

Children’s access to housing

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

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

Children living in urban and rural areas

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

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

In 2022, 57% of children lived in urban areas while 43% were in rural households. Looking back over two decades, there is a clear shift in the distribution of children towards urban areas: In 2002, 48% of children were in urban households, and this increased gradually to 57% by 2017, after which it remained stable. The urban child population has grown by 3.2 million, from 8.7 million children in 2002 to 12 million in 2022. Children are consistently less urbanised than adults: In 2022, 68% of the adult population was urban, compared with 57% of children.

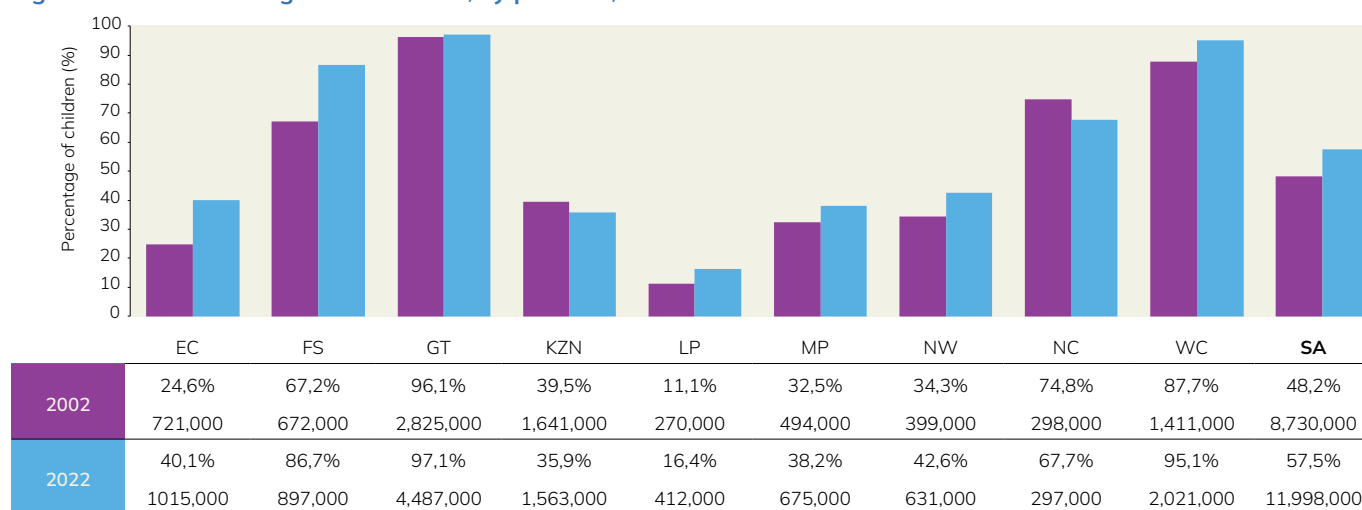
There are marked provincial differences in the rural and urban distribution of the child population. This is related to the distribution of cities in South Africa, and the legacy of apartheid’s spatial arrangements where women, children and older people

in particular were relegated to the former homelands. The Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces alone are home to over 70% of all rural children in South Africa. KwaZulu-Natal has the largest child population in numeric terms, with 2.8 million (64%) of its child population being classified as rural. The least urbanised province is Limpopo, where only 16% of children live in urban areas. Proportionately more children (39%) live in the former homelands, compared with adults (28%). Almost all of children living in the former homeland areas are African.

Children living in Gauteng and the Western Cape are almost entirely urban (97% and 95% respectively). The urban child population in Gauteng alone has grown by over 1.6 million since 2002 and the urban child population in the Western Cape has grown by over 600,000. These increases are partly the result of urban births, and also partly the result of within-province movement and migration from other provinces. Other provinces that have experienced a marked growth in the urban share of the child population are the Eastern Cape, Free State and North West. KwaZulu-Natal, in contrast, has seen a slight reduction in its urban child population.

Rural areas, particularly the former homelands, have poorer populations. In 2022, six out of every ten children in the poorest income quintile lived in rural areas and this had been a consistent

Figure 5a: Children living in urban areas, by province, 2002 & 2022



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2023) *General Household Survey 2002*; *General Household Survey 2022*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall & Neo Segoneco, Children’s Institute, UCT.

trend over the previous decade. Within the poorest part of the population, it is mainly rural households that care for children – even though many of these children may have parents who live

and work in urban areas. The inequalities also remain strongly racialised. Over 90% of White, Coloured and Indian children are urban, compared with 52% of African children.

