The shape of children's families and households: A demographic overview

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This chapter gives an overview of children's living arrangements in South Africa, drawing mainly on household surveys. It draws attention to the diversity of family forms and living arrangements, and to the challenges of categorising families. It differentiates between the concepts of "family" and "household" and shows the fluidity of household and child-care arrangements as families seek to maintain family connections across households while also providing income and care. This creates a challenge for the state, which must design policies and programmes to support families and their children without undermining family strategies.

The chapter considers the following questions:

- Why is there pressure to classify families given the diversity and fluidity of families?
- What is the difference between a family and a household?
- What do South African households look like, and how have they been classified?
- What are the trends in children's household forms, and what do we know about "vulnerable" household forms?
- Who cares for children in the absence of parents, and what are some of the reasons for parental absence?
- What are some of the underlying dynamics that influence household arrangements?

The diversity of families

International research has consistently shown that functional families offer the most natural environment for the growth, protection, support and socialisation of children.[1] At the same time there is wide recognition that "the concept of the family may differ in some respects from State to State, and even from region to region within a State, and that it is therefore not possible to give the concept a standard definition".[2] The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has urged that the concept "must be understood in a wide sense" and "interpreted broadly and in accordance with appropriate local usage".[3] The United Nations Human Rights Committee requires that "States parties should report on how the concept and scope of the family is construed or defined in their own society and legal system" and that "where diverse concepts of the family, 'nuclear' and 'extended', exist within a State, this should be indicated with an explanation of the degree of protection afforded to each".[4] This is presumably to ensure that some family forms are not disadvantaged by current policy.

It is not a simple task to classify the diversity of family forms in South Africa. The following sections will illustrate that families and households are not necessarily the same and they do not necessarily have fixed boundaries: both can extend over geographic space and degrees of kin, both can be multigenerational and porous, shifting rather than static, and there are possibilities for overlap and duplication in that people may belong to more than one household, just as kinship ties connect multiple families in complex ways.

What is the difference between family and household, and why are they so often confused?

Many people conflate the terms family and household. The confusion arises in part from the assumption that families are essentially (or ideally) nuclear in form. It has been argued that confusion about these constructs stems from instances where those who attempt to analyse them do not see Western kinship and household systems as the product of culture.[5] While "household" and "family" may coincide, for example in the context of nuclear families, this cannot be taken as the norm, even in "Western" contexts, and especially not in southern Africa.[6]

If one tries to distinguish between the terms, then "household" could be defined as an arrangement of co-residence with shared consumption and production (even though household members may not be co-resident all the time), whereas "family" would refer to social groups that are related by blood or bonds of marriage, non-marital union, adoption or some other affiliation, and which endure over time and space.

Both constructs may incorporate degrees of kinship, forms of emotional attachment, and relations of dependence and reciprocity. Yet "the household" cannot be understood simply as the residential dimension of "the family". Arguably both

households and families are dynamic, changing over time with births and deaths, the union and separation of partners and, in the case of households, the arrival and departure of members.

While "household" and "family" may coincide, for example in the context of nuclear families, this cannot be taken as the norm.

Although co-residence is not necessarily a key characteristic in traditional patterns of family organisation, researchers often use household survey data to study family structure.[7] Very few statistical offices report on families, and when they do refer to families they are often simply reporting on households.

The possibilities and limitations of household surveys

Most surveys use a physical dwelling as the sampling unit and then determine whether there are one or more households at that dwelling, and who resided in each household at a particular point in time. In other words, they look at co-residence arrangements within a physical space, rather than family structure. However, most of the large household surveys in South Africa do provide some information on family relationships within the household – for example by identifying co-resident spouses or partners (in the case of adults) and connecting children with their co-resident parents. Many also record the relationship between each member and the head of the household, although the notion of household headship is itself problematic and the person recorded as the head may sometimes be quite arbitrary. Qualitative research has found that subjective definitions of household membership and headship often include absent household members (such as migrant workers) and so do not always correspond to the definitions arrived at through surveys.[8] What the surveys usually cannot see is relationships between other members of the household or the extent to which families are stretched, with members spread across different households. And only panel surveys that return to the same group of people can see the movement of individuals between households, and how households change over time.

Nevertheless, surveys are often the only way we can quantitatively analyse the distribution of different household types and map trends over time. Although the types tell us

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Box 4: How are households defined in different surveys?

The **Population Census** defines a household as *"a group of persons who live together and provide themselves jointly with food or other essentials for living, or a single person who lives alone"*.[9] The census only counts people who were present in the household on census night, so it would exclude members who are away. Using this definition, a household may be even narrower than a family that usually lives together.

