



Child-headed households in South Africa: A statistical brief

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There is a lot of policy and media attention focused on child-headed households, but until now, very little statistical analysis. This *Children Count – Abantwana Babalulekile* brief presents new evidence drawn from nationally representative household surveys in South Africa.

What are child-headed households?

Child-headed households are commonly defined as households where all members are under 18 years. This is the definition of child-headed households used in this analysis.

How many children live in child-headed households?

An analysis of the 2006 General Household Survey found 0.67% of children living in child-headed households. This is equivalent to roughly 122 000 children out of 18.2 million children in South Africa.

Is the proportion of child-headed households growing?

No. Twenty nationally representative surveys spanning the period 2000-2007 indicate no increase in the proportion of children living in child-headed households.

Are most of the children in child-headed households AIDS orphans?

No. Most children living in child-headed households are not orphans at all. The 2006 General Household Survey found that only 8% of children living in child-headed households were children who had lost both their mother and father. 80% had a living mother.

How many children usually live in a child-headed household?

In 2006 almost half (44%) of child-headed households consisted of only one child. Most child-headed households have between one and three members.

How old are children in child-headed households?

Over half (55%) of children living in child-headed households are 14 or older. In the vast majority (88%) of child-headed households there is at least one child who is 15 or older.

Where are most child-headed households in South Africa?

About 90% of all child-headed households are located in three provinces – Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape.

Statements about child-headed households are often not based on evidence

Common but inaccurate assumptions about child-headed households abound. Some examples are captured in the following quotes from recent government and NGO publications:

- "A notable feature of the HIV and AIDS pandemic is the sharp growth in numbers of child-headed households."
- "Older children have the adult burden of caring for younger brothers and sisters. This forces many to drop out of school in an effort to survive."
- "The prevalence of child-headed households in South Africa is reported to be increasing steadily. There have been reports in the media of areas in the country where a substantial proportion (up to 65%) of households in a particular community are headed by children."

The evidence presented in this brief challenges these understandings.



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Definitions

Children are people under the age of 18.

Adults are people 18 or older.

Household members are defined by Statistics South Africa in national surveys as persons who sleep in the common home for four or more nights a week.

Child-headed households (CHH) have only children as household members.

Mixed-generation households have both adults and children as members.

Double orphans are children who have lost both parents.

Maternal orphans are children who have lost a mother but whose father is alive.

Paternal orphans are children who have lost a father but whose mother is alive.

Orphans are the total of double, maternal and paternal orphans.

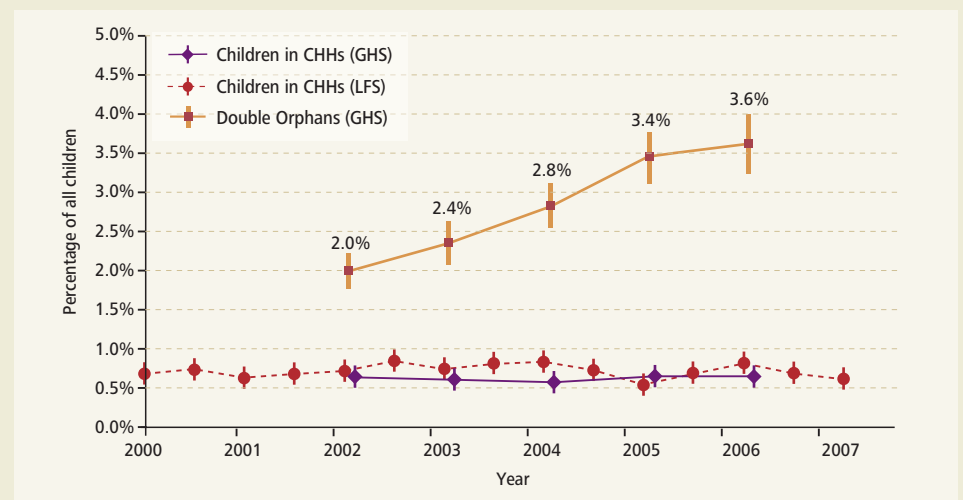
The proportion of orphans is increasing but the proportion of child-headed households is not

Due to the HIV epidemic, there has been a marked increase in the proportion of children in South Africa who are double orphans. The proportion of children who are double orphans increased over the period 2002 to 2006 from 2% (357 000 children) to 4% (660 000 children). In spite of this increase the proportion of children in child-headed households has not changed over the same period.

The proportion of children living in child-headed households was 0.67% in 2006. This is not significantly different from the 2002 estimate (0.65%).

