

# Children out of school: Evidence from the Community Survey

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**S**ection 3(1) in the South Africa Schools Act requires that all children “attend school from the first school day of the year in which such learner reaches the age of seven years until the last day of the year in which such learner reaches the age of fifteen years or the ninth grade whichever comes first”. This period of compulsory schooling from grades 1 – 9 corresponds to the right to basic education that is guaranteed by section 29(1)(a) in the Constitution.

Since 1994, South Africa has made significant strides in improving access to basic education, yet a recent survey suggests that approximately 400,000 children are still out of school.

This essay draws on a detailed analysis of the 2007 Community Survey to explore patterns of access and exclusion and focuses on four key questions:

- How many children have access to basic education?
- In which areas of the country are children most likely to be out of school?
- What are the characteristics of children who are out of school?
- What are the key factors that shape children’s access to basic education?

## How many children have access to basic education?

A nationally representative Community Survey was conducted by Statistics South Africa in February 2007, collecting data for 949,105 individuals and 246,618 households. The survey contains detailed information on educational attendance<sup>1</sup> and attainment for all household members, along with data on variables such as total annual earnings, employment, health, disability and access to social grants.

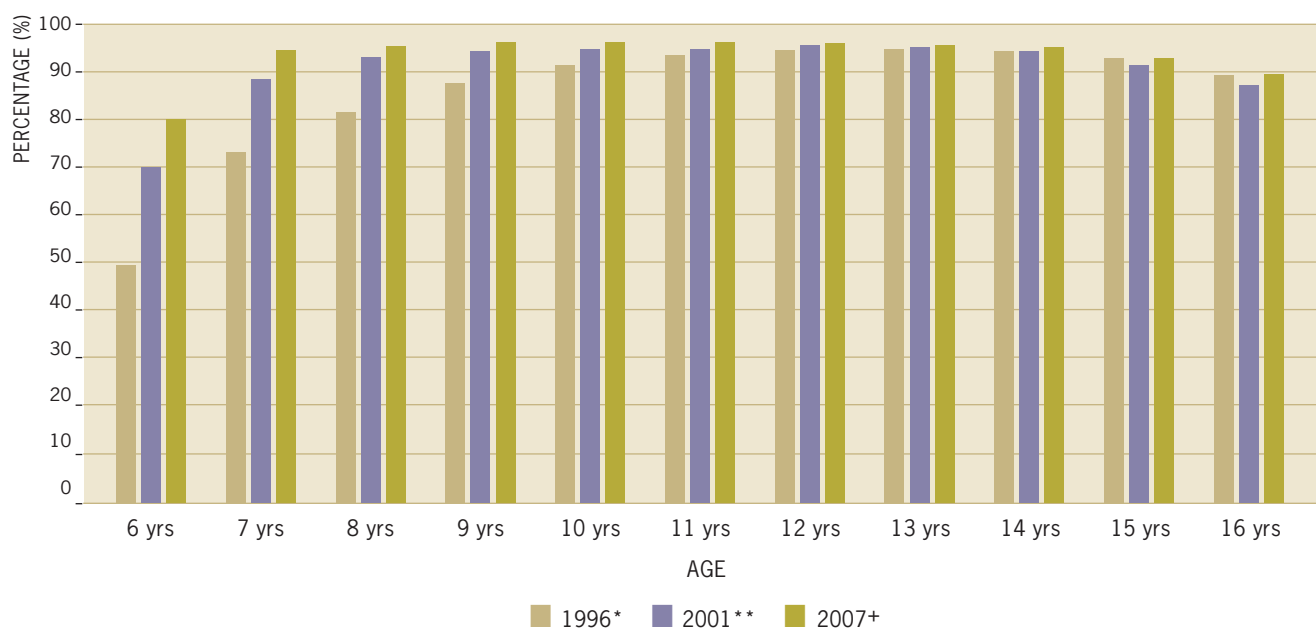
Analysis of survey data suggests that access to basic education is improving, with an attendance rate of 95.4% for grades 1 – 9. The biggest increase was among seven-year-

<sup>1</sup> Attendance data are derived from question 26 of the survey: “Is the person currently attending an educational institution?” The data refer to attendance at a point in time, and do not necessarily indicate regular attendance at school. These figures are also slightly lower than the enrolment figures calculated from the Department of Education SNAP surveys.