The **General Household Survey** (GHS) is a nationally representative survey conducted by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) every year. It allows for households to include members who are not present at the time of the survey by defining a household as *"every person who is considered to be a member of the household … who stayed here at least four nights on average per week for the last four weeks"*.[10] This is still a narrow definition of a household because it excludes non-resident members including those who go to work or school elsewhere but return on weekends. Other official surveys like the Income and Expenditure Survey, the Quarterly Labour Force Survey and the Living Conditions Survey also use this definition.

The **National Income Dynamics Study** (NIDS) is a nationally representative panel survey commissioned by the Presidency. NIDS uses a broader definition of the household than the Stats SA surveys because it includes non-resident members. In this way it allows for double counting: the same person (say, a temporary migrant) might be counted as a non-resident member at their home of origin and also as a resident member of the household where they live and work. NIDS has three criteria for defining household membership:

- Household members must have lived "under this roof" or within the same compound / homestead at least 15 days in the last 12 months; and
- When they are together they share food from a common source; and
- They contribute to or share in a common resource pool.[11]

The NIDS survey therefore defines a household not by the regularity of a member's physical presence but by their subjective "belonging" to the household, implied by shared resources and communal living arrangements. A similar definition is used in the demographic surveillance sites at Hlabisa and Agincourt.

Table 1: Distribution of household types in South Africa[i]

Household type	Share of households
One-person (where there is only one household member)	22%
Couple (where there are only two members and they are either spouses or partners)	10%
Childed couple (where there is a spouse/partner couple with their own children and no other members)	19%
Lone parent (where there is a person without spouse/partner in the household, with their own children and no other members)	11%
Extended (any household that does not fit into one of the above categories, but all members are related)	36%
Composite (any household with at least one unrelated member)	2%
Total	100%

Source: Statistics South Africa (2017) *General Household Survey 2016.* Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Debbie Budlender.
Note: "Childed couple" refers to the strictly nuclear form (two parents with one or more biological children) and for ease of reading is labelled "nuclear" in the rest of this chapter.

little about the nature of families or the quality of relationships, they are useful for giving an overall picture of household arrangements and the contexts in which children live, and can be used to inform social policy if they are interpreted with care.[12]

What do South African households look like?

Types of households in South Africa

Given survey limitations and the complexity of household and family forms, there is no definitive or ideal way of classifying households for purposes of family analysis. Stats SA has tended to use four household types: single-person, nuclear, extended and complex,[13] while Table 1 presents a more detailed analysis of household types in South Africa using six types[14].

As the table shows, the largest single category is the "extended" family household (36% of all households), followed by single-person households (22%). Less than one fifth of households in South Africa take the form of a nuclear family (i.e. "childed couple").

Cross-sectional analyses can describe household arrangements at a single point in time but do not show how households change over time. Despite arguments that processes of modernisation and industrialisation lead to the simplifying of family structure towards a nuclear form,[15] various analyses have suggested that extended household forms continue to predominate, and that nuclear structures are not increasing.[16] A rural analysis concluded that a decline in nuclear family structures and an increase in three-generation households was due largely to "changes in migratory behaviour (such as an increase in female labour migration)".[17]

Table 2: Children's household types, total and by race

Household type	Share of all children	African	Coloured	Indian / Asian	White
Nuclear (spouse/partner couple with their own children and no other members)	25%	21%	37%	61%	67%
Lone parent (single parent with own children and no other members)	10%	11%	6%	3%	6%
Extended (not nuclear or lone parent, but all members are related)	62%	66%	50%	35%	23%
Composite (not nuclear or lone parent, and some members are not related)	2%	2%	7%	1%	4%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Statistics South Africa (2017) *General Household Survey 2016.* Pretoria, Stats SA. Analysis by Debbie Budlender.
Note: "One-person" and "couple" households have been excluded from the child-centred analysis as the number of children living in these household forms is negligible.

i   The analysis in Tables 1 and 2 draws on a simplified version of the IPUMS method, to provide an overall picture of types of households in South Africa. The IPUMS-International project harmonises variables from census data to enable comparisons between different countries. The advantage of the IPUMS method is that it moves beyond each member's relationship to the household head and combines a number of variables (including age, household relationships, fertility, marital status and even proximity on the household roster) to determine family interrelationships.

Children's households

Table 2 shows that children's living arrangements are very different from the overall pattern presented above. In particular, the "extended household" category is much more prevalent with 62% of children living in such households. A quarter of all children live in strictly nuclear households (consisting only of children and their biological parents), while 10% live in lone parent households. When weighted to the population, approximately five million children live in nuclear households and two million live in lone parent households, while 12 million are in extended households.