Children living in formal, informal and traditional housing

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

Children’s right to adequate housing means that they should not have to live in informal dwellings. One of the seven elements of adequate housing identified by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is that it must be “habitable”.³ To be habitable, houses should have enough space to prevent overcrowding, and should be built in a way that ensures physical safety and protection from the weather.

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

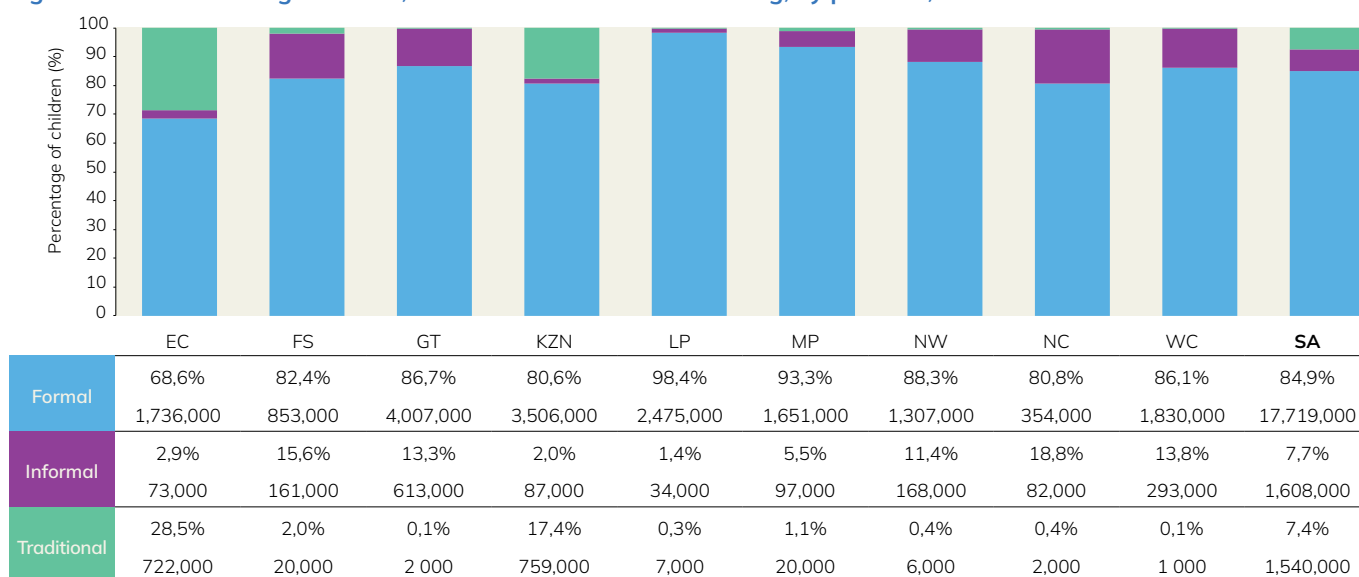
Access to services is another element of “adequate housing”. Children living in formal areas are more likely to have services on site than those living in informal or traditional dwellings. They are also more likely to live closer to facilities like schools, libraries, clinics and hospitals than those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

The environmental hazards associated with informal housing are exacerbated for very young children. The distribution of children in informal dwellings is slightly skewed towards younger children: four out of 10 children who live in informal housing are pre-school age.

In 2022, 1.6 million children (8% of children in South Africa) lived in informal housing – backyard shacks or informal settlements. The number of children in informal housing has declined gradually from 2.3 million (13%) in 2002. The provinces with the highest shares of informally-housed children are the Western Cape, Gauteng, Northern Cape and Free State. The Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo have the lowest shares of children in informal housing. Most children in Limpopo live in formal housing, while Eastern Cape has a relatively large share of its child population living in traditional dwellings (29%).

The distribution of children in formal, informal and traditional housing has remained fairly constant since 2002. But racial inequalities persist. Virtually all White children lived in formal housing in 2022, compared with 83% of African children. Access to formal housing increases with income. Nearly 100% percent of children in the wealthiest 20% of households live in formal dwellings, compared with 78% of children in the poorest quintile.

Figure 5b: Children living in formal, informal and traditional housing, by province, 2022



Source: Statistics South Africa (2023) *General Household Survey 2022*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall & Neo Segoneco, Children’s Institute, UCT.