Figure 1 presents an analysis of 20 national surveys between 2002 and 2007. It was found that the proportion of children in child-headed households has remained between 0.55% and 0.85%, with no increasing trend over time.

Figure 1: Percentage of children in child-headed households and percentage of children who are double orphans, 2000 – 2007



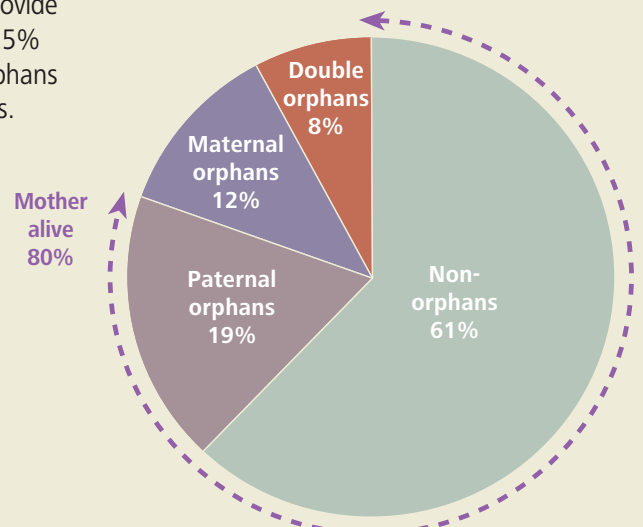
Source: Authors' calculations from General Household Survey 2002-2006 and Labour Force Survey 2000-2007

Most children living in child-headed households have a living parent

Many people assume that child-headed households are the result of an increase in orphaning. But figure 2 shows that most children living in child-headed households have two living parents (61%) and 80% have a living mother. Only 8% are double orphans.

Most double orphans live in households with adults, suggesting that kinship networks continue to provide care for these children. Only 1.5% of children who are double orphans live in child-headed households.

Figure 2: Orphan status of children living in child-headed households, 2006

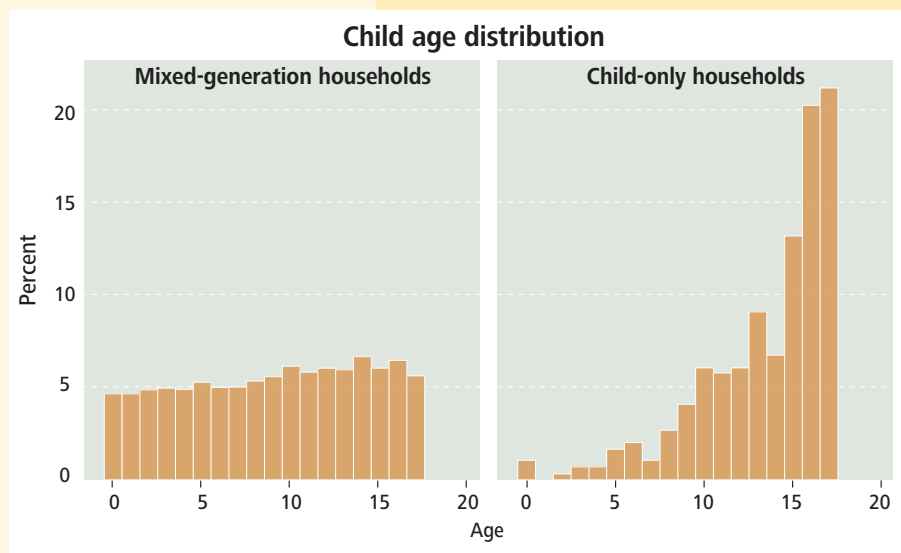


Source: Authors' calculations from General Household Survey 2006

Children in child-headed households are mostly teenagers

Children who live in child-headed households tend to be older than children in mixed-generation households. Most child-headed households (88%) have at least one child older than 15.

Figure 3: Ages of children in mixed-generation households compared to children in child-headed households



Source: Authors' calculations from General Household Survey 2006

Figure 3 compares the age distribution of children living in child-headed households with those living in mixed-generation households. The figure shows that the distribution is skewed towards older children in child-headed households, while children in mixed-generation households are far more evenly distributed across the age range. Whereas 40% of children in mixed-generation households are under seven years, only 8% of children in child-headed households are in this young age group.

What else do the surveys tell us about child-headed households?

LIVING ENVIRONMENT

Children in child-headed households live in conditions that are on average worse than those in mixed-generation households. Child-headed households are less likely to live in formal dwellings, or to have access to adequate sanitation and water on site. This is partly because they are disproportionately located outside of cities, where better services are available.