The overall pattern reflects the dominance of the African population, but the patterns vary substantially by race. Two thirds (66%) of African children live in extended households while only 21% live in households that are defined as nuclear. At the other extreme, 67% of White children live in nuclear households. Given assumptions about nuclear forms being the Western norm, it is interesting that one third of White children do not live in nuclear family households.

Trends in "vulnerable" household forms

As we have seen, the extended household is the most common configuration nationally, and even more so for children. Extended households include multiple-generation households (for example, children, parents and grandparents) as well as many other permutations, such as a mother living with her child and her sister, or households where cousins are included. Extended households are not necessarily large: a two-person household with a child and her aunt would fall into this category, for example.

Household forms that are sometimes regarded as particularly vulnerable, such as child-headed households, youth-headed households and skip-generation households (where the middle generation is missing), do not appear in the general household typologies presented above as they could apply to many of the household types. For example, a child- or youth-headed household could be a nuclear family (when two young people have a baby and form a family), a single-person household (if a young person lives alone) or an extended household (if young siblings or cousins live together).

Working with data from the Agincourt demographic surveillance site, Madhavan and Schatz defined categories for various "fragile" household forms (including child-headed and skip-generation households) that were commonly considered to be highly prevalent, and possibly increasing. They found only a small minority of households in these categories.[18]

A comparison of children's household types over the period 1993 to 2017 (as illustrated in Figure 2) also found no increase in the prevalence of child-headed, youth-headed, skip-generation and single-adult households. If anything, these household forms, already a small minority, decreased slightly while "extended" household forms increased over the two post-apartheid decades.[19]

Most of the single-adult households are households where children live with their biological mother. However, the
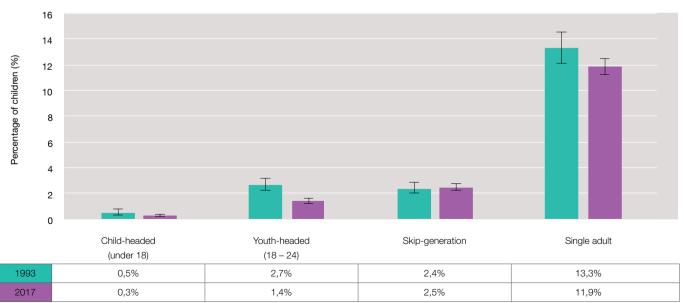
Figure 2: Share of children in household sub-types, 1993 & 2017

	Child-headed (under 18)	Youth-headed (18 – 24)	Skip-generation	Single adult
1993	0,5%	2,7%	2,4%	13,3%
2017	0,3%	1,4%	2,5%	11,9%

vast majority of children live in households with at least two adults, and about half have three or more co-resident adults.

Child-headed households

There have been persistent and widely held assumptions that child-headed households are without family support – and that parents or adult caregivers are "permanently absent".[20] The dominant narrative on orphans and vulnerable children has suggested that children in child-headed households are mainly orphans, and that they have proliferated because of HIV-related orphaning. While it is true that South Africa has high rates of orphaning, and that the rapid increase in orphaning during the 2000s was driven by HIV, this does not explain the phenomenon of child-headed households.

> *Orphans are overwhelmingly cared for by family members, while child-headed households may be an outcome of family strategies.*

In 2017, 80% of children living in child-only households had a living father and 88% had a living mother. Only 5% were double orphans.[21] These distributions have remained fairly consistent since 2002, and over the past decade the share of children living in child-only households has remained small (around 0.5% of children).[22]

The assumed or implied link between orphaning and child-headed households has been promoted by international agencies, non-governmental organisations and government departments and has remained remarkably persistent even in academic literature.[23] It has been suggested that assumptions or even deliberate misrepresentation of child-headed households "served to justify the intervention of diverse donors into the (re)construction of the South African family".[24]

The available evidence suggests that orphans are overwhelmingly cared for by family members, while child-headed households may be an outcome of family strategies (for example, to access education, or to maintain a rural homestead while adults migrate for work). Child-headed households can be temporary arrangements, and they are not necessarily without family support. For example, there may be neighbouring relatives, and migrant adults may return. Even in the relatively few cases where children are orphaned and living alone, the "child-headed" status of the household may be transient, just until new family care arrangements are made. These dynamics are not easily captured in household

surveys, which do not look beyond the household or see change over time at the level of the household. Child-headed households are substantially more likely than other households with children to receive remittances from family members living elsewhere, again pointing to family support beyond the household.[25]

An analysis of child-headed households in the 2017 General Household Survey reveals that:
- About three quarters of child-headed households are in the former homelands, mostly in Limpopo, the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal.
- 95% of children in child-headed households have at least one living parent.
- 90% of child-headed households have at least one member who is aged 15 or over.
- Child-headed households are small (with a mean household size of 1.8) and nearly half have only one member. These children living alone are mainly boys in their older teens.