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**Figure 8: Attendance rates at educational institutions for children aged 6 – 16 years for 1996, 2001 & 2007**



**Sources:** 1996 and 2001 census data from Statistics South Africa (2007) *Community Survey 2007 (Revised Version)*. Statistical Release P0301. 24 October. Pretoria: StatsSA. Statistics South Africa (2008) 2007 Community Survey raw data. Supplied by StatsSA, September 2008. Analysis by Brahm Fleisch, Jennifer Shindler & Helen Perry, University of the Witwatersrand.

**Notes:**

- \* The 1996 census data was updated when published by Statistics South Africa in 2007.
- \*\* Shindler (2005) found the census 2001 school-age population data to be somewhat of an undercount, most especially in the 15 – 19-year-old age band.
- + The percentages for 2007 vary slightly from those published by Statistics South Africa.

olds where attendance increased from 88.4% in 2001 to 94.8% in 2007. There has also been a large increase in the attendance rate of six-year-olds due to the phasing in of grade R and the lowering of the age of school entry to six years in 2004.<sup>2</sup>

While the attendance rate of compulsory school-aged children is very high, there are still large numbers of children who are out of school. In 2007, just over 408,000 children aged seven to 15 years (4.6%) were not attending school.

The number of children who have never been to school is small, at around 58,000, or less than 1% of all children between the ages of seven and 15. Nearly one-third of these children are seven years old and presumably most of them will enrol at school in the next year or two. This suggests that most of the 408,000 children not in school either go to school late or drop out for various reasons.

**In which parts of the country are children most likely to be out of school?**

One of the more interesting findings emerging from the 2007 Community Survey is the uneven distribution of out-of-school children between provinces. The three wealthiest provinces

(Gauteng, Northern and Western Cape) have the highest proportion of children out of school. Poorer provinces such as Limpopo, Free State and Mpumalanga record very low proportions of children out of school.

A similar pattern can be seen in the cities. The proportion of compulsory school-age children out of school in the six metropolitan municipalities is consistently higher than the national average (5.2% compared to 4.5%), with Johannesburg and Cape Town each showing almost 6% of children not in school.

An analysis of the 25 municipalities with the highest percentages of children out of school reveals some surprising results. More than a third of these municipalities are located in rural parts of the Western Cape, either along the Southern Cape coast or in the Karoo. Six municipalities are located in the Eastern Cape and three in the Northern Cape – all in similar rural farming areas. While more research is needed to identify the specific reasons for the high drop-out in these municipalities, a Human Rights Watch report pointed to child labour and the closure of farm schools as contributing factors. Research by Adnams, Rosenthal and others found that high rates of foetal alcohol syndrome may also account for children dropping out of school in these areas.

<sup>2</sup> In terms of the Education Laws Amendment Act of 2002, five-year-old children who were turning six before 30 June could be admitted to grade 1 from January 2004. Despite the lowering of the age at which children may begin school, seven remains the age at which compulsory schooling begins.

## What are the characteristics of children out of school?

There are a number of individual and family characteristics that may help explain why children are not in school or that make it harder for children to access basic education.

### Disability

The survey data suggest that disability is a significant barrier to basic education. While only 167,000 children aged 7 – 15 years (1.9%) are reported in the survey as having some type of disability, children with disabilities account for nearly 10% of the total number of children who are out of school. The survey also indicates that children with disabilities have a much

lower attendance rate than other children, as 38,000 children with disabilities (22.5%) were out of school.

