

# Introducing Children Count

South Africa's commitment to the realisation of socio-economic rights is contained in the Constitution, the highest law of the land, which includes provisions to ensure that no person should be without the basic necessities of life. These are specified in the Bill of Rights, particularly section 26 (access to adequate housing); section 27 (health care, sufficient food, water and social security); section 28 (the special rights of children) and section 29 (education).

Children are specifically mentioned and are also included under the general rights: every child has the right to basic nutrition, shelter, basic health care services and social services. These form part of what are collectively known as socio-economic rights. While these rights are guaranteed by the Constitution, the question is: *how well is South Africa doing in realising these rights for all children?* To answer this question requires monitoring the situation the situation of children, which means there is a need for regular information that is specifically about them.

## A rights-based approach

Children Count was established in 2005 to monitor progress for children and is an ongoing data and advocacy project of the Children's Institute, updated every year. It provides statistical information that can be used to inform the design and targeting of policies, programmes and interventions, and as a tool for tracking progress in the realisation of children's rights.

## Child-centred data

Any monitoring project needs regular and reliable data, and South Africa is fortunate to have a reasonably good supply. There is an array of administrative data sets, and the national statistics body, Statistics South Africa (or Stats SA), undertakes regular national population surveys that provide useful information on a range of issues. Most reports about the social and economic situation of people living in South Africa do not focus on children, but rather count all individuals or households. This is the standard way for statistics bodies to present national data but is of limited use for those interested in understanding the situation of children.

'Child-centred' data does not only mean the use of data about children specifically. It also means using national population or household data and analysing it at the level of the child. This is important because the numbers can differ enormously depending on the unit of analysis. For example, national statistics describe the unemployment rate, but only a child-centred analysis can tell how many children live in households where no adult is employed. National statistics show the share of households without adequate sanitation, but when a child-centred analysis is used, the share is significantly higher.

## Counting South Africa's children

*Children Count* presents child-centred data on many of the areas covered under socio-economic rights. As new data become available with the release of national surveys and other

data sources, it is possible to track changes in the conditions of children and their access to services over time. This year, national survey data are presented for each year from 2002 to 2022, and many of the indicators in this issue compare the situation of children over this 21-year period.

The main household survey used as a data source for *Children Count* is the General Household Survey (GHS), a large nationally representative survey that Stats SA runs every year. We analyse the raw data to derive statistical estimates for the *Children Count* indicators. Usually, the survey is undertaken through face-to-face interviews at people's homes and fieldwork runs throughout the year. In 2020, data collection was stopped abruptly in March due to COVID-19 and the consequent lockdown.

In 2020 and 2021 the survey was conducted telephonically with a smaller sample of just under 30,000 individuals in 9,000 households, and some of the questions usually analysed for *Children Count* were excluded – notably the time taken to get to school and to health facilities. The GHS returned to its full face-to-face sample in 2022.

The tables on the following pages give basic information about children's demographics, care arrangements, income poverty and social security, education, health and nutritional status, housing and basic services. Each table is accompanied by commentary that provides context and gives a brief interpretation of the data. The data are presented for all children in South Africa and, where possible, by province.

The indicators in this *South African Child Gauge* are a sub-set of the *Children Count* indicators. The project's website contains the full range of indicators and more detailed interactive data, as well as links to websites and useful documents. It can be accessed at [www.childrencount.uct.ac.za](http://www.childrencount.uct.ac.za).

## Confidence intervals

Sample surveys are subject to error. The percentages simply reflect the mid-point of a possible range, but the true values could fall anywhere between the upper and lower bounds. The confidence intervals indicate the reliability of the estimate at the 95% level. This means that, if independent samples were repeatedly taken from the same population, we would expect the estimate to lie between upper and lower bounds of the confidence interval 95% of the time.

It is important to look at the confidence intervals when assessing whether apparent differences between provinces or subgroups are real: the wider the confidence interval, the more uncertain the estimate. Where confidence intervals overlap for different subpopulations or time periods, it is not possible to claim that there is a real difference in the estimates, even if the mid-point percentages differ. In the accompanying bar graphs, the confidence intervals are represented by vertical lines at the top of each bar (|).