Although the percentage of children living in child-headed households is very small, the number is not negligible when one considers that every one of those children may need support services. In 2017, about 58,000 children were living in 48,000 households where all the resident members were under 18 years. Children in child-headed households may be vulnerable in multiple ways: they tend to be extremely poor and have low access to social grants,[26] they may struggle to access schooling or to achieve academically, they may be vulnerable to violence, abuse and exploitation, and experience high levels of anxiety, stress or grief.[27] It is important that responses and support services for child-headed households distinguish between those that need intervention in their household arrangements (for example by placing children in alternative care) and those where family strategies should be acknowledged but where other services are needed (such as counselling or assisting with access to school and social grants).

Section 137 of the Children's Act defines "child-headed households" differently from the common definition where households consist only of children under 18 years. The purpose of the Children's Act definition is formally to recognise child-headed households as a family form and give them legal status. It refers to a household in which a child over the age of 16 has assumed the role of primary caregiver for other children in the household, even if there is an adult living in the household who, for example, is too old or ill to take on that role. The definition of such child-headed households is dependent on their identification by

welfare services and a discretionary decision by the provincial Head of Social Development that it is in the best interest of the children in the household for it to be defined as a child-headed household. Some of these households are identified and supported locally, through organisations like *Isibindi* (see Case 9 on page 78). Details of the numbers and whereabouts of legally-defined child-headed households are not publicly available, although in 2017 the Department of Social Development was reported to have identified and assisted 3,214 child-headed households.[25]

Female-headed households

The notion of a single household head who is "responsible for the household" is problematic as various members may be responsible for different aspects of household management and decision-making, and responsibilities may be shared, including among adults who are non-resident members.[26] Yet the construct of the "female-headed household" is sometimes cited as a cause for concern, and both Stats SA and international agencies like the World Bank report on female-headed households among their social indicators.[27] Concerns about large numbers of "female-headed households" may arise partly because it is known that women tend to earn less than men and so households without adult males may be poorer on average, with a greater burden on women to maintain the household, care for dependents and provide financial support. There may also be concerns about the absence of men in child-rearing or as role models for children.

A female-headed household may be defined as a household where there are only adult women and no adult men, or where there are both women and men, but a woman is identified as being the nominal household head. Female-headed households are not a new phenomenon in South Africa. Two sources of data from 1980 recorded over 50% of African households in the rural homelands as being headed by women, while female headship was between 20% and 25% in small towns and farms, and higher in metropolitan areas.[31]

Both the 2011 census and the 2016 Community Survey found that 41% of all households in South Africa were headed by women. A child-centred analysis of households puts the number of female-headed households even higher. In 1993, 47% of African children lived in female-headed households and this had increased to 54% in 2014.[32]

Female-headed households are, on average, larger than male-headed households and have more child dependants. Female-headed households are also more likely than male-headed ones to have nobody employed.[33] Even with increased employment rates among women, the income differentials between women and men mean that poverty has remained strongly gendered – a dimension of inequality which is inherited by children and only partly offset by social grants.[34]

Parental co-residence and absence

As shown in the previous chapter, the extent of parental absence from children's households is uniquely high in South Africa. In 2017 just over a third of children in South Africa
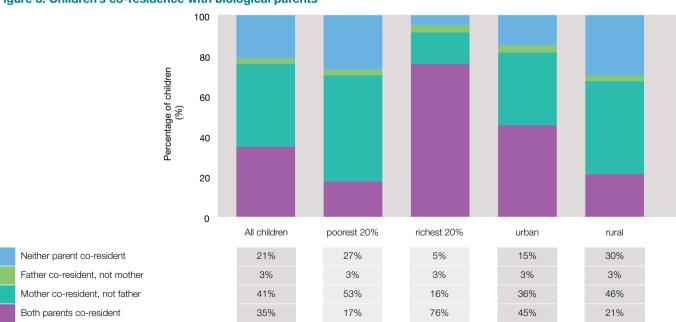
Figure 3: Children's co-residence with biological parents

	All children	poorest 20%	richest 20%	urban	rural
Neither parent co-resident	21%	27%	5%	15%	30%
Father co-resident, not mother	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%
Mother co-resident, not father	41%	53%	16%	36%	46%
Both parents co-resident	35%	17%	76%	45%	21%

