

# Demography of South Africa's children

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The UN General Guidelines for Periodic Reports on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, paragraph 7, says that reports made by states should be accompanied by "detailed statistical information ... Quantitative information should indicate variations between various areas of the country ... and between groups of children ...".<sup>1</sup>

## The child population in South Africa

In mid-2017, South Africa's total population was estimated at 56.5 million people, of whom 19.6 million were children under 18 years. Children therefore make up 35% of the total population.

The distribution of children across provinces is slightly different to that of adults, with a greater share of children living in provinces with large rural populations. Together, KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo accommodate almost half of all children in South Africa. A fifth of children live in Gauteng, a mainly metropolitan province, and 10% live in the Western Cape. Despite being the smallest province in the country, Gauteng accommodates 29% of all households and 28% of adults, but only 20% of children. This difference is because of the relatively large number of adult-only households in the province.

There have been striking changes in the provincial child populations since 2002. The number of children living in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo has decreased, while the numbers of children living in Gauteng and Western Cape have risen by 40% and 21% respectively. This is partly the result of population movement (for example, when children are part of migrant households or move to join existing urban households), and partly the result of natural population growth (new births within the province).

We can look at inequality by dividing all households into five equal groups or income quintiles, based on total income to the household (including earnings and social grants) and dividing that by the number of household members, with quintile 1 being

the poorest 20% of households, quintile 2 being the next poorest and so on. Quintile 5 consists of the least-poor 20%. More than two-thirds of children live in the poorest 40% of households (i.e. the poorest two quintiles).

Children are fairly equally distributed across the age groups, with an average of just over one million children in each year under 18. The gender split is equal for children. In terms of the apartheid-era racial categories, 85% of children are African, 8% are Coloured, 5% White and 2% Indian.

These population estimates are based on the General Household Survey (GHS), which is conducted annually by Statistics South Africa. The population numbers derived from the survey are weighted to the mid-year population estimates using weights provided by Statistics South Africa. Using previously weighted data (the 2013 population model), it appeared that the child population had remained fairly stable, with a marginal reduction of 0.2% in the population size between 2002 and 2015. However there was considerable uncertainty around the official population estimates, particularly in the younger age groups.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, Statistics South Africa updated the model and recalibrated the mid-year population estimates all the way back to 2002,<sup>3</sup> and re-released the data with new weights in 2018. The Children Count team reanalysed all the data retrospectively. Based on the recently revised weights it appears that child population has grown by 8%, increasing from 18.1 million in 2002 to 19.6 million in 2017.

**Table 1: Distribution of households, adults and children in South Africa, by province, 2017**

PROVINCE	HOUSEHOLDS		ADULTS		CHILDREN		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	% change 2002 – 2017
Eastern Cape	1,667,000	10%	3,965,000	11%	2,534,000	13%	-13%
Free State	882,000	5%	1,860,000	5%	1,007,000	5%	1%
Gauteng	4,709,000	29%	10,170,000	28%	4,108,000	21%	40%
KwaZulu-Natal	2,827,000	17%	6,915,000	19%	4,159,000	21%	0%
Limpopo	1,537,000	9%	3,404,000	9%	2,374,000	12%	-2%
Mpumalanga	1,248,000	8%	2,782,000	8%	1,662,000	8%	9%
North West	1,172,000	7%	2,508,000	7%	1,348,000	7%	16%
Northern Cape	333,000	2%	782,000	2%	432,000	2%	9%
Western Cape	1,823,000	11%	4,556,000	12%	1,954,000	10%	21%
<b>South Africa</b>	<b>16,199,000</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>36,943,000</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>19,579,000</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>8%</b>

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

## Children living with their biological parents

Many children in South Africa do not live consistently in the same household as their biological parents. This is a long-established feature of childhoods in South Africa, and international studies have shown that the country is unique to the extent that parents are absent from children's daily lives.<sup>4</sup> Parental absence is related to many factors, including historic population control, labour migration, poverty, housing and educational opportunities, low marriage and cohabitation rates, as well as customary care arrangements.<sup>5</sup> It is common for relatives to play a substantial role in child-rearing. Many children experience a sequence of different caregivers, are raised without fathers, or live in different households to their biological siblings.

