

# Children’s access to housing

Katharine Hall (Children’s Institute, University of Cape Town)

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”.<sup>1</sup>

Article 27 of the 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”.<sup>2</sup>

## 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.

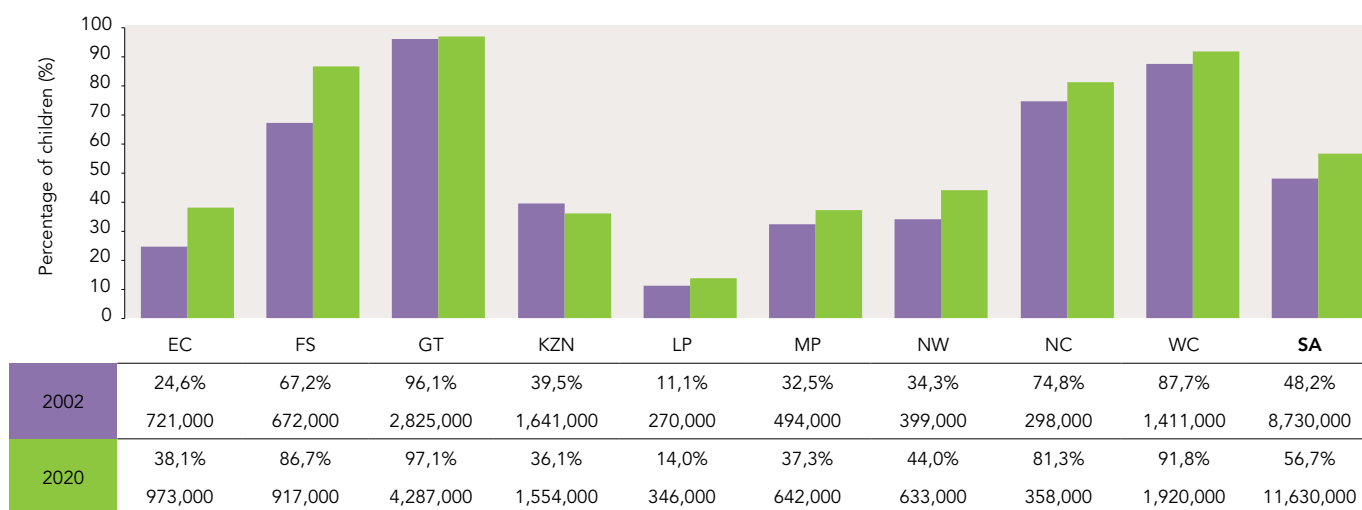
Location is one of the seven elements of adequate housing identified by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.<sup>3</sup> Residential areas should ideally be situated close to work opportunities, clinics, police stations, schools and child-care facilities. In a country with a large 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.

The General Household Survey captures information on all household members, making it possible to look at the distribution of children in urban and non-urban households and compare this to the adult distribution. Nearly half of South Africa’s children (43%) lived in rural households in 2020 – equivalent to 8.9 million children. Looking back over a decade, there is a clear shift in the distribution of children towards urban areas: in 2002, 48% of children were found in urban households, and this increased gradually to 57% by 2017, after which it has remained stable. Given estimated population growth, the urban child population has grown by nearly 3 million, from 8.7 million children in 2002 to 11.6 million in 2020. Children are consistently less urbanised than adults: In 2020, 67% 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 about three-quarters (73%) of all rural children in South Africa. KwaZulu-Natal has the largest child population in numeric terms, with 2.7 million (64%) of its child population being classified as rural. The least urbanised province is Limpopo, where only 14% of children live in urban areas. Proportionately more children (39%) live in the former homelands, compared with adults (29%). Almost all of children living in the former homeland areas are African (99.8%).

In 2020, children living in the Gauteng and Western Cape were almost entirely urban based (97% and 92% respectively). These provinces historically have large urban populations. The urban child population in Gauteng alone has grown by 1.5 million since 2002 and the urban child population in the Western Cape has grown by just over 500,000. These increases would be partly the result of urban births, but 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

Figure 5a: Children living in urban areas, by province, 2002 & 2020



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2021) *General Household Survey 2002*; *General Household Survey 2020*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall, Children’s Institute, UCT.

West. KwaZulu-Natal, in contrast, has seen a slight reduction in its urban child population, both in percentage and numeric terms.

Rural areas, and particularly the former homelands, have much poorer populations. In 2018, nearly two-thirds of children in the poorest income quintile lived in rural areas compared with 10% in the richest quintile, and this had been a consistent trend over the previous decade. In other words, 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 2019 and 2020 data suggest the possibility of a shift in this pattern, with a decline in the rural share of children in the poorest quintile (from 70% to 58%), and an increase in the rural share of the child population in the wealthiest quintile (from around 10% to over 20%).