Source: Statistics South Africa (2018) *General Household Survey 2017*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Calculations by Katharine Hall, Children's Institute, UCT.
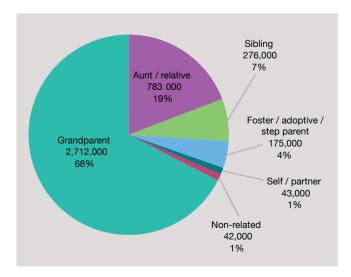
lived with both their parents, while 21% (4.1 million) lived with neither parent. Three quarters had a co-resident mother but only 38% had a co-resident father. Parental co-residence arrangements are clearly related to inequality. Children in the poorest quintile are much less likely than the non-poor to live with both their parents, and more likely to have neither parent in their household. This does not mean that poor people are less attached to their children. Rather it suggests that poor parents may be less able to live with their children, and more likely to have extended family who can provide care. Poor and rural households bear a large burden of care for the children of parents who live elsewhere, for example because they are trying to earn money in cities.

Most children who have only one co-resident parent, (and even those who have no co-resident parents), live in households with two or more adults, where responsibility for child care may be shared. Co-resident men may also play a social fathering role. Although only 38% of children have a co-resident biological father, over three quarters have at least one co-resident adult male.[35]

Very young children are likely to have a co-resident mother (over 90% of children under two years live with their mother), but co-residency drops as children grow up. An analysis of school-age children aged 7 – 17 found that 10% lived in skip-generation households consisting of grandparents and grandchildren with no middle generation.[36]

One again, it should be remembered that these distributions are a moment in time, reflecting the situation when the survey is conducted. The distributions have

remained quite consistent over the past two decades, even though household forms for individual children may have changed during their childhood.

Who cares for children in the absence of biological parents?
Given the political and social history of South Africa where relatives have always played a substantial role in the care of children, skip-generation and three-generation households are more prevalent in rural than urban areas.[37] Almost all of the 4.1 million children who did not have co-resident parents in 2017 were living with kin, as shown in Figure 4.

> *Kinship care may be both a product of structural obstacles to parent-child co-residence, and of choice.*

In the context of labour migration and non-marital childbearing, many grandparents assume the role of co-caregivers or primary caregivers.[38] The presence of a pensioner in the household enables adult household members (including women of working and childbearing age) to become labour migrants, suggesting that income from the pension provides a means to migrate, and/or the means for the pensioner to care for children of the migrant.[39]
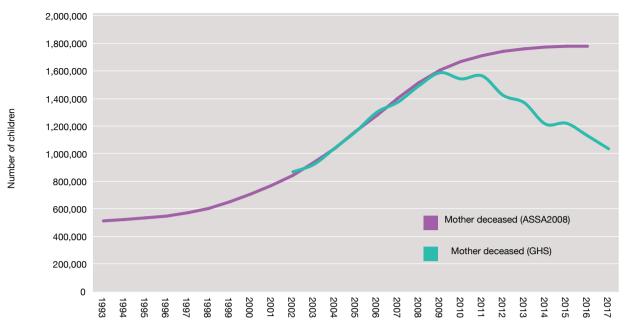
One of the common concerns about grandparent care is that grandparents may be old and frail, and not physically strong enough to provide adequate care. Although the South African population is ageing because of better survival rates, grandparents are not necessarily very old. The average age of transition to motherhood has been fairly stable since the 1970s, at 21 years.[40] This means that many women can expect to become grandmothers in their 40s or earlier.

Over 7 million children live in households where the household head is defined as their grandparent or great-grandparent, and in nearly half of these cases (46%) the grandparent is under 60 years. Almost two thirds of these children also have one or both parents living in the same house, so that caregiving can be shared between parents, grandparents and other kin if present. Around 2.7 million children live with grandparents in the absence of their parents. These grandparents tend to be slightly older on average, although 39% are under 60 years and therefore not yet eligible for an old age pension.

The reasons for parental absence
Parental absence is only partly due to orphaning. Orphaning rates started increasing during the 1990s and rose sharply

Figure 4: Relationship of child to household head when parents are not co-resident

Sibling
276,000
7%

Aunt / relative
783 000
19%

Foster / adoptive / step parent
175,000
4%

Grandparent
2,712,000
68%

Self / partner
43,000
1%

Non-related
42,000
1%

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

Figure 5: Trends in maternal orphaning, comparing ASSA model and survey estimates

during the 2000s, driven mainly by AIDS and related parental deaths. After 2009 orphaning rates (and particularly maternal orphaning) started to decline – much earlier and more quickly than was predicted in modelled projections from the 2000s,[ii] as shown in Figure 5. This was directly related to the roll-out of antiretrovirals – a policy success.