### Poverty and social grants

The survey suggests that access to services and employment status do not have a major impact on access to education, but that social grants are associated with patterns of attendance. Social grants were received by 3,535,000 children (40%) in the survey. These children had a higher rate of attendance (96.5%) than the school-going population as a whole. Conversely, 265,400 of children out of school are not receiving social grants. While this is “only” 5.1% of school-aged children who do not receive social grants, 65% of out-of-school children are not receiving social grants. These children in all likelihood are

**Table 7: Individual and family characteristics of children aged 7 – 15 years who were not in school in 2007**

Characteristics	Number of children in school	Number of children out of school	Total number of children	% out of school	% of total number of children out of school
Total children 7 – 15 years	8,565,217	408,437	8,973,654	4.6	100
Disability	129,567	37,510	167,077	22.5	9
No disability	8,435,650	370,927	8,806,577	4.2	91
Receiving social grant	3,410,537	124,886	3,535,422	3.5	31
Not receiving social grant	4,983,297	265,404	5,248,701	5.1	65
Piped water from access point outside yard	1,914,328	90,980	2,005,307	4.5	22
Piped water inside dwelling	3,175,412	154,232	3,329,643	4.6	38
Piped water inside yard	1,847,297	81,370	1,928,667	4.2	20
Other water access*	1,628,181	81,856	1,710,037	4.8	20
Electricity for lighting	6,585,464	296,886	6,882,350	4.3	73
Other type of fuel for lighting**	1,979,753	111,552	2,091,305	5.3	27
Both parents alive	6,393,495	277,393	6,670,888	4.2	68
Mother alive, father dead or status not known	1,399,021	77,226	1,476,247	5.2	19
Father alive, mother dead or status not known	323,301	18,749	342,050	5.5	5
Both parents dead or status not known	449,400	35,070	484,470	7.2	9
Born in South Africa	8,507,042	397,473	8,904,515	4.5	97
Born outside South Africa	47,086	6,438	53,524	12.0	2
Place of birth unknown or unspecified	8,806	4,526	13,332	34.0	1
Have not moved in last six years	7,381,651	351,420	7,733,070	4.5	86
Moved in last six years	1,183,567	57,017	1,240,584	4.6	14
Not one person in the household is employed	3,566,130	173,762	3,739,892	4.6	42
At least one person in the household is employed	4,999,087	234,676	5,233,763	4.5	57

**Source:** Statistics South Africa (2008) 2007 Community Survey raw data. Supplied by Stats SA, September 2008. Analysis by Brahm Fleisch, Jennifer Shindler & Helen Perry, University of the Witwatersrand.

#### Notes:

\* Other water access includes borehole, spring, dam/pool, river/stream, water vendor, rain-water tank and other.

\*\* Other sources of fuel for lighting include gas, paraffin, candles, solar and other.

eligible for social grants, but their parents, grandparents or heads of household do not have the means to access them.

### Orphans

Children who reported that either their mothers or both parents were dead (or status unknown) accounted for 9% of the total number of children aged 7 – 15 years. A higher proportion of these children were out of school: 5.5% of maternal orphans, 5.2% of paternal orphans and 7.2% of double orphans (both parents dead) were out of school in 2007. In total, 32% of children who are out of school have one or more parents who are dead (or status unknown).

### Children born outside South Africa

The number of children born outside South Africa (or where the place of birth is either unknown or unspecified) is small (67,000 children), but these children have a much lower attendance rate than average. More than one in 10 children born outside South Africa are not attending school. This increases to more than one-third of children whose place of birth is unknown.

### Family structure

Approximately 5,159,000 children aged 7 – 15 (15%) live in households where their parents are the head of household and a further 2,633,000 children (29%) live in households where their grandparents or great-grandparents are the head of the household.

A much higher proportion of children living with relatives as the head of household who are neither parents nor grandparents (7.6%) are out of school than children who live with

their biological parents as the head of household (4%). Children living with a non-relative who is the head of the household are even more vulnerable: 10.6% of these children are out of school. Research by Anderson in 2000 and 2005 found that living with a relative improves education outcomes.