WORK

Very few children in child-headed households are working to earn income (6% of child-headed households have an employed household member over 15 years).

GRANTS

Social grants are an important source of income for millions of people in South Africa. As children in child-headed households are older, on average, than in mixed-generation households, fewer children fall within the eligible age threshold for child support grants (up to 14 years). In addition, there are no pensioners living in these households. This means that child-headed households will have less access to income support through social grants.

INCOME

Remittances – money sent by family members or other adults living elsewhere – are the main source of income for child-headed households (77%). This suggests that the majority of children living in these circumstances are not forced into self-sufficiency and do have some kind of support. However, the reliance on remittances in the absence of earnings and grants means income may be unreliable.

SCHOOL

The vast majority of children in child-headed households attend school (95%). This is the same attendance rate as reported for children in mixed-generation households.

Technical notes

Data sources

The data is from Statistics South Africa's annual General Household Survey (GHS) for 2002-2006 and the twice-yearly Labour Force Survey (LFS) for 2000-2007. These are the only representative national surveys that provide suitable data to identify child-headed households and to enable comparison over time. The detailed analysis uses the GHS 2006. Population weights provided by Statistics South Africa were applied.

Confidence intervals

Sample surveys are always subject to error. The confidence intervals (CIs) provide a range in which you would find the true value. CIs are represented in figure 1 by vertical lines above and below each data point. Where CIs overlap for different years, we cannot say that there is a real difference in the proportion, even if the mid-point proportions differ.

People who may not have been counted

Strict survey definitions would exclude adults who live in a household fewer than four nights a week, while homeless children may not have been covered by the surveys.

Reasons for using proportions of children as a measure

Household size is decreasing, so household numbers are increasing faster than population numbers. This artificially increases the proportion of mixed-generation households. The analysis therefore compares *proportions of children* living in households rather than *proportions of households* over time.

Proportions are more reliable than numbers

Provincial estimates were calculated for five years of the GHS. Although numbers of children in each province were derived from these proportions, the absolute numbers should be used with caution as they are based on mid-year population estimates, which themselves carry additional uncertainty.

Limit to what can be known about child-headed households

Child-only households are rare. A national survey of 30 000 households like the GHS 2006 (which covered 105 000 people) only captured 156 child-headed households (304 children). The small numbers limit the extent to which more detailed analysis can be conducted. The data provide a series of snapshots in time and cannot explain how child-only households are formed, or how long they remain in place.

This brief is based on:

Meintjes H, Hall K, Marera D & Boule A

(2010) 'Orphans of the Aids epidemic?

The extent, nature and circumstances of child-headed households in South Africa.'

AIDS Care (in press).

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What could this evidence mean for policy responses?

The number of children living in child-headed households is cause for concern

- Approximately 122 000 children live in child-headed households. While this is a very small proportion of children in South Africa, the number is not insignificant.
- Child-headed households are at risk of having to cope not only without adults, but also with poorer living conditions than other children. They lack regular income from earnings and social grants, and are disproportionately located in non-urban areas, where service delivery is poor.

Interventions based on wrong assumptions may be inappropriate

- While it is possible that the burden of HIV on families and communities might lead to a growth in child-headed households in the future, the evidence to date shows no increase in the proportion of children living in such circumstances. This is despite the increases in both HIV prevalence and orphaning over the same period.
- A solitary focus on HIV and its related orphaning as the cause of child-headed households masks other important issues and risks the development of inappropriate policies, programmes and interventions. The vast majority of children in child-headed households have at least one living parent.
- A disproportionate focus on child-headed households may be at the expense of children whose lives are compromised in other ways. Income poverty, poor service delivery and access to social infrastructure are not specific to child-headed households.

More research is needed to understand child-headed households better

- The possibilities for analysis are limited by the small number of child-headed households captured in national surveys, as well as the "snapshot in time" nature of these surveys, and the narrow definition of "household".
- To ensure policy and programming are appropriately focused and formulated, it will be important to track child-headed households over time. More research is needed to shed light on the events that lead to the formation of child-headed households, as well as their duration and circumstances. Longitudinal panel surveys and good qualitative research will best achieve this.

Material development: Jo Monson & Jean Redpath

Proofing: Charmaine Smith

Design: Jenny Young

Funded by UK Department for International Development (DFID)

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Suggested citation:

Meintjes H, Hall K, Marera D & Boule A (2009) *Child-headed households in South Africa: A statistical brief*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, University of Cape Town