Paternal orphaning rates are higher than maternal orphaning, and therefore account for a larger share of parental absence. In 2017, 5% of children (just over 1 million) had lost their biological mother, while 11% (2.2 million) had lost their father. But orphaning is not the main reason for the absence of either fathers or mothers. Nearly 5 million children do not have a co-resident mother, but only 22% of these are maternally orphaned, while 78% (3.7 million) have a mother living elsewhere. A much larger number of children – 12 million – do not have a co-resident father, but only 18% of these children are paternally orphaned. Nearly 10 million have a biological father living elsewhere.

Parental absence may be related to a range of reasons such as non-marital childbearing, adult employment strategies and labour migration, urban housing constraints, limited availability of affordable care, schooling opportunities, choices about who is best placed to provide care for children, divorce or separation, and any combination of these. Kinship care may be both a product of structural obstacles to parent-child co-residence, and of choice. Research that explicitly set out to analyse the effect of motherhood on labour participation among women found that labour migration was a key reason for maternal absence. [41]

Quantitative estimates of parental absence are snapshots in time, whereas households (and people) are not static. Children may move to join absent parents, or parents may return to the household of origin. The fact that parents are not resident members of the child's household does not mean that they never see the child. They may remain in contact with the family and the child, they may stay in the household some of the time (for example on weekends), they may be integrally involved in decision-making about the child and they might help to support the child financially. Widespread access to mobile phones means that it is much easier for family members to stay in touch than it was previously.

Contact with non-resident parents
Many absent parents do see their children regularly and help to support them financially even when they live elsewhere. Overall, children are less likely to have contact with their absent fathers than with absent mothers: a quarter of children whose fathers live elsewhere never see their fathers.

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ii The Actuarial Society of South Africa issued a cautionary note in 2012, warning that recent estimates of AIDS mortality (in particular adult survival rates) were likely to be overstated as the assumptions around antiretroviral treatment initiation became out of date with public sector guidelines (Actuarial Society of South Africa 2012). A new model, "Thembisa", takes into account more recent developments in HIV prevention and treatment (Johnson 2014).

With high rates of paternal absence in the first place, this suggests that substantial numbers of children have fathers who are absent not only from their households but also from their lives. Around half of children with non-resident fathers see their father at least monthly and a substantial number are in daily or weekly contact. In contrast, only 8% of children whose mothers live elsewhere never see their mothers. Over half of those with a non-resident mother see their mother at least once a month, and one fifth see their mother weekly or daily (as illustrated in Table 3).

> *Teenage childbearing rates have fallen since the 1980s, and have continued to decline since 1994.*

When these numbers are extrapolated to all children under 15, only 1% of have no contact with or financial support from their biological mother even though she is known to be alive. A larger share, 13%, have no contact with their living father. This is an indicator of possible paternal abandonment, although it would include men who do not know that they are fathers (for example if the mother chose not to inform them about their paternity), as well as fathers who are in prison or mental institutions, or who live elsewhere but are too poor or sick to visit or send money.

What are some of the underlying trends relevant to family and household arrangements?
A range of broader trends and dynamics are relevant to family form and household structure in that they influence and/or arise from changing family dynamics. Many of these changes are also reflected in regional and global patterns.

Households are getting smaller
During the 1990s some authors claimed that African families were becoming smaller and more nuclear as they became urbanised, and that this trend was evident in the quantitative survey data.[42] Others argued that the available data could not support such a claim, as surveys were not able to reflect the fluidity of households or adequately describe family forms.[43]

Later analyses found strong signs of changing household structure. Households were indeed becoming smaller on average (decreasing from around 4.4 members in 1993, to 3.2 in 2014),[44] but not because they were becoming more nuclear. Rather, alongside the high prevalence of extended family households, a marked increase in single-person households seems to have contributed to a decrease in average household size.[45] Many of these single adults have children living elsewhere.

Another possible contributing factor is the splitting of large and extended households into smaller units to accommodate families in the tiny 40m^2 dwellings provided through the housing subsidy scheme[46] or as a strategy to access housing subsidies.[47] With around four million houses having been developed since 1994, the so-called "RDP" houses now accommodate about a quarter of all households.

Households where children live have more members than adult-only households, but even these households have become smaller – down from an average of 5.9 resident members in 1993 to 4.7 in 2017.

Table 3: Contact and financial support from parents who live elsewhere

	Absent mother	Absent father
How often does absent parent see the child?		
• Daily / several times a week	20%	22%
• Several times a month	37%	27%
• Several times a year	35%	27%
• Never	8%	24%
Absent parent supports the child financially	**53%**	**46%**
No contact or financial support from absent parent	**7%**	**22%**
Share of all children potentially abandoned	**1.4%**	**13.2%**
Illustrative number of children potentially abandoned by parent	**229,000**	**2.2 million**

Analysis using longitudinal data from NIDS[48] illustrates the extent to which household composition changes over time. Three approaches were used in the investigation, which examined change over a period of less than five years.