Children living in overcrowded households

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

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights defines “habitability” as one of the criteria for adequate housing.³ Overcrowding is a problem because it can undermine children’s needs and rights. For instance, it is difficult for school children to do homework if other household members want to sleep or watch television. Children’s right to privacy can be infringed if they do not have space to wash or change in private. The right to health can be infringed as communicable diseases spread more easily in overcrowded conditions, and young children are particularly susceptible to the spread of disease. Overcrowding also places children at greater risk of sexual abuse, especially where boys and girls have to share beds, or children have to share beds with adults.

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

In 2022, 3.5 million children lived in overcrowded households. This represents 17% of the child population – much higher than the share of adults living in crowded conditions (9%).

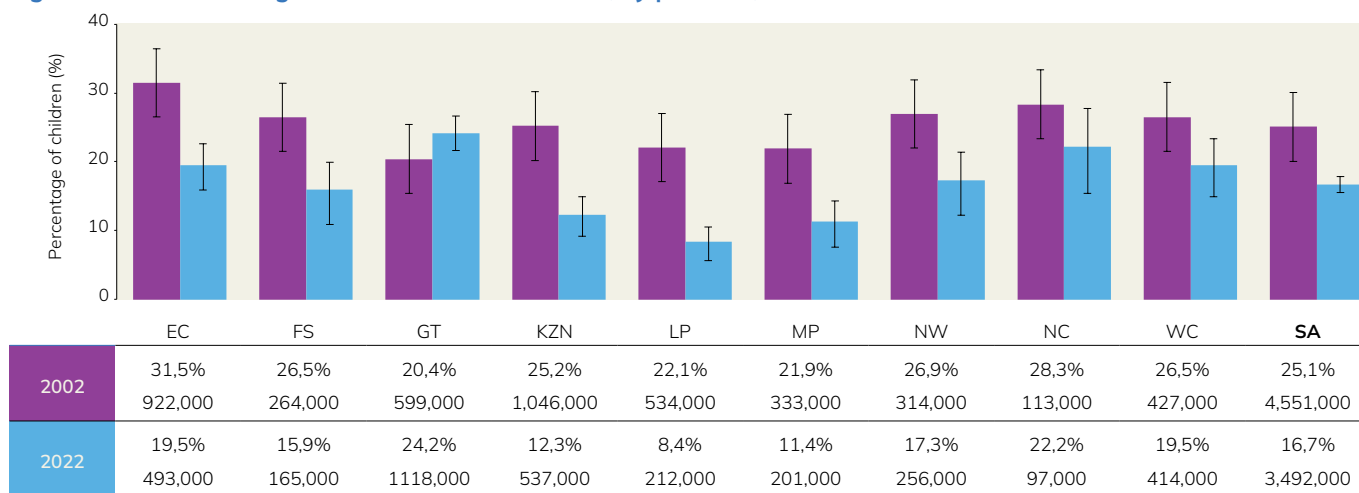
Overcrowding is associated with housing type: 48% of children who stay in informal dwellings also live in overcrowded conditions, compared with 24% of children in traditional

dwellings and 13% of children in formal housing. Young children are slightly more likely than older children to live in overcrowded conditions. Twenty percent of children below six years live in crowded households, compared to 14% of children over 12 years.

There is a strong racial bias in children’s housing conditions. While 18% of African and 17% of Coloured children live in crowded conditions, less than 1% of White children live in overcrowded households. Children in the poorest 20% of households are more likely to be living in overcrowded conditions (24%) than children in the richest 20% of households (2%).

The average household size has decreased from 4.5 at the time of the 1996 population census, to around 3.5 in 2022.⁴ The reduction in average household size during the 1990s and early 2000s was linked to the rapid provision of small subsidy houses that could not accommodate extended families.^{5, 6} It has also been linked to adult urban migration coupled with continuing constraints on family co-migration and declining marriage and cohabitation rates between men and women.⁷ In recent years, an important contributor to declining average household size has been the fairly rapid growth in single-person households where adults live alone.⁸⁻¹⁰ In 2022 there were 18 million households in South Africa, double the number recorded in 1996.⁴ Of these 18 million households 25% (around 4.6 million) were households where one person lived alone.^{11, 12} Households in which children live are larger than the national average, although they have also declined in size over time. The mean household size for adult-only households in 2022 was 1.7 while the mean household size for households that included children was 4.6.

Figure 5c: Children living in overcrowded households, by province, 2002 & 2022



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2023) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2022*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall & Neo Segoneco, Children’s Institute, UCT.

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