## Data sources and citations

*Children Count* uses a few data sources. Most of the indicators are analysed by our team using data from the General Household Survey conducted by Stats SA, while some draw on administrative databases used by government departments (Health, Education, and Social Development) to record and monitor the services they deliver.

Most of the indicators presented were developed specifically for this project. Data sources are carefully considered before inclusion, and the technical notes, strengths and limitations of each are outlined on the project website.

Here are examples of how to reference *Children Count* data correctly:

When referencing from the *Demography* section in this publication, for example:

Hall K (2024) Demography of South Africa's children. In: Stemming W, Biersteker L & Lake L (eds) *South African Child Gauge 2024*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town.

When referencing from the Housing and Services online section, for example:

Hall K (2024) Housing and Services – Access to adequate water. *Children Count* website, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town. Accessed on 20 May 2024: [www.childrencount.uct.ac.za](http://www.childrencount.uct.ac.za)

Each domain is introduced below, and key findings are highlighted.

## Demography of South Africa's children

(pages 196 – 200)

This domain provides child population figures and gives a profile of South Africa's children and their care arrangements, including children's co-residence with biological parents. There were 21 million children in South Africa in 2022 and 20% of children do not live with either of their biological parents. This does not necessarily mean that they are orphaned: 80% of children who do not have any co-resident parent do have a living mother, and 88% of children without any co-resident parents have at least one parent who is alive but living elsewhere.

## Income poverty, unemployment and social grants

(pages 201 – 209)

Child poverty rates increased during lockdown and then levelled off in 2021, before increasing again in most provinces in 2022, with 70% of children living below the upper-bound poverty line. Social assistance grants are therefore an important source of income for caregivers to meet children's basic needs and to protect children and their households from income shocks. In March 2022, just over 13 million children received the Child

Support Grant (a slight drop from the previous year); 253,000 children received the Foster Child Grant (a substantial and consistent decline in numbers over the past decade), and there has been a gradual but consistent increase in access to the Care Dependency Grant with about 168,000 child beneficiaries in 2022.

## Child health and nutrition

(pages 210 – 217)

In 2022 over 2.5 million children (12%) lived in households where children are reported to experience hunger; 20% of children lived far from the primary health care facility they normally use, and 82.2% of infants were fully immunised in their first year of life. While long-term trends indicate that infant and under-five mortality rates peaked in 2003, preliminary estimates by the Medical Research Council suggest that infant and under-five mortality rates rose sharply in 2021 and 2022, climbing to 30 and 40 deaths per 1,000 live births respectively.

## Children's access to education

(pages 218 – 225)

South Africa has made significant strides in improving access to education with a reported attendance rate of 98% in 2022. The effect of COVID-19 and lockdown on early learning was dramatic: causing a rapid reversal of the gains made over nearly two decades. Attendance rates rose again after 2020, and by 2022 the pre-lockdown attendance rate had been regained, with 91% of 5 – 6-year-olds reported to be attending early learning programmes. However, attendance rates do not necessarily translate into improved educational outcomes or progress through school. In 2022, a third of young people aged 15 – 24 (34%) were not in employment, education or training, indicating that South Africa has failed to make any progress toward the Sustainable Development Goal target of substantially reducing the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training by 2030.

## Children's access to housing

(pages 226 – 229)

This domain presents data on children living in rural or urban areas, and in adequate housing. The latest available data show that, in 2022, 57% of children were living in urban areas, and 85% of children lived in formal housing. In 2022, 1.6 million children (8% of the child population in South Africa) lived in informal housing – in backyard shacks or informal settlements, and 3.5 million children lived in overcrowded households.

## Children's access to basic services

(pages 230 – 233)

Without water and sanitation, children face substantial health risks that also compromise their nutritional status. In 2022, 72% of children had piped drinking water at home, and 79% had an adequate toilet on site – an improvement from 46% in 2002.