The inequalities also remain strongly racialised. Around 90% of White, Coloured and Indian children are urban, compared with 51% of African children.

There are no statistically significant differences in the child population in urban and rural areas across age groups.

### 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 the purposes of the 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' situated 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'.<sup>3</sup> 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

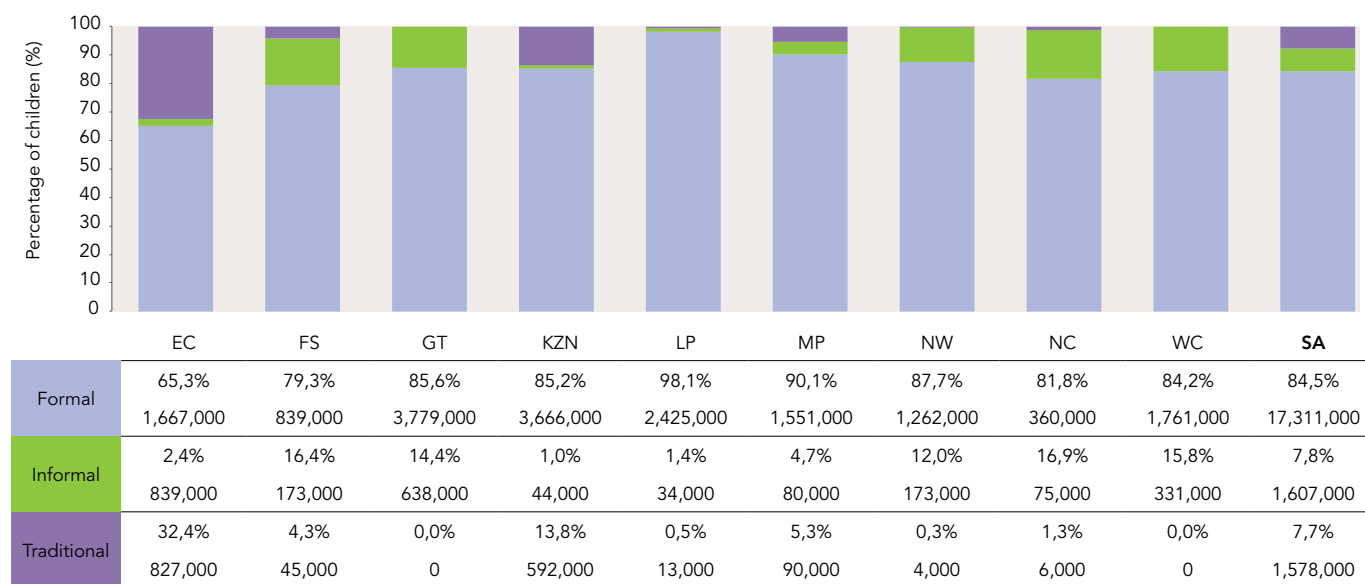
informal dwellings such as shacks in informal settlements and backyards would not be considered habitable or adequate. Informal housing in backyards and informal settlements make up the bulk of the housing backlog in South Africa. 'Traditional' housing in rural areas cannot necessarily be assumed to be inadequate. Some traditional dwellings are more habitable than new subsidy houses – 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 are 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 and babies: 36% of children in informal housing are in the 0 – 5-year age group, whereas 29% are aged 12–17 years.

In 2020, 1.6 million children (8%) in South Africa lived in backyard dwellings or shacks in informal settlements. The number

Figure 5b: Children living in formal, informal and traditional housing, by province, 2020



Source: Statistics South Africa (2021) *General Household Survey 2020*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall, Children's Institute, UCT.

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, Northern Cape and Free State (each with around 16% of their child populations informally housed), and Gauteng (14%). The Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo have by far the lowest shares of children in informal housing. The vast majority of children in Limpopo are recorded as living in formal housing, while Eastern Cape has a relatively large share of its child population living in

traditional dwellings (32%). The distribution of children in formal, informal and traditional housing has remained fairly constant since 2002. But racial inequalities persist. All White children in the 2020 survey lived in formal housing, compared with only 83% of African children. Access to formal housing increases with income. Ninety percent of children in the wealthiest 20% of households live in formal dwellings, compared with 78% of children in the poorest quintile.