Parental absence does not necessarily mean parental abandonment. Many parents continue to support and see their children regularly even if they have to live elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

Virtually all children live with at least one adult, and the vast majority live in households where there are two or more co-resident adults. This indicator examines co-residence between children and their biological parents specifically. Although many children live with just one of their biological parents (usually the mother), this does not mean that the mother is a "single parent" as she is not necessarily the only adult caregiver in the household. In most cases, there are other adult household members such as aunts, uncles and grandparents who may contribute to the care of children.

The share of children living with both parents decreased from 39% in 2002 to 34% in 2017. Forty-one percent of all children (8.1 million children) live with their mothers but not with their fathers. Only 3% of children live in households where their fathers are present and their mothers absent. Twenty-one percent do not

have either of their biological parents living with them. This does not necessarily mean that they are orphaned: most children without any co-resident parents have at least one parent who is alive but living elsewhere.

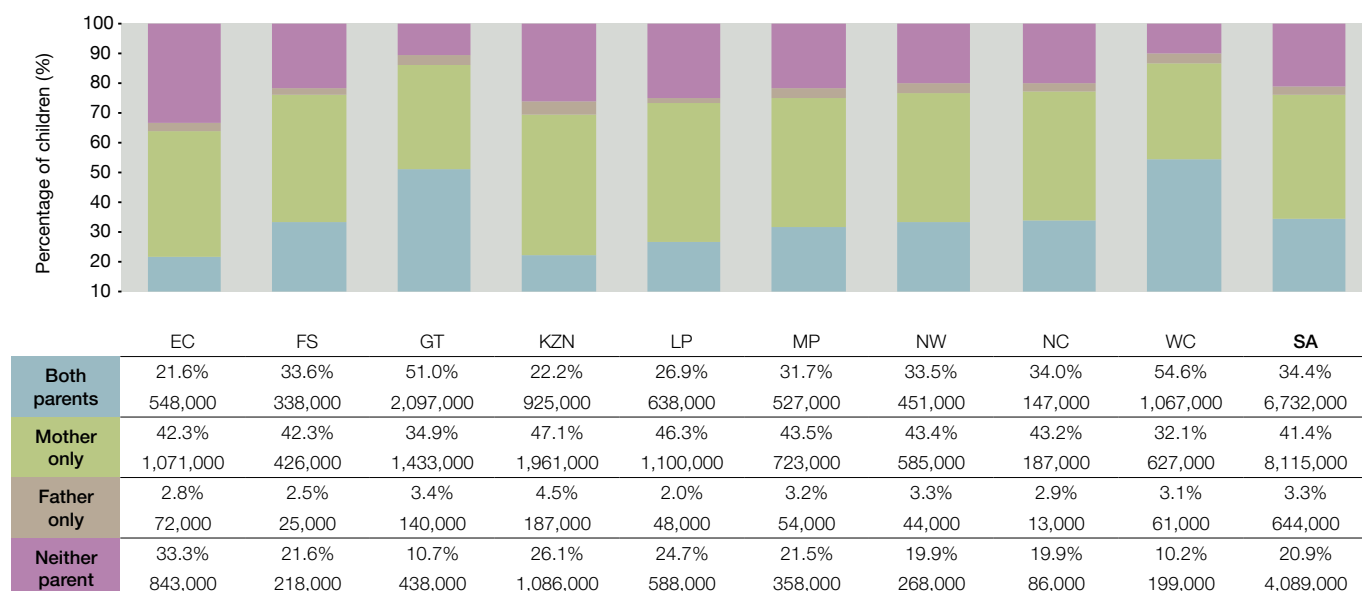
There is some provincial variation in these patterns. In the Western Cape and Gauteng, the share of children living with both parents is significantly higher than the national average, with around half of children resident with both parents (55% and 51%, respectively). Similarly, the number of children living with neither parent is relatively low in these two provinces (10% and 11%, respectively). In contrast, close to a third of children (33%) in the Eastern Cape live with neither parent. These patterns are consistent from 2002 to 2017.