- The first test examined whether individuals were living with the same household members in 2010 as in 2008. Even when ignoring changes due to deaths, less than 45% of the panel members were living with exactly the same individuals.
- The second approach looked only at the number of members in the household and found that only 42% were in a household of the same size in 2008 and 2012 even after disregarding both births and deaths.

- The third approach examined how many members of a particular household in 2012 had at least one other member of their 2008 household who was living in a different household less than five years later. The analysis revealed 35% of individuals lived in such "split" households.

These results reveal extremely high rates of change in the composition and size of households even over a short timeframe. Further, other analyses confirm that the overwhelming majority of households in South Africa consist only of related members. The high rates of change in composition and size of households will therefore be mirrored in high rates of change in composition and size of families.

Fertility rates are falling

South Africa's fertility rates have been dropping since the 1960s. They reached their sharpest decline in the 1980s and have continued to decline post-apartheid, reaching 2.4 in 2017.[iii] This "fertility transition" is driven partly by higher education levels and declining marriage rates.[49] The difference in fertility rates between married and unmarried women has narrowed over the years, and the stigma of single motherhood has also declined.[50] Thus, over time, women have fewer children and more women are single mothers – albeit often with an extended family around.

> *The urban share of the South African population is projected to rise to 80% by 2050.*

Teenage childbearing rates have also fallen since the 1980s, and have continued to decline since 1994.[51] The fertility rate among 15 – 19-year-old women was estimated at 78 per 1,000 in 1996, dropping to 71 in 2016.[52] In terms of health risks to mother and baby there is a huge difference between a 19-year-old giving birth and a 15-year-old giving birth. It is particularly among children aged 15 – 17 that fertility rates have declined: the share of children born to mothers under 17 dropped from 13% in 1984 to 5% in 2008.[53]

Teenage mothers often receive the support of their mother and other older relatives to care for children. With this support girls are more likely to be able to complete their schooling.[54] Legal amendments have also enabled pregnant

learners to continue their education, possibly contributing to greater visibility of teenage parenting (and thus an impression that the prevalence is increasing).

Marriage rates are falling

Childbearing is increasingly delinked from marriage – both in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. Marriage rates have been declining and for those who do get married the age of marriage has increased. The average age of marriage in the sub-Saharan African region was 18 years for women in 1930, rising to 23 years in 1990. In South Africa, the average age at which women married was 32 years in 2016.[55]

The percentage of African women who were never married was fairly stable in South Africa (at around 25%) from 1921 to the 1950s, and started increasing from 1960, with the biggest increase in the 20-year period between 1960 and 1980, when it rose to 43%. This was at a time when controls on population movement and residential arrangements were at their height. The labour system enforced the separation of migrant men from women for 11 months of the year, meaning that marriages became harder or lengthier processes to enter into, and more difficult to sustain.[56]

The share of never-married African women continued to increase gradually to 54% in 2001.[57] In 2014 only 23% of African women of childbearing age (15 – 49 years) were married; and the national figure was 27%.[58] There are many possible reasons for the continued decline in marriage rates, including the high cost of entering into marriage, the context of widespread unemployment and low earnings, and women's independence from male providers (due to higher

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iii   The 2011 census recorded an increase in fertility for a few years during the late 2000s, after which it decreased again.

Table 4: Marital status of children's mothers

Mother's marital status	All children	African	Coloured	Indian/Asian	White
Married	29%	24%	41%	73%	76%
Living together / partner	11%	12%	12%	8%	7%
Separated / divorced	2%	2%	3%	5%	7%
Widowed	2%	2%	1%	2%	0%
Single	30%	33%	27%	3%	3%
Unknown / not co-resident	25%	28%	16%	9%	7%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

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

education levels and earning capacity among women). There is a link between declining marriage rates and the rise in female-headed households – in turn linked to the uncoupling of marriage and motherhood.[59]

Table 4 shows a child-centred analysis of maternal marriage rates recorded in 2017. It was not possible to determine the marital status of mothers for 25% of children because the mothers did not live in the child's household (or were deceased), and their marital status was therefore not recorded. Forty percent of children had a mother who was in a union (29% were married, and 11% living with a partner), while 30% were single and never married. There is considerable variation across races, as shown in the table.