### 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 2020, 4.3 million children lived in overcrowded households. This represents 21% of the child population – much higher

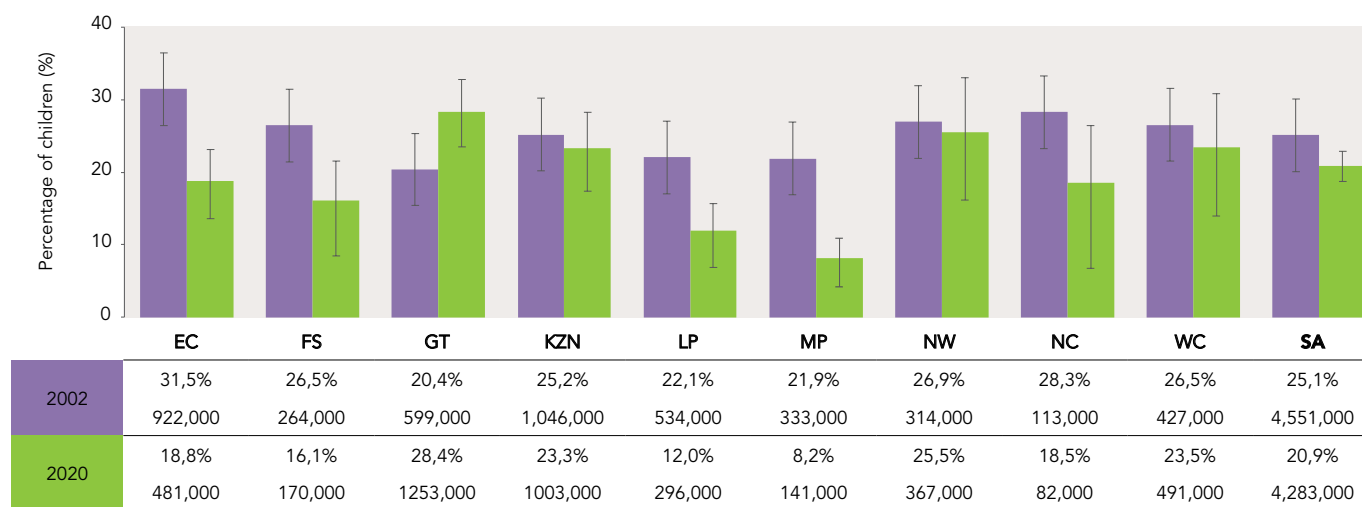
than the share of adults living in crowded conditions (12%). Overcrowding is associated with housing type: 46% of children who stay in informal dwellings also live in overcrowded conditions, compared with 25% of children in traditional dwellings and 18% of children in formal housing.

Young children are slightly more likely than older children to live in overcrowded conditions. Twenty-three percent of children below six years live in crowded households, compared to 18% of children over 12 years.

There is a strong racial bias in children's housing conditions. While 22% of African and 18% of Coloured children live in crowded conditions, less than 3% of White children live in overcrowded households. Children in the poorest 20% of households are more likely to be living in overcrowded conditions (30%) than children in the richest 20% of households (15%).

The average household size has gradually decreased from 4.5 at the time of the 1996 population census, to around 3.5 in 2020, indicating a trend towards smaller households. This is related to the rapid growth in single-person households where adults live alone: In 2020 there were 17.4 million households in South Africa, of which 19% (around 3.4 million) were households where one adult lived alone.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5, 6</sup> It has also been linked to adult urban migration coupled with continuing constraints on family co-migration and

Figure 5c: Children living in overcrowded households, by province, 2002 & 2020



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2021) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2020*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall, Children's Institute, UCT.

declining marriage and cohabitation rates between men and women.<sup>7</sup> 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 2020 was 1.9 while the mean household size for households with children was 4.8.<sup>8</sup>

## References

---

1. Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996.
2. Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights. *Convention on the Rights of the Child, UN General Assembly Resolution 44/25*. Geneva: United Nations. 1989.
3. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *The Right to Adequate Housing (art. 11 (1)): 13/12/91. CESCR General Comment 4*. Geneva: United Nations. 1991.
4. Hall K, Mokomane Z. The shape of children's families and households. In: Hall K, Richter L, Mokomane Z, Lake L, editors. *Children, Families and the State: Collaboration and Contestation South African Child Gauge 2018*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, UCT; 2018.
5. Hall K. Accommodating the poor? A review of the Housing Subsidy Scheme and its implications for children. In: Leatt A, Rosa S, editors. *Towards a Means to Live: Targeted poverty alleviation to make children's rights real*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, UCT; 2005.
6. Public Service Commission. *Report on the Evaluation of the National Housing Subsidy Scheme*. Pretoria: Public Service Commission. 2003.
7. Posel D, Hall K. The economics of households in South Africa. In: Oqubay A, Tregenna F, I V, editors. *The Oxford Handbook of the South African Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2021.
8. Statistics South Africa. *General Household Survey 2018*. Pretoria: Stats SA. 2019.