.
- 2 Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN General Assembly Resolution 44/25*. Geneva: United Nations.
- 3 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (1991) *The Right to Adequate Housing (art.11 (1)):13/12/91. CESCR General Comment 4*. Geneva: United Nations.
- 4 See no. 3 above.
- 5 See no. 3 above.
- 6 Statistics South Africa (2018) *General Household Survey 2017*. Pretoria: Stats SA. [Analysis by K Hall, Children’s Institute, UCT]