Children in the poorest 20% of households are least likely to live with both parents: only 16% have both parents living with them, compared with 76% of children in the wealthiest 20% of households.

Less than one-third (30%) of African children live with both their parents, while the vast majority of Indian and White children (83% and 78%, respectively) reside with both biological parents. Almost a quarter of all African children do not live with either parent and a further 44% live with their mothers but not their fathers. These figures are striking for the way in which they suggest the limited presence of biological fathers in the home lives of large numbers of African children.

Younger children are more likely than older children to have co-resident mothers, while older children are more likely to be living with neither parent. While 13% of children aged 0 – 5 years (909,000) live with neither parent, this increases to 28% of children (1.63 million) aged 12 – 17 years.

Figure 1a: Children living with their biological parents, 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.

## Orphaned children

An orphan is defined as a child under the age of 18 years whose mother, father or both biological parents have died (including those whose living status is reported as unknown, but excluding those whose living status is unspecified). For the purpose of this indicator, orphans are defined in three mutually exclusive categories:

- A maternal orphan is a child whose mother has died but whose father is alive.
- A paternal orphan is a child whose father has died but whose mother is alive.
- A double orphan is a child whose mother and father have both died.

The total number of orphans is the sum of maternal, paternal and double orphans. This definition differs from those commonly used by United Nations agencies and the Actuarial Society of South Africa (ASSA), where the definition of maternal and paternal orphans includes children who are double orphans.

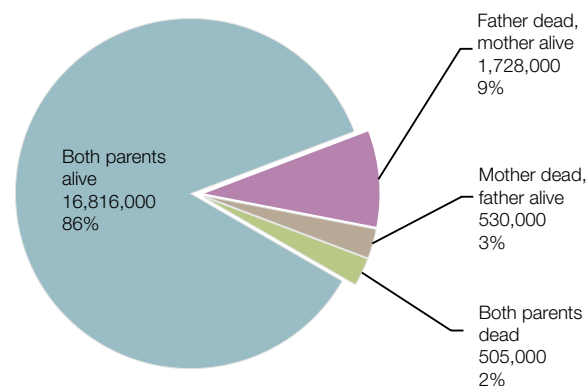
In 2017, there were 2.8 million orphans in South Africa. This includes children without a living biological mother, father or both parents, and is equivalent to 14% of all children in South Africa.

The total number of orphans increased by over a million between 2002 and 2009, after which the trend reversed. By 2017, orphan numbers had fallen to below 2002 levels. This was largely the result of improved access to antiretrovirals.

Orphan status is not necessarily an indicator of the quality of care that children receive. It is important to disaggregate the total orphan figures because the death of one parent may have different implications for children than the death of both parents. In particular, it seems that children who are maternally orphaned are at risk of poorer outcomes than paternal orphans – for example, in relation to education.<sup>7</sup>

The majority (63%) of all orphans in South Africa are paternal orphans (with living mothers). In 2017, 3% of children were maternal orphans with living fathers, 9% were paternal orphans with living mothers, and a further 3% were recorded as double