Households are dynamic as people move

Households are not static. Policies and interventions targeted at households or children may be challenged by the high rates of mobility in the population. Cross-sectional comparisons over time reveal trends in average form but they do not capture the dynamic nature of individual households as membership changes. An analysis of panel data from NIDS shows the dynamic nature of households and how membership changes even over the short term as outlined in Box 5 on page 41.[60]

Children are highly mobile – and also "left behind"

The mobility of children has been well-documented in relation to orphaning since the early years of the HIV epidemic,[61] but only more recently in relation to adult labour migration. Two localised studies found high rates of child mobility and a strong association between child and maternal migration.[62]

An analysis of national panel data from NIDS found that 35% of African children under 15 had moved place over a period of six years (2008 – 2014) and 14% had moved across municipalities.[63] Children's migration was highly correlated with maternal migration, though mothers and children did not necessarily move at the same time or in the same direction. A quarter of all children in the balanced sample[iv] experienced a child-mother migration event during the period (where either the mother or the child, or both migrated). Nearly half of these migration events resulted in the child living with the mother (for example, if they co-migrated, or the child joined the mother, or the mother returned to a home of origin where the child was staying). Slightly more than half resulted in the separation of children from mothers (the mother migrated leaving the child behind, or the child was sent away from the mother's home to be cared for elsewhere).

The population is increasingly urbanised

Like the rest of the world, South Africa is urbanising rapidly. The urban share of the South African population was calculated at 54% in 1996,[64] increasing to 63% in 2011, and is projected to rise to 80% by 2050.[65]

Children are less urbanised than adults: fewer than half (47%) of children were resident in urban areas in 2002, and by 2017 this had increased to 57%. Yet, in the same year, 69% of adults lived in urban areas. The difference in levels of urbanisation between adults and children is likely to be related to (adult) labour migration, where the main direction of movement is to cities.

Children do not always follow parents who migrate to cities, and some who are born in urban areas are sent away to be cared for by relatives. There are drawbacks to urban life, including the lack of adequate, affordable and safe family accommodation, high crime rates, high costs of living, and the possibility of adults remaining unemployed. For adults

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iv The balanced sample consists only of those who could be matched across the waves of the panel (in this case, from 2008 to 2014/15). The attrition rate for African children across the first four waves of NIDS was 16%

who do manage to find work, there is the question of how to care for children when women and their children are away from the extended family and established chains of care, and where private childcare is unaffordable.

As Posel and Van der Stoep have commented:

Although mothers can now move permanently with their families to places of employment, there are a number of reasons why they may be choosing to migrate without their children. The precarious nature of employment, a higher cost of living and the accessibility and quality of accommodation at places of employment would discourage migration with children.[66]

Conclusion

Household structure and co-residence patterns do not really tell us much about families, which may be spread across the country and beyond. Neither do they tell us about the quality of family relationships or the care that children receive. However, some points can guide policymakers and service providers in thinking how best to collaborate with families for the well-being of children.

- Most households consist entirely of members who are related to one another. In other words, while families may extend beyond the physical boundaries of households, nearly all children live in households with family members.
- Families are changing – with lower marriage rates, higher rates of non-marital births, and smaller household sizes. But the direction of change is not towards more nuclear forms. Extended households continue to predominate, and kinship care of children remains common. Yet the normative framework of the nuclear family remains pervasive in post-apartheid South Africa – even though "these powerful value frameworks centred on the importance of the nuclear family as the key site of care

for children… do not align with the lived experiences of care of many children in contemporary South Africa".[67] It has been argued that the very concept of "family" is itself political – that "while a diversity of kinship systems certainly has existed through history and across the globe, it is the nuclear family model which has achieved privileged status in modern social imaginaries and development imperatives"[68] and that "falsely universalised notions of the nuclear family" are reproduced in the relationship between family policy and state[69].

- Households are dynamic as family members move around. Child-care arrangements change over time according to the needs of the child, which in turn must be weighed against the needs of the family as whole, the availability of care and suitable accommodation, and other considerations.

This essay provides evidence to support a shift from a focus on regulating, preserving and (re)constructing families, towards a better understanding of co-residence arrangements as a family strategy. It challenges concerns around commonly perceived fragile forms such as child- and youth-headed households, skip-generation households, and single parent households, and how these too may be family strategies.

Family choices are also constrained by policy and planning – for example, families depend on cities for employment, yet cities fail to provide adequate and safe family accommodation. The lack of state-funded child-care facilities for young children results in continued dependence on unemployed family members to provide care.

Policies that are about families cannot rely solely on household level information to define categories and target groups in need of protection or intervention. Rather, the challenge is for policies and programmes to respond to diverse and changing living arrangements so that the state can support families and the children in their care.

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