### Child-headed households

Only 23,000 children aged 7 – 15 (1%) are head or acting head of their households, yet a high proportion (17%) of these children were out of school. This confirms findings by Case and Ardington on the negative impact of child-headed households on continuous school attendance.

### What are the key factors that shape children's access to basic education?

How does the 2007 Community Survey contribute to our understanding of school participation? Firstly, it provides a good estimate of the number of compulsory school-aged children who are out of school. While the attendance rate of 95.4% is good by international standards, it still leaves 408,000 children aged 7 – 15 out of school.

Secondly, the survey provides an opportunity to understand the profile and characteristics of children who are out of school. Wilson's 2004 analysis on the right to education suggests that poverty and the government's school-fee policy is the reason why many of these children are not in school. However, the survey data do not support this as the singular reason for children not being in school. In a recently published book on why South Africa's school children underachieve in

**Table 8: Household structure and proportion of children enrolled in 2007**

Relationship to head of household	Number of children in school	Number of children out of school	Total number of children	% out of school	% of total number of children out of school
Total children 7 – 15 years	8,565,217	408,437	8,973,654	4.6	100
Son/daughter of the head of the household	4,951,564	207,820	5,159,384	4.0	50.9
Grandchild/great-grandchild of head of household	2,522,299	110,988	2,633,287	4.2	27.2
Adopted son/daughter of head of household	119,516	8,753	128,269	6.8	2.1
Head/acting head of the household	19,255	4,006	23,261	17.2	1.0
Brother/sister of head of household	219,136	14,575	233,711	6.2	3.6
Brother/sister-in-law of head of household	24,294	2,279	26,573	8.6	0.6
Non-related person to the head of the household	29,407	3,475	32,882	10.6	0.9
Other relative to the head of the household	539,041	44,381	583,422	7.6	10.9
Stepchild of the head of the household	94,135	5,290	99,424	5.3	1.3

**Source:** Statistics South Africa (2008) 2007 Community Survey raw data. Supplied by Stats SA, September 2008. Analysis by Brahm Fleisch, Jennifer Shindler & Helen Perry, University of the Witwatersrand.

reading and maths, Fleisch found that (measured by household income) at least 60% of children attending school from grades 1 – 9 live in families that are poor.

## What are the conclusions?

The analysis of the 2007 Community Survey suggests that poverty and school fees are unlikely to be a sufficient explanation as to why children are not in school. If poverty alone is not necessarily a barrier to access, then what other factors might explain why children are not in school?

The evidence from the 2007 Community Survey suggests at least five broad, but inter-related, factors that may account for children not being in school:

- Children with various kinds of disability are not attending school.
- Children living with biological parents or grandparents are far more likely to be in school than children living with other relatives, with siblings and with people that are not relatives, or children who are themselves the head of a household.
- Children living in households that are, in all likelihood, eligible for social grants but who do not receive them are also at risk. They may not necessarily be disabled or living in a stressed family structure, but for some reason their parents or grandparents have not been able to access the welfare safety net.
- Children who have one or both parents dead or their whereabouts unknown are vulnerable to being out of school.
- Children living on farms and in small towns in the Southern Cape and central Karoo have lower attendance rates than children from other areas.

The findings suggest a picture of children living on the margins of society. Orphaned and disabled children are vulnerable to being out of school, as well as children who are likely to be living in households that are excluded from the mainstream economy and that struggle to access state services such as social grants. These children may also be living on the fringes of households, in which other children — the sons, daughters, grandsons and granddaughters — receive more favourable treatment. Many of these factors overlap at the complex intersection of poverty and social exclusion and suggest further issues for analysis. They also suggest that bringing the 408,000 out-of-school 7 – 15-year-olds into schools will require similarly complex interventions from a variety of agencies.

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