**Figure 1b: Children living in South Africa, by orphanhood status, 2017**

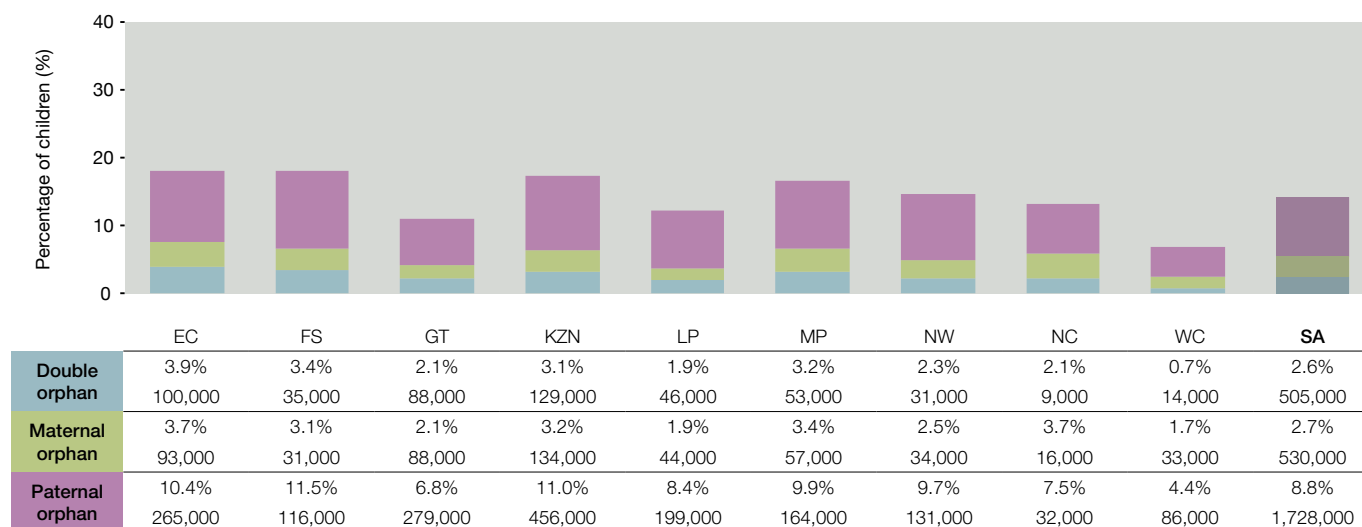


Source: Statistics South Africa (2018) *General Household Survey 2017*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall & Winnie Sambu, Children's Institute, UCT.

orphans. This means that 6% of children in South Africa did not have a living biological mother and twice that number did not have a living biological father. The numbers of paternal orphans are high because of the higher mortality rates of men in South Africa, as well as the frequent absence of fathers in their children's lives (1.6% or 314,000 children have fathers whose vital status is reported to be "unknown", compared with 0.3% or 54,000 children whose mothers' status is unknown).

The number and share of children who are double orphans more than doubled between 2002 and 2009, from approximately 361,000 to 866,000 after which the rates fell again. In 2017, 505,000 children had lost both their parents. Orphaning rates are particularly high in provinces that contain the former homelands, as these areas bear a large burden of care for orphaned children. Fifty-four percent of double orphans live in either the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal or Limpopo provinces.

**Figure 1c: Number and percentage of orphans, 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.

KwaZulu-Natal has the largest child population and the highest orphan numbers, with 17% of children in that province recorded as orphans who have lost a mother, a father or both parents. Orphaning rates in the Eastern Cape (18%) and the Free State (18%) are similarly high. The lowest orphaning rates are in the Gauteng (where 11% of children have lost at least one parent), and the Western Cape (7%).

The poorest households carry the greatest burden of care for orphans. Close to half (49%) of all orphans are resident in

the poorest 20% of households. Eighteen percent of children in the poorest 20% of households are orphans, compared with the richest 20% where total orphaning rates are around 4%.

The likelihood of orphaning increases with age. Across all age groups, the main form of orphaning is paternal orphaning, which increases from 4% among children under six years of age, to 15% among children aged 12 – 17 years. While 1% of children under six years are maternal orphans, this increases to 5% in children aged 12 – 17 years.

## Child-only households

A child-only household is defined as a household in which all members are younger than 18 years. These households are also commonly referred to as “child-headed households”, although this definition differs from the one contained in the Children’s Act. The Children’s Act definition of a child-headed household includes households where there are adults who may be too sick or too old to effectively head the household and a child over 16 years bears this responsibility.

While orphaning undoubtedly places a large burden on families, there is little evidence to suggest that their capacity to care for orphans has been saturated, as commentators feared in the past. Rather than seeing increasing numbers of orphaned children living on their own, the vast majority of orphans live with adult family members.

There were about 58,000 children living in a total of 32,000 child-only households across South Africa in 2017. This equates to 0.3% of all children. While children living in child-only households are rare relative to those residing in other household forms, the number of children living in this extreme situation is of concern.

Importantly, however, there has been no increase in the share of children living in child-only households in the period 2002 – 2017. If anything, the number has dropped. Predictions of rapidly increasing numbers of child-headed households as a

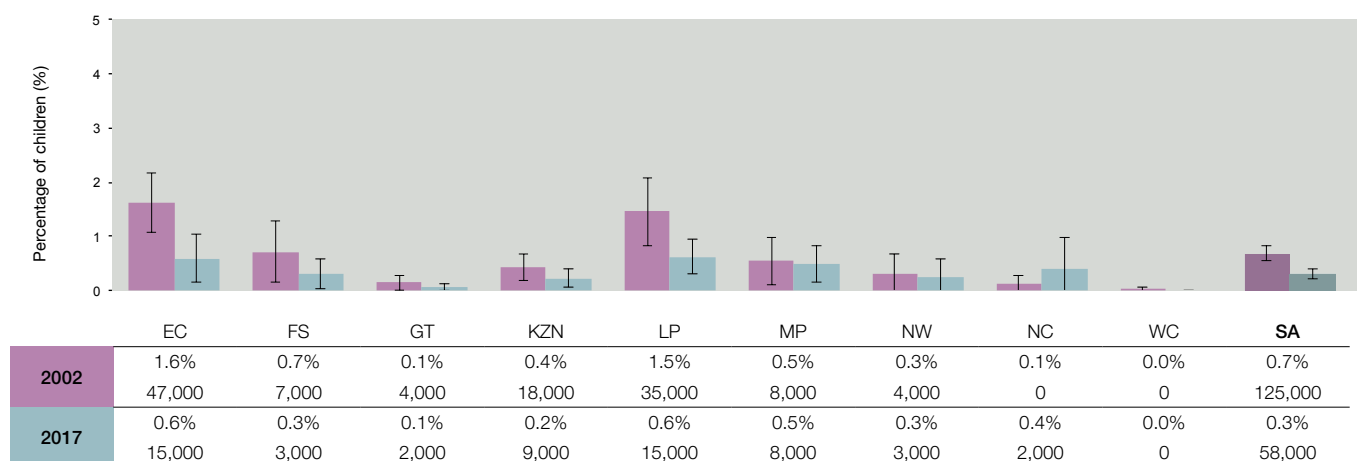
result of HIV are at this point unrealised. An analysis of national household surveys to examine the circumstances of children in child-headed households in South Africa revealed that most children in child-only households are not orphans<sup>8</sup> and 84% have a living mother. These findings suggest that social processes other than HIV-related mortality may play important roles in the formation of these households. For example, leaving teenage boys to look after a rural homestead while parents migrate to work may be a livelihood strategy for the household.

While it is not ideal for any child to live without an adult resident, it is positive that more than half (57%) of all children living in child-only households are aged 15 years and above. Children can work legally from the age of 15, and from 16 they can obtain an identity document and receive grants on behalf of younger children. Only 6% of children in child-headed households are under six years of age.

Research suggests that child-only households are frequently temporary arrangements, and often exist just for a short period, for example while adult migrant workers are away, or for easy access to school during term time, or after the death of an adult and prior to other arrangements being made to care for the children (such as other adults moving in or the children moving to live with other relatives).<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 1d: Children living in child-only households, by province, 2002 & 2017**

(Y-axis reduced to 5%)



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

More than 50% of all children in child-only households live in two provinces: Limpopo and Eastern Cape, each with 26% of children in child-only households. From 2002 to 2017, these provinces have consistently been home to the majority of children living in child-only households. The number of child-only households in KwaZulu-Natal appears to have dropped, but this may not be significant because the numbers are so small and the confidence intervals relatively wide.

Relative to children in mixed-generation households, child-only households are vulnerable in a number of ways. Child-only households are predominantly clustered in the poorest households: 88% of children living in child-only households are in the poorest 20% of households. In addition to the absence of

adult members who may provide care and security, they are at risk of living in poorer conditions, with poor access to services, less (and less reliable) income, and low levels of access to social grants.

There has been very little robust data on child-headed households in South Africa to date. The figures should be treated with caution as the number of child-only households forms just a very small sub-sample of the General Household Survey. In particular, we caution against reading too much into the provincial breakdowns. When comparing the overall estimates nationally, the number of children in child-headed households seems to have declined since